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Fan Communities as Laboratories of Political Influence: How Fans of Taylor Swift Make Sense of the Celebrity's Politics

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Introduction

In the run-up to the U.S. 2026 midterm elections, personality-driven politics took a front seat. For the first time in its history, the Republican Party organized a midterm convention in September 2026 in Dallas, Texas – termed by some as "Trumpapalooza," bringing together a crowd uneager to be associated with a historically unpopular president, yet simultaneously unable to bow out of the event altogether, as Trump constituted both the "GOP's biggest asset in getting out the vote (…) and its greatest obstacle in convincing voters to keep Republicans in power."[1]

Republicans and Democrats across the country, meanwhile, leaned heavily into personality-driven creator culture, paying political influencers on social media for promoting candidates.[2,3,4] Hasan Piker, a popular Twitch streamer revered on the left and excoriated on the right, was hailed by some as powerful enough to rally young progressive Democratic voters during the midterm election.[5,6] Earlier in the year, failed Californian gubernatorial candidate Tom Steyer had paid the celebrity gossip Instagram account The Shade Room, the meme Instagram account Foos Gone Wild, as well as content creator Eduardo Espina sums ranging from $25,000 to $400,000 to promote his run for governor, alongside a campaign paying small-scale influencers for promoting him.[7]

With individual personalities – celebrities, creators, influencers – who typically operate outside the direct orbit of politics front and center in the contemporary information ecology and culture, the question of whether famous individuals choose to discuss politics as part of their platform on social media becomes central. Just how much political opinion is expected and acceptable gets negotiated in public by fans, followers, and the media.

When U.S. rapper Macklemore, as the support act of English singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran, expressed support for Palestinian rights by saying "Free Palestine" on a stage in New Jersey in September 2026, the fallout was swift: Venue owner Robert Kraft arranged that Macklemore could no longer perform on his stage, as well as on a group of other venue owners' stages.[8]

Pressure on Sheeran to articulate his politics rose, while the rest of the supporting acts quit the tour in solidarity with Macklemore.[9] Sheeran ultimately issued a statement on his Instagram page: "I have my personal views on this devastating conflict. Just because I choose not to speak publicly, it doesn't mean I don't have them, and it doesn't mean that I don't care".[10] Sheeran lost more than 500,000 Instagram followers over the controversy.[11]

The question of when and to what extent stars, celebrities, and influencers articulate their politics in public venues, either be-

cause they want to or because they feel they must, is especially important during elections, when politicians frequently turn to star power to make their case.

In this white paper, we draw on research conducted in the run-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election to explore how fans of celebrity singer and international superstar Taylor Swift made meaning of and read politics into their star's activities. We report data from 16 in-depth interviews with U.S.-based fans of Swift – also referred to as 'Swifties.' The extent to which Taylor Swift has or has not been explicit about her politics are a matter of frequent public debate – from the time that she spoke critically of U.S. Senator from Tennessee Marsha Blackburn's anti LGBTQIA+ policies,[12,13] her political coming-out in the 'Miss Americana' Netflix documentary,[14,15,16] a timid display of support via sugar cookies stating "Biden 2020" on her Instagram,[17] to an outright rejection of Trump and his politics in a post refuting deepfake photos of her that Trump posted, in her words, "falsely endorsing" his presidential run.[18]

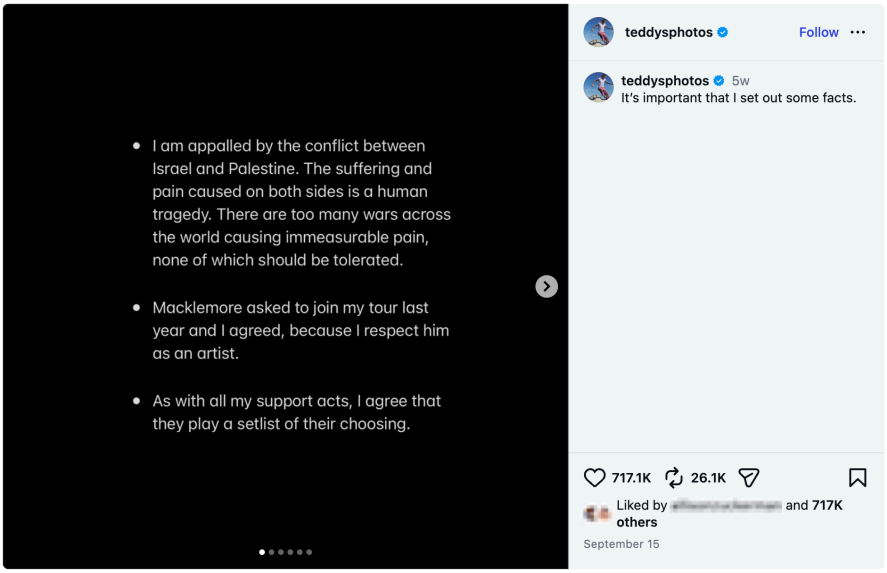


Figure 1. Screenshot of Ed Sheeran's (@teddysphotos) post following the Macklemore controversy. (Screenshot via Instagram)

Stars like Swift find themselves in a bind not to speak about politics to mitigate any possibility of controversy among (paying) fans, and pressure from fans to have a stance on important political and social justice issues. Swift and her fandom serve as an incisive case to explore the perceived impact of celebrity endorsements and changing expectations toward stars in an era of influencer politics and amidst a political and social climate in the United States increasingly defined by identity politics, hatred, and factionalism. How fans reflect what they want from their stars when it comes to politics, and what politics they read into a star's behavior, are relevant questions to unpack, given the powerful role celebrities and influencers play in political competitions.

Celebrity Endorsements and Political Influence(rs)

The core assumption of celebrity endorsements in politics is simple: A beloved celebrity's fame is harnessed to rally support for a political campaign, candidate, or cause,[19,20,21] under the assumption that endorsements make messages more credible.[22] Celebrity endorsements that emphasize shared social identity between a political candidate and a celebrity help promote a sense of belonging.[23]

Celebrities have historically faced the question of whether, how, and to what extent they want to articulate their politics. While serving as a Nike brand ambassador,[24] former professional basketball player Michael Jordan was quoted as saying, "Republicans buy sneakers, too,"[25,26] explaining why he did not endorse Democratic candidate Harvey Gantt in the 1990 Senate race in Jordan's home state of North Carolina. When Oprah Winfrey endorsed Barack Obama as the 2008 presidential nominee of the Democratic Party, the Pew Research Center polled Americans, finding that although 60% of the people surveyed thought the endorsement would aid Obama, a mere 15% said they themselves were more likely to support him because of the endorsement.[27]

With influencers increasingly entering the fray and talking politics, the question of whether they can transfer that support to their fans/followers is receiving renewed interest. Influencers, like celebrities, may be challenged by their audiences to answer questions about the extent of their politics – and whether politics is part of their brand. The term 'political influencer' conventionally refers to content creators who promote political or social causes in their communications on social platforms;[3,28] as such, it encompasses a broad array of creators, including (1) those for whom politics is the very bread and butter and core topic of their communications (i.e., a MAGA firebrand), (2) those who have a following on a separate topic but speak up about politics every so often, either because they get paid, out of their own volition, or due to public pressure, as well as (3) political actors who are tapping into influencer logics of communication on social media.

We are interested here in the ways in which celebrities like Taylor Swift, whose fame is garnered outside the realm of platforms but, by virtue of Swift's immense online following, translates into platform logics, are experiencing similar dynamics to those of

influencers, whose fame is created within the realm of platforms:[3,29] Both actor groups may be confronted with their fans' and followers' expectation that they articulate a political stance. Important to note, the present study is not focused on questions around paid political influencers.[4,30] Rather, we investigate when star power gets thrown behind political causes either because of personal politics of the star, due to pressure and expectations from fans, or combinations thereof.

Swift stands out as having one of the largest, most active fanbases.[31] One of the participants in our study, Lauren, stated when discussing Taylor Swift, "I think of her as a influencer of young women. And I think it's impossible in 2024 America, to be in a position of influencing young women and not be somewhat political." Whether Swift is best described as influencer or a celebrity is beside the point; what lies at the core of this research is how fans of a celebrity superstar – Taylor Swift in this case – project political meaning into the star's online activities and respond to subtle political cues from Swift.

Fans share an interest and collective orientation toward a "fan-object,"[32] and engage in participatory culture and community-building efforts around their fan-object.[33] Political constituencies rally similarly around causes as fans rally around stars, in that the orientation is toward performance, participation, knowledge, and being emotionally invested in the cause/person.[34]

By drawing on 16 interviews conducted with U.S.-based fans of celebrity singer Taylor Swift in the context of the run-up to the 2024 U.S. presidential election, we shed light on the perceived impact of celebrity endorsements, the changing expectations toward stars in an era of influencer politics, and the meaning-making processes of fans. Details on methodology are provided toward the end of this white paper.

In what follows, we distill from our data four high-level observations: 1. Celebrity does not equal political influence; 2. Fans act as interpretive communities who co-construct their star's politics; 3. Fandom as expression of shared political identity; and 4. Fan communities as laboratories of political action.

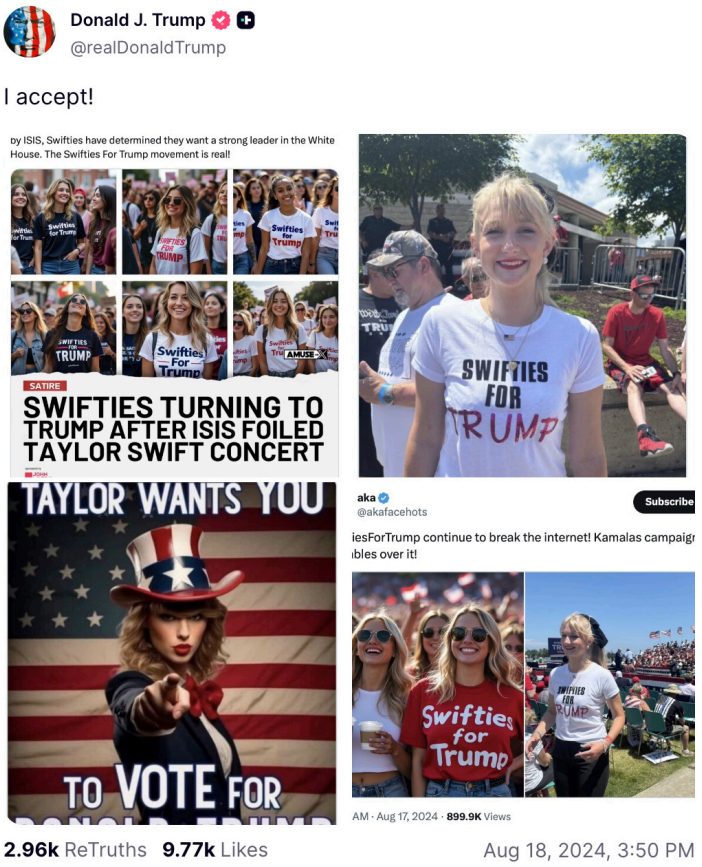


Figure 2. Screenshot of Donald J. Trump's (@realDonaldTrump) post on Truth Social sharing deepfakes insinuating Swift and Swiftie support for his campaign. (Screenshot via Truth Social)

1. Celebrity does not equal political influence

In an era where celebrity culture is tightly intertwined with politics, it is tempting to think that a celebrity expressing their political views may be able to impact fans' political opinions or even voting decisions. Interviews that we conducted complicate this assumption.

As one participant, Martha, explained, "I'm not sure if I would change my political opinions because of her [Taylor Swift], and so I like to think that other people wouldn't." Randi said, "I don't choose who I vote for, based on celebrities." Martha's and Randi's responses highlight that a celebrity's reach alone does not necessarily translate into political influence; still, the visibility celebrities like Taylor Swift garner certainly makes them appealing for political campaigns. Fans we spoke with touched on separating the art from the artist and their stars' personal values from their own. Caitlin, for instance, said: "As far as political values or political stance goes, I don't know that I've ever liked or disliked a person solely because of that reason."

Swift's case is an example of why one should not assume that celebrity endorsements can "deliver" an election (in this case – for Kamala Harris) or change the outcome based on fans' engagement with her political involvement. Participant Ivy jokingly imagined what it would be like if it did, briefly describing how Swift could essentially motivate all Swifties to turn out by offering them something they wanted even more than votes: "[If] we really wanted to get record-high turnout, [Taylor Swift] would promise us [Reputation the album] re-recorded if Kamala got elected, ...That's the one way we could win this easily is if she would just give us Reputation, because that's all I really want."

Even if fans suggest that the politics of the celebrities they like are not necessarily relevant to their own voting, it is important to consider how fandom may correlate with the identity politics of stars. In other words, that fans may be attracted to celebrities whose perspectives they share.

2. Fans act as interpretive communities who co-construct their star's politics

Some fans we spoke with, such as Felicity, suggested that they didn't expect Taylor Swift to make big political proclamations, "I'm not one of those people that needs Taylor to make a political statement about everything under the sun." Yet, others said they were expecting more from their favorite celebrities and got frustrated amidst political silence. Suzan reflected on two famous Tennessee pop stars, Taylor Swift and Dolly Parton, in an interview conducted prior to Parton's death:

> I get frustrated with Dolly Parton. Dolly, how can you love the Gays, and, you know, be such an icon, and be from Appalachia and be quiet… that's one of the things that frustrates me the most about Dolly. I'm probably one of the Swifties that just wishes Taylor would go ahead and say something. Because how can you not be political right now?

Some participants we spoke with told us how their attitudes toward celebrities speaking about politics shifted over the course of time, out of a sense of past disillusionment. Lauren mentioned that she had wanted Swift to say more prior to the 2024 election but, that she had "been disappointed by the statements she has put out for not going farther… I don't know what I would want her to say."



Figure 3. Screenshot of Taylor Swift's (@taylorswift) post responding to Trump's sharing of deepfakes, and declaring her support for the Harris/Walz ticket. (Screenshot via Instagram)

As Swifties collectively talk, interpret, defend, criticize, and determine what Taylor Swift represents, they come up with their own conclusions about the celebrity's political identity. Swifties are experienced in this domain, as the star's political identity has historically been less explicitly articulated, leaving fans to interpret what she might believe and where she might be standing on certain issues.

Notwithstanding, participant Ellie explained that fans such as herself already knew what Swift thought or wanted: "honestly, I don't think she should [endorse Kamala Harris; note: this interview was conducted before Swift endorsed Harris]; her fandom will do it for her, and we're seeing it already…We know her well enough to know … I think she says a lot by letting her fandom speak." Another participant, Ivy, interpreted Swift's often-critiqued political neutrality through the prism of Southern politeness. She stated that, "I understand how she grew up, because my family, though not similar [was] considered really far left for the South, [or] maybe it's because I'm of similar age [it did not] seem like apoliticalness It seemed like politeness." Fans we spoke with assumed they knew what Taylor Swift wanted (politically), even without her explicitly saying it. Ivy put it this way: "Swiftie fandom was turning Kamala Harris into her own Eras tour poster."

Fans we spoke with did not wait for Taylor Swift to articulate her politics. Instead, they search for meaning and form interpretive communities that extrapolate their star's politics from the breadcrumbs she leaves behind – in a similar fashion to how Swifties in the past have collaboratively created fan theories and conspiracy theories around their star.[35,36] Swift herself thus may not completely be in control of her political image. Through co-construction, fans make the celebrity's politics more of a participatory process than an outcome.

3. Fandom as expression of shared political identity

Fandom, to the people we spoke with, meant how people understood themselves and saw their experiences, values, and identities reflected in Swift. Swifties described this connection as growing up alongside Taylor, with Nicole explaining, "she writes songs that it almost sometimes feels like it was written about your life, because it's so easy to put yourself in those shoes and be like, I went through this similar situation." Charlotte, similarly, described how Swift's music had accompanied her through different



Figure 4. Screenshot of Taylor Swift's (@taylorswift) post showing Biden/Harris cookies to express her political support. (Screenshot via Instagram)

stages of her life: "Like every album, I feel like I relate to that stage in my life…I was a young girl at the time, and then, as I've gotten older, she's aged as well."

This parasocial connection manifests in how fans make sense of Swift's values and politics. Caitlin explained, "I think, especially in our culture, within the United States, patriarchal ideas are at the forefront of how our country was founded. I think, having a strong female voice and celebrity that people pay attention to (…) speaking to some of these things I think just makes it more real for a lot of people." Felicity explained that it was difficult for her to imagine being both a Swiftie and politically conservative, "just because [of] the content of her music at this point in her career, and just what it's like to be in the fandom, and what she stands for." Britney echoed, "in recent years Taylor Swift has fallen under a very liberal category where she and I am."

Fans used their political and cultural perspectives and experiences to make sense of Swift's politics and read their own political identity into Swift's online behavior. Alex described how fans pieced together Swift's political identity from her support for women, the Biden cookies, and other actions:

> She's made it relatively clear that she supports (…) women. (…) I think she is a registered Democrat. She had the Biden cookies in 2020. But, at the same time, there are certain things like when Palestine really started getting traction, people wanted a statement from her. But she's kept quiet about it.

Fans' admiration, in our data, became a lens through which people interpreted the celebrity's political views in conjunction with their own, assuming a shared political identity.

4. Fan communities as laboratories of political action

Our final section focuses on how fan communities constitute laboratories of political action. Fans do not simply participate in celebrity culture; they recognize how their collective actions can reciprocally shape a celebrity's public image. As Felicity explained, "I definitely note that our fandom can coordinate like no other and things like even a hashtag on Twitter, they [Swifties] can get it trending in a few minutes." Here, Felicity underscored how notorious Swifties are for protecting Swift from online harassment, haters, and trolls by coming together. Her quote highlights how fans recognize their ability to mobilize and amplify messages through social media. This collective power at times gets channeled into more concrete political participation. Suzan, for instance, described how certain groups of Swifties were encouraging more political engagement in the 2024 U.S. presidential election, and applying fan community engagement modes from their shared identity as Swifties to the context of politics:

> There are a lot of Swifties that are organizing for Kamala Harris. And that's really interesting, they're not just organizing. They're talking about making QR codes about registering to vote. And they're gonna take them to the Eras tour concerts here in the United States, and they're making bracelets just like they would be making bracelets for the Eras tour concerts, and they're posting they've already got hashtags, they're really, effectively organizing.

By adopting familiar fandom practices such as friendship bracelets and Eras Tour posters, Swifties turned them into tools for political messaging. The participants we spoke with demonstrated how fan communities can double as avenues for political action, even absent of the celebrity telling fans what they believe in.

At the same time, the relationship between celebrity and fans raises questions about responsibility and control. One participant, Lauren, described the fanbase of Swifties as "a really, really large group of people that is sort of cultishly led by Taylor Swift herself." Lauren further explained that the community's sheer size and scope was what made it both powerful, as well as uncontrollable: "her [Swift's] control over it is not absolute." Lauren's acknowledgments highlight a central tension: Celebrities benefit from their devoted fans' engagement and articulations of political power but cannot control how that power is used or what it comes to represent.

Celebrity political influence emerged as a shared process shaped by the celebrity's public actions, the community of fans around them, and the meaning-making that fans practice together. While celebrities may provide a platform, fans help determine what that platform ultimately represents, including how political messages spread and how influence is used and recognized.

Conclusion

In an era of personality-driven politics, the role of celebrities, influencers, and creators comes into sharp focus, especially the question of whether, to what extent, and under what circumstances, personalities decide to articulate a political stance publicly. We considered international pop superstar Taylor Swift through the prism of celebrity political influence – drawing on research on celebrity endorsements,[19,20,21,37,38] political influencers,[3,28] and fandom.[32,34]

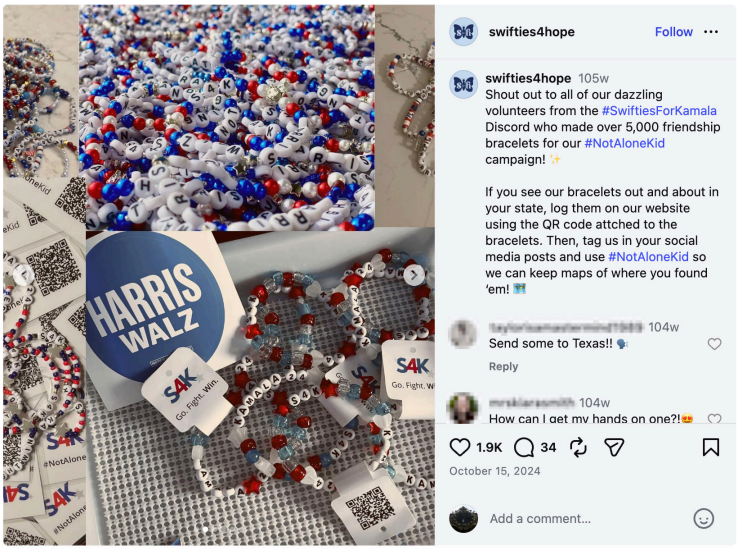


Figure 5. Screenshot of a post by grassroots organization Swifties for Hope (@swifties4hope), formerly known as Swifties for Kamala, and unaffiliated with Swift herself, showing images of Kamala/Walz friendship bracelets. (Screenshot via Instagram)

Stars like Taylor Swift are used to satisfying their fan clientele's expectations to speak up on some social justice and political issues, while also not risking wider reputational and commercial consequences by saying too much, which, in turn, in the case of Swift, could drive more conservative-leaning fans away.

Through interviews with 16 U.S.-based Swifties, we explored how fans engaged in meaning-making processes around the star's politics. For those fans we spoke with, fandom alone typically did not translate into considering the celebrity as a potential source of input for their own political decision-making.

We documented how the Swift fandom acted as an interpretive community, co-constructing their star's politics and inferring what Swift's political identity and stance on certain issues may entail, even in areas where she had not clarified what her own stance/opinion might be. Fandom, as we showed in this white paper, can instigate participatory processes of political meaning-making about a star's politics, at times treating those inferred politics as though they were facts.

We also shed light on how fans saw Swift as someone with whom they shared a lot of identity characteristics; based on this, participants that we spoke with frequently assumed this also translated into a shared political identity between themselves and the star.

Lastly, we describe fan communities as potential laboratories of political action. Fandom can be productive for collective action, coordination, and political participation, including rallying fellow Swifties around supporting the presidential candidacy of Kamala Harris, or tapping into ritualistic fandom practices typical to the fandom of Taylor Swift such as friendship bracelets that are then applied to and translated into bonding over shared political identity.

Ultimately, this study documents how celebrity political influence should not be reduced to the question of whether a celebrity articulates a clear stance on an issue, candidate, or cause. Instead, it must be understood by closely looking how interpretive fan communities define what a star's politics might mean.

For elections, this has concrete ramifications: While celebrity endorsements may be an auspicious trophy for politicians, tapping into fan communities – even absent of an endorsement or clear sign of support – can be a promising area for political campaign strategists, especially in domains where strong identity-based intersections between a celebrity, politician, and their fanbase exist.[23]

Methods

The data reported here come from a larger interview project which focused on opinions, attitudes, and experiences of fans of Taylor Swift, specifically, around questions about platform governance and politics. For this white paper, we focus on showcasing the ways in which fans made sense of the celebrity icon's politics, and how they read politics into her work and life.

The University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board approved the study on June 7, 2024. We carried out 16 semi-structured interviews with fans of Taylor Swift on Zoom between July and October 2024. This time was marked by significant upheaval in the political landscape in the United States; during initial interviews, Joe Biden was the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party; at later stages of the interview process, assassination attempts were made on Donald J. Trump's life; toward the final stages of interviews, Kamala Harris emerged as the presidential candidate who replaced Biden on the Democratic ticket.

We recruited participants through social media, snowball sampling via academic listservs and personal contacts, as well as through posts promoting the study in Swift-specific online fora on Reddit and Facebook. Participants had to be 18 years or older, U.S.-based, and self-identify as fans. Our sample included 14 women, one man, and one person who identified as nonbinary, all aged 27 to 44. 14 people stated they identified as White, one as Hispanic, Latino or Spanish, and one as Asian. Participants who completed an interview received a $25 gift card. We report data using pseudonyms provided by participants in lieu of their real names.

After finishing interviews, we created transcripts using a combination of Zoom live transcription and Whisper's open-source automatic speech recognition tool (run offline). To analyze transcripts, we utilized the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti and employed coding techniques from grounded theory that allow for the creation of abstract and conceptual codes to make sense of data. In a first step, we open-coded all transcripts; in a second step, we related open codes into broader connecting dimensions through axial coding,[39,40] which form the basis of our results.

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