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HUMAN SUSTAINABILITY–ORIENTED HRM IN DIGITALLY INTENSIVE WORK SYSTEMS: INTEGRATING WELLBEING, SURVEILLANCE, AND ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of digitally intensive work systems has fundamentally reshaped human resource management (HRM) practices, raising critical questions regarding employee wellbeing, workplace surveillance, and organizational trust. This study explores the concept of Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM as a strategic framework for balancing technological efficiency with long-term human wellbeing in highly digitalized organizational environments. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives from sustainable HRM, organizational psychology, and digital governance, this paper develops an integrative conceptual model that explains how HRM practices can simultaneously support employee wellbeing while managing digital monitoring mechanisms in a trust-based organizational climate. The analysis highlights that excessive or opaque surveillance practices may undermine psychological safety and trust, thereby threatening human sustainability. Conversely, transparent, participatory, and ethically grounded HRM policies can transform digital monitoring into a supportive tool that enhances employee engagement and wellbeing. The findings suggest that organizational trust plays a mediating role in aligning digital control systems with sustainable HRM outcomes. This study contributes to the emerging literature on sustainable and digital HRM by offering a human-centered framework that emphasizes ethical governance, mutual trust, and employee wellbeing as key pillars of sustainable performance in digitally intensive work systems. Practical implications for HR managers and policymakers are discussed to promote resilient, trust-based, and human-sustainable digital workplaces.

Keywords:
Human Sustainability; Sustainable Human Resource Management; Digital Work Systems; Employee Wellbeing; Workplace Surveillance; Organizational Trust; Ethical HRM; Digital HRM.

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Introduction

The accelerated digitalization of work has profoundly transformed organizational structures, employment relations, and human resource management (HRM) practices. Digitally intensive work systems—characterized by the extensive use of digital platforms, algorithmic management, data analytics, and real-time monitoring technologies—have become increasingly prevalent across industries. While these systems offer substantial benefits in terms of efficiency, flexibility, and performance optimization, they also generate new challenges related to employee wellbeing, privacy, autonomy, and trust within organizations. Consequently, contemporary HRM is confronted with the pressing task of reconciling technological advancement with the long-term sustainability of human resources.

In recent years, the concept of sustainability has expanded beyond environmental and economic dimensions to encompass the human and social aspects of organizational life. Human sustainability emphasizes the preservation and development of employees' physical, psychological, and social wellbeing over time, ensuring that work systems do not erode human capacity, dignity, or motivation. Within this context, Sustainable Human Resource Management (Sustainable HRM) has emerged as a critical framework that integrates economic performance with social responsibility and ethical considerations. However, much of the existing Sustainable HRM literature has focused on traditional work settings, offering limited insights into how sustainability-oriented HRM can be effectively implemented in digitally intensive work environments.

Digitally intensive work systems often rely on advanced surveillance technologies to monitor employee behavior, productivity, and compliance. Tools such as algorithmic performance evaluation, digital tracking, and automated reporting systems enable organizations to exercise unprecedented levels of control over work processes. Although these technologies can enhance transparency and coordination, they also raise concerns about excessive monitoring, data misuse, and perceived managerial distrust. Empirical studies increasingly indicate that pervasive surveillance may negatively affect employee wellbeing by increasing stress, reducing perceived autonomy, and undermining psychological safety. These outcomes directly contradict the core principles of human sustainability, which prioritize long-term wellbeing and meaningful work experiences.

At the same time, organizational trust has been identified as a key mechanism that shapes employees' responses to digital monitoring practices. Trust influences how employees interpret managerial intentions, perceive fairness, and accept organizational control systems. In high-trust environments, digital monitoring may be perceived as supportive and developmental, whereas in low-trust contexts, similar practices can be experienced as intrusive and coercive. Despite its importance, organizational trust remains underexplored in the intersection between digital HRM, surveillance, and human sustainability. Existing research often examines these elements in isolation, resulting in fragmented insights and limited theoretical integration.

This study addresses this gap by advancing the concept of Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM in digitally intensive work systems. Rather than viewing digital surveillance solely as a technical or control-oriented issue, this paper adopts a human-centered perspective that situates surveillance practices within broader HRM strategies, ethical governance, and trust-based employment relationships. By integrating employee wellbeing, workplace surveillance, and organizational trust

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into a single conceptual framework, this research seeks to clarify how HRM can function as a balancing mechanism between digital efficiency and human sustainability.

The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it aims to conceptualize Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM in the context of digitally intensive work systems, highlighting its distinguishing features from conventional HRM and digital HRM approaches. Second, it examines the dual role of digital surveillance as both a potential risk and a strategic tool for supporting sustainable HRM outcomes, depending on its design, transparency, and governance. Third, it explores the mediating role of organizational trust in aligning digital monitoring practices with employee wellbeing and sustainable organizational performance.

By offering an integrative and theoretically grounded perspective, this study contributes to several streams of literature, including Sustainable HRM, digital work and employment, and organizational trust. It responds to recent calls for more human-centered and ethical approaches to managing digital transformation in organizations. Furthermore, the framework developed in this paper provides practical insights for HR managers and policymakers seeking to design digitally enabled work systems that are not only productive but also resilient, ethical, and sustainable from a human perspective.

Materials and Methods

Research Design and Approach

This study employs a **conceptual qualitative research design** grounded in a **systematic literature-based analysis** to examine Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM within digitally intensive work systems. The design is intentionally non-empirical, as the primary objective is theory development and conceptual integration rather than hypothesis testing. This approach is appropriate given the fragmented nature of existing research on digital surveillance, employee wellbeing, and organizational trust, which are often examined separately rather than as interconnected elements within HRM systems.

The study adopts a **theory-building orientation**, integrating perspectives from sustainable HRM, digital work studies, organizational behavior, and ethics. Through this approach, the research aims to construct a coherent framework that explains how HRM can function as a balancing mechanism between digital efficiency and long-term human sustainability.

Materials and Data Sources

The primary materials consist of **peer-reviewed academic publications**, including journal articles, scholarly books, and institutional reports relevant to the study's core constructs. The literature was sourced from established academic databases such as **Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar**, ensuring academic credibility and international relevance.

The literature selection followed a structured keyword-based search strategy using terms including *human sustainability*, *sustainable HRM*, *digital HRM*, *digitally intensive work systems*, *employee wellbeing*, *workplace surveillance*, *algorithmic management*, and *organizational trust*. Priority was given to literature published within the last decade to capture recent developments in digital work systems, while seminal theoretical works were included to strengthen conceptual foundations.

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Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure analytical rigor, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied, as summarized in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Literature Selection Criteria

Criteria Type	Description
Inclusion Criteria	Peer-reviewed sources; relevance to HRM, digital work, wellbeing, surveillance, or trust; clear theoretical or empirical contribution
Time Frame	Primarily published within the last 10 years, with selective inclusion of foundational works
Disciplinary Scope	HRM, organizational studies, psychology, sociology of work, digital governance
Exclusion Criteria	Non-scholarly sources; opinion-based articles; studies with limited methodological transparency or weak conceptual relevance

Analytical Procedure

The analytical process followed a **four-stage qualitative synthesis procedure**:

1. **Initial Screening**
   Titles and abstracts were reviewed to identify potentially relevant publications aligned with the research objectives.
2. **In-depth Content Analysis**
   Full-text readings were conducted to extract key concepts, definitions, theoretical arguments, and findings related to human sustainability, digital surveillance, wellbeing, and trust.
3. **Thematic Categorization**
   Extracted insights were coded and grouped into thematic categories reflecting the main constructs of the study.
4. **Integrative Synthesis**
   Themes were compared and synthesized to identify relational patterns and conceptual linkages, forming the basis for framework development.

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The main analytical themes identified are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Core Analytical Themes and Focus

Theme	Analytical Focus
Human Sustainability	Long-term employee wellbeing, dignity, capacity preservation
Sustainable HRM	Ethical HR practices, stakeholder balance, long-term orientation
Digitally Intensive Work Systems	Algorithmic management, digital platforms, data-driven control
Workplace Surveillance	Monitoring intensity, transparency, ethical implications
Organizational Trust	Perceived fairness, psychological safety, acceptance of control

Conceptual Framework Development

The conceptual framework was developed using **abductive reasoning**, combining established theories with emerging insights from digitalized work contexts. Rather than treating technology as a deterministic force, the framework emphasizes **managerial choices and HRM governance** as critical determinants of employee outcomes.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual logic underpinning this study.

Figure 1. Conceptual Structure of Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM

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In this structure, **Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM** operates as a mediating and regulatory mechanism that shapes how surveillance practices are perceived and experienced by employees. **Organizational trust** functions as a key relational outcome that determines whether digital monitoring supports or undermines wellbeing.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the rigor of the conceptual analysis. First, the use of multiple academic databases minimized selection bias and strengthened theoretical diversity. Second, transparent documentation of the analytical steps supports methodological clarity and replicability. Third, continuous comparison across disciplinary perspectives reduced the risk of uncritical conceptual adoption and encouraged reflective theorizing.

Although the study does not rely on primary data, its rigor lies in the systematic integration of established theories and contemporary digital work insights.

Ethical Considerations

This research exclusively uses secondary data from publicly available academic sources and does not involve human participants. Therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. Nonetheless, ethical considerations are central to the analytical stance of the study, particularly regarding issues of privacy, autonomy, and fairness in digitally mediated HRM practices. These considerations reinforce the normative commitment to human-centered and responsible digital governance.

Methodological Limitations

As a conceptual study, the findings do not provide empirical validation of causal relationships. The proposed framework is intended as a foundation for future empirical research rather than a definitive explanatory model. Additionally, the literature-based approach may not fully capture contextual variations across industries or cultural settings. Future studies employing quantitative surveys or qualitative case studies are recommended to empirically test and refine the proposed relationships.

Results

This section presents the analytical results derived from the systematic synthesis of the selected literature and the development of the conceptual framework on Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM in digitally intensive work systems. The results are organized according to the core constructs of the framework and their interrelationships, as identified through thematic analysis and integrative theorizing.

1. Characteristics of Digitally Intensive Work Systems

The analysis reveals that digitally intensive work systems are predominantly characterized by high levels of datafication, algorithmic coordination, and continuous digital connectivity. These systems rely heavily on digital platforms, real-time performance metrics, and automated decision-making tools to manage work processes and employee outputs. Across the reviewed literature, digital intensity is consistently associated with increased organizational control, speed of information flow, and standardization of work practices.

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However, the results also indicate that digital intensity amplifies the visibility of employee behavior, thereby expanding the scope and depth of workplace surveillance. This expansion creates a structural context in which HRM practices play a decisive role in shaping how digital control mechanisms are designed, communicated, and experienced by employees.

2. Forms and Implications of Workplace Surveillance Practices

The findings show that workplace surveillance in digitally intensive environments manifests in multiple forms, including performance tracking, behavioral monitoring, communication analysis, and algorithmic evaluation. These practices differ in intensity, transparency, and perceived legitimacy. Surveillance systems that operate implicitly or without clear justification tend to generate negative employee responses, such as heightened stress, perceived loss of autonomy, and reduced psychological safety.

Conversely, the results suggest that surveillance practices embedded within clear ethical guidelines and communicated transparently are more likely to be perceived as functional and supportive. When employees understand the purpose, scope, and limits of monitoring, surveillance shifts from being perceived as coercive control toward being interpreted as a coordination and development mechanism. This finding underscores the non-deterministic nature of digital surveillance and highlights the mediating influence of HRM governance.

3. Role of Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM Practices

A central result of this study is the identification of Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM as a critical regulatory layer between digital surveillance and employee outcomes. The analysis indicates that HRM practices emphasizing ethics, transparency, and participation significantly shape employee perceptions of digital monitoring systems.

Ethically grounded HRM practices establish normative boundaries that protect employee dignity and privacy, thereby mitigating the adverse effects of intensive monitoring. Transparency-oriented HRM practices, such as clear communication of monitoring objectives and data usage policies, enhance perceived fairness and procedural justice. Participatory HRM practices, including employee involvement in the design or evaluation of digital tools, foster a sense of agency and shared responsibility.

Collectively, these HRM practices transform digital surveillance from a purely control-oriented mechanism into a sustainability-oriented management tool that aligns organizational objectives with human wellbeing.

4. Organizational Trust as a Mediating Outcome

The results demonstrate that organizational trust emerges as a pivotal mediating construct within the conceptual framework. Trust is shown to influence how employees cognitively and emotionally interpret surveillance practices and HRM intentions. In contexts where Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM practices are present, employees are more likely to attribute benevolent and developmental motives to management actions.

High levels of organizational trust reduce uncertainty and perceived risk associated with digital monitoring, thereby weakening the link between surveillance intensity and negative wellbeing

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outcomes. Conversely, the absence of trust exacerbates the negative consequences of surveillance, even when monitoring systems are technically efficient or legally compliant. These findings position trust not merely as an outcome but as a dynamic relational mechanism that sustains human-centered digital work environments.

5. Employee Wellbeing Outcomes

The analysis identifies employee wellbeing as a multidimensional outcome encompassing psychological, social, and emotional sustainability. Psychologically, wellbeing is reflected in reduced stress levels, perceived autonomy, and a sense of meaningful work. Socially, wellbeing relates to perceived inclusion, fairness, and quality of workplace relationships. Emotionally, it involves feelings of safety, respect, and organizational support.

The results indicate that employee wellbeing is positively associated with HRM systems that explicitly integrate human sustainability principles into digital governance. In such systems, employees are more likely to experience digital work environments as enabling rather than exhausting. In contrast, digitally intensive work systems lacking sustainability-oriented HRM practices tend to produce short-term performance gains at the expense of long-term human capacity and resilience.

6. Integrated Results of the Conceptual Framework

Taken together, the results support the proposed conceptual framework in which digitally intensive work systems create structural conditions for increased surveillance, while Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM functions as a mediating system that shapes trust and wellbeing outcomes. Organizational trust emerges as a key relational bridge that aligns digital control mechanisms with sustainable employee experiences.

The framework illustrates that human sustainability is not an automatic outcome of digital transformation but a strategic result of deliberate HRM choices. Organizations that prioritize ethical governance, transparency, and employee participation are better positioned to harness digital technologies without compromising long-term employee wellbeing.

Discussion

This study advances the understanding of Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM by positioning it as a strategic response to the challenges created by digitally intensive work systems. The discussion interprets the conceptual results in relation to existing literature, highlights theoretical contributions, and clarifies how the proposed framework extends current debates on digital HRM, workplace surveillance, and employee wellbeing.

Human Sustainability in the Context of Digital Work

The findings reinforce the argument that digital transformation fundamentally alters the conditions under which human sustainability is maintained. Unlike traditional work systems, digitally intensive environments intensify monitoring, accelerate work rhythms, and blur boundaries between control and support. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that human

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sustainability cannot be treated as a passive outcome of organizational policies but must be actively designed through HRM practices that acknowledge the structural power of digital technologies.

By integrating human sustainability into HRM governance, the framework responds to growing concerns that digital efficiency often prioritizes short-term productivity over long-term human capacity. The results suggest that sustainability-oriented HRM shifts the focus from maximizing immediate output toward preserving employee wellbeing, engagement, and trust as strategic organizational resources.

Reframing Workplace Surveillance Through HRM

Existing research on workplace surveillance frequently adopts a critical stance, emphasizing its detrimental effects on autonomy, privacy, and psychological wellbeing. While these concerns are empirically well-founded, the results of this study indicate that surveillance should not be conceptualized as inherently harmful. Instead, its impact depends on how it is embedded within HRM systems and organizational values.

This study extends the literature by reframing surveillance as a socially constructed practice shaped by ethical norms, transparency, and participation. When HRM functions as an ethical mediator, surveillance practices can be aligned with developmental objectives rather than coercive control. This perspective challenges deterministic views of technology and emphasizes managerial agency in shaping digital work experiences.

Organizational Trust as a Central Mechanism

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the explicit positioning of organizational trust as a central mediating mechanism linking surveillance practices and employee wellbeing. While prior studies have acknowledged trust as an important organizational variable, it has rarely been integrated systematically into models of digital HRM and human sustainability.

The results demonstrate that trust operates both cognitively and affectively, influencing how employees interpret managerial intentions behind digital monitoring. In high-trust environments, employees are more likely to perceive surveillance as legitimate and supportive, thereby reducing stress and resistance. In contrast, low levels of trust amplify perceptions of intrusion and exploitation, even when monitoring practices are formally justified.

By highlighting trust as a dynamic relational outcome of HRM governance, this study bridges the gap between technological control and human-centered management perspectives.

Implications for Sustainable HRM Theory

From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to Sustainable HRM literature by extending its scope into digitally intensive work systems. Traditional Sustainable HRM models often assume relatively stable organizational structures and interpersonal management practices. The proposed framework adapts these models to contexts characterized by algorithmic management and data-driven control.

Furthermore, the study advances Sustainable HRM theory by explicitly integrating ethical governance and trust as core mechanisms of human sustainability. This integration strengthens the

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normative foundation of Sustainable HRM and aligns it with contemporary debates on responsible digitalization and ethical AI in organizations.

Practical Implications for Organizations

The findings offer several practical implications for HR practitioners and organizational leaders. First, organizations should recognize that digital monitoring systems require HRM governance, not merely technical implementation. Clear ethical guidelines, transparent communication, and employee participation are essential to maintaining trust and wellbeing.

Second, HR managers should actively monitor trust levels as a key indicator of human sustainability in digital work environments. Trust erosion may signal deeper systemic issues that threaten long-term organizational resilience.

Third, organizations should move beyond compliance-based approaches to digital surveillance and adopt sustainability-oriented HRM strategies that emphasize dialogue, fairness, and shared responsibility. Such strategies enable organizations to balance digital efficiency with human dignity and wellbeing.

Directions for Future Research

Although this study provides a robust conceptual foundation, it also opens avenues for future empirical research. Quantitative studies could test the proposed relationships using structural equation modeling to examine the mediating role of trust. Qualitative research, such as case studies or interviews, could provide deeper insights into employee experiences of digital surveillance under different HRM regimes.

Additionally, cross-cultural research could explore how national context, institutional frameworks, and cultural values influence the implementation and effectiveness of Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM. Such research would further refine the framework and enhance its generalizability.

Conclusion and Implications

Conclusion

This study set out to conceptualize Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM as a strategic response to the challenges posed by digitally intensive work systems. By integrating employee wellbeing, workplace surveillance, and organizational trust into a single analytical framework, this research advances a human-centered perspective on digital HRM that moves beyond purely efficiency-driven approaches.

The findings demonstrate that digitally intensive work systems inherently expand the scope of workplace surveillance, increasing organizational control over employee behavior and performance. However, the study shows that the consequences of such surveillance are not technologically predetermined. Instead, their impact on employee wellbeing depends largely on how surveillance practices are governed, communicated, and embedded within HRM systems. Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM emerges as a critical mediating mechanism that aligns digital monitoring with ethical principles, transparency, and employee participation.

Moreover, the study identifies organizational trust as a pivotal relational outcome that connects HRM governance to sustainable employee experiences. Trust shapes employees' interpretations of digital surveillance and determines whether monitoring practices are perceived as supportive or intrusive. In this sense, trust functions not only as an outcome of HRM practices but also as a stabilizing force that enables organizations to sustain performance without eroding human wellbeing.

Overall, this research concludes that human sustainability in digital work environments is a strategic choice rather than an automatic byproduct of digital transformation. Organizations that deliberately embed sustainability principles into HRM governance are better equipped to balance technological efficiency with long-term human resilience and organizational legitimacy.

Theoretical Implications

This study offers several important theoretical contributions. First, it extends Sustainable HRM theory into the context of digitally intensive work systems, an area that remains underdeveloped in existing literature. By addressing algorithmic management and digital surveillance explicitly, the proposed framework adapts sustainability-oriented HRM concepts to contemporary digital realities.

Second, the study contributes to digital HRM and workplace surveillance literature by reframing surveillance as a socially constructed and HRM-mediated practice rather than an inherently coercive technological tool. This perspective challenges deterministic assumptions about technology and highlights the role of managerial agency, ethical governance, and relational dynamics.

Third, the integration of organizational trust into the framework enriches theoretical debates on human sustainability by emphasizing relational and psychological mechanisms. Trust is positioned as a central connector between control systems and wellbeing outcomes, thereby bridging gaps between organizational behavior, HRM, and digital work studies.

Practical Implications

The findings carry several practical implications for organizations navigating digital transformation. First, HR practitioners should treat digital surveillance systems as socio-technical arrangements that require active HRM governance. Clear ethical standards, transparent communication regarding data usage, and employee participation in decision-making are essential for maintaining trust and wellbeing.

Second, organizations should view employee wellbeing as a strategic sustainability outcome rather than a secondary concern. Monitoring trust levels, psychological safety, and perceptions of fairness can provide early indicators of sustainability risks within digitally intensive work systems.

Third, policymakers and organizational leaders should move beyond compliance-oriented approaches to digital monitoring and adopt sustainability-oriented HRM strategies that emphasize dialogue, accountability, and shared responsibility. Such approaches enhance organizational legitimacy and reduce the long-term risks associated with employee disengagement and burnout.

Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, this study highlights the importance of aligning digital control mechanisms with human-centered leadership practices. Managers should be trained not only in the technical use of digital monitoring tools but also in ethical decision-making and trust-building competencies. Effective managers in digital environments act as translators between technological systems and human experiences, ensuring that control does not undermine dignity and motivation.

Additionally, involving employees in the design and evaluation of digital HRM tools can strengthen acceptance and foster a sense of ownership. Participation enhances transparency and reinforces trust, which in turn supports sustainable performance outcomes.

Policy Implications

At the policy level, the study suggests the need for clearer institutional guidelines that address the ethical use of digital surveillance in the workplace. Regulations should balance organizational needs for efficiency and accountability with employee rights to privacy, autonomy, and wellbeing. HRM policies aligned with such regulatory frameworks can help organizations implement digital technologies responsibly and sustainably.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. As a conceptual and literature-based analysis, it does not provide empirical validation of the proposed relationships. The framework should therefore be tested through future quantitative and qualitative research. Empirical studies could examine the mediating role of organizational trust using survey data or explore employee experiences of surveillance through in-depth case studies.

Future research could also investigate contextual variations across industries, organizational sizes, and cultural settings to enhance the generalizability of the framework. Additionally, longitudinal studies may provide insights into how trust and wellbeing evolve over time in digitally intensive work systems.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, this study underscores the importance of re-centering human sustainability within digital transformation strategies. Human Sustainability–Oriented HRM offers a viable pathway for organizations seeking to harness digital technologies without compromising employee wellbeing, trust, and long-term organizational resilience. By integrating ethical governance, transparency, and participation into HRM practices, organizations can build digitally advanced workplaces that are not only efficient but also genuinely sustainable from a human perspective.

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