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The Shifting Semantics of “Kawaii”: Historical, Cultural, and Gendered Transformations in Japanese Aesthetic Perception

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ABSTRACT

The Japanese concept of Kawaii often translated as “cute” or “adorable” has become an emblem of Japan’s global cultural identity. However, beyond its surface charm, Kawaii encapsulates a profound cultural discourse that intertwines emotion, gender, and power. This paper examines the shifting semantics and cultural functions of Kawaii from the Showa period to the Reiwa era, revealing how its meaning evolved from a symbol of fragile innocence to one of empowerment and diversity. Employing a qualitative and multimodal approach, the research draws from historical media artifacts such as Shoujo no Tomo (Girls’ Companion) magazine and contemporary visual representations alongside intergenerational interviews. The findings suggest that Kawaii functions as both a linguistic and ideological framework through which Japanese femininity, consumer identity, and self-expression are negotiated. Ultimately, Kawaii emerges as a dynamic aesthetic category that reflects broader sociocultural transformations, particularly the reconfiguration of gender and affect in modern Japan.

Keywords: Cultural Semiotics, Historical Discourse, Japanese Aesthetics, Kawaii, Multimodality

INTRODUCTION

The word *Kawaii* (かわいい) possesses a long and intricate linguistic genealogy that extends to Japan’s premodern past. Its etymological roots trace to *kawayushi*, a term that originally expressed pity, tenderness, or compassion toward something small and helpless during the Heian period (794–1185) (Nittono et al., 2012). Over time, *kawayushi* transformed into *kawaisou* and then *Kawaii*, gradually shedding its connotation of weakness and adopting one of affection and charm. This semantic softening reflected broader cultural shifts in Japanese emotional and moral sensibilities, where qualities once regarded as pitiable became appreciated as symbols of innocence, humility, and virtue (Nittono et al., 2012; Urakami et al., 2021).

Nittono, Fukushima, Yano, and Moriya (2012) describe *Kawaii* as an effective response that elicits care, attention, and protective behavior. Rather than representing a purely aesthetic category, *Kawaii* functions as a socio-psychological phenomenon embedded in empathy and interpersonal relations. Psychological research further associates *Kawaii* with measurable physiological responses such as attentional focus and relaxation, suggesting that cuteness operates as an evolutionary adaptation promoting nurturance and social bonding. Within this framework, *Kawaii* emerges as both linguistic signifier and emotional expression a duality that underpins its persistent cultural resonance.

From a linguistic standpoint, *Kawaii* reflects the Japanese propensity toward emotivity, or the expression of emotion as a valued cultural norm (Hinton, 2014). Its semantic range extends far beyond objects and appearances to encompass behaviors, gestures, and personality traits. In everyday language, *Kawaii* operates performatively: it not only describes but also enacts positive feeling, establishing emotional rapport between speaker and listener (Margalena et al., 2023). This performative dimension makes *Kawaii* a central feature of Japan’s social communication style, where empathy and harmony govern expression (Hirota, 1995; Nittono et al., 2012).

The meaning of *Kawaii* has shifted through Japan’s major historical epochs from pre-war idealizations of feminine modesty to post-war optimism and contemporary self-expression. During the Showa period (1926–1989), *Kawaii* crystallized as a moral and visual ideal within shoujo (少女) culture, represented vividly in magazines such as *Shoujo no Tomo* (Girls’ Companion). These publications depicted young women in delicate poses, adorned with ribbons and floral dresses, embodying the traits of obedience, gentleness, and melancholy (Dollase, 2008). The illustrations of Nakahara Jun’ichi fused Western romantic motifs with Japanese restraint, creating what Bae (2018) calls “melancholic innocence,” an aesthetic that offered escapism during political instability.

By the late 1930s, Japan’s militarization redirected aesthetic values toward patriotism and vigor. The state’s wartime propaganda idealized *kenkō bijin*

(“healthy beauty”), replacing fragile femininity with disciplined, supportive motherhood (Bae, 2018). This ideological reconfiguration demonstrates that *Kawaii* aesthetics were never purely apolitical they served as cultural instruments aligning personal emotion with national purpose.

Following Japan’s defeat in World War II, *Kawaii* entered a new interpretive phase under American occupation. Western influence in fashion, education, and media fostered more playful and optimistic depictions of youth. As Dollase (2008) observes, the post-war shoujo figure symbolized democratic freedom and self-discovery, departing from pre-war ideals of quiet endurance. The rise of manga and anime culture from the 1950s onward further diversified the meanings of *Kawaii*, associating it with creativity, emotional independence, and consumer identity.

The Heisei era (1989–2019) marked *Kawaii*’s globalization, driven by Japan’s economic bubble and the later recession that shaped an introspective, emotionally expressive youth culture (Nittono et al., 2012). Subcultures emerging from Harajuku and Shibuya transformed *Kawaii* into a performative rebellion: colorful, excessive, and often ironic. Commercial icons like Hello Kitty, Pokémon, and Sanrio characters embodied a commodified but emotionally sincere aesthetic that transcended national borders. In Nye’s (2004) notion of “soft power,” *Kawaii* became a strategic export of Japanese identity, conveying harmony and innocence to global audiences.

In the Reiwa period (2019–present), *Kawaii* continues to diversify across digital and social media platforms. The contemporary aesthetic incorporates gender-fluid, athletic, and mature bodies, redefining beauty through inclusivity. Online influencers, cosplayers, and visual artists reinterpret *Kawaii* as empowerment rather than compliance. Urakami et al. (2021) argue that modern *Kawaii* encompasses psychological comfort, creativity, and resistance against restrictive social expectations. This transformation marks a cultural recalibration from passive sweetness to assertive individuality.

The discourse of *Kawaii* is deeply intertwined with constructions of gender and power. Historically, *Kawaii* reinforced the *yamatonadeshiko* archetype of the modest and nurturing woman (Majda et al., 2022; D. L. Miller, 2017). Yet from the 1970s onward, *Kawaii* also became a site of subtle resistance. Dollase (2008) interprets the *Kawaii* boom of the 1970s–1980s as a reaction against patriarchal and corporate expectations, where young women adopted childish handwriting, soft fashion, and cute behavior as a deliberate refusal of adult conformity. What appeared as regression functioned, paradoxically, as self-definition.

Feminist analyses later expanded this perspective. Allison (2006) argues that *Kawaii* circulates within Japan’s “commodified affective economy,” where emotions are both produced and consumed. Women deploy *Kawaii* aesthetics to perform approachability while reclaiming visibility in a male-dominated media landscape. (Nittono et al., 2012) likewise sees *Kawaii* as a gendered semiotic

resource an adaptable code that enables women to negotiate modern pressures by transforming emotional labor into social capital.

Recent scholarship further broadens *Kawaii*'s reach beyond femininity. Male idols, queer performers, and even mascots and AI avatars now embody forms of *Kawaii* that challenge binary identities (Occhi, 2012; Urakami et al., 2021). Saito (2019) calls this trend a “post-gender aesthetic,” where cuteness reflects emotional openness rather than gendered weakness. In this new context, *Kawaii* acts as a shared language of empathy that destabilizes traditional divisions of gender and power.

Globally, *Kawaii* has become a semiotic and cultural export. Dollase (2008) and Galbraith (Akalu et al., 2024) describe its dissemination through anime, fashion, and digital media as a vehicle of cultural diplomacy a projection of Japan's national identity through affective aesthetics, aligning with Nye's (1990) theory of soft power. Yet the globalization of *Kawaii* also generates hybrid meanings: in Western contexts, it is often infused with irony and subcultural resistance; in Southeast Asia, it becomes a form of digital identity among youth communities.

From a semiotic standpoint, *Kawaii* embodies what Barthes (1977) terms the “mythic sign” a surface of simplicity concealing cultural complexity. Its recognizable visual features rounded shapes, pastel colors, and large eyes constitute what Azuma (2009) calls “database aesthetics,” where emotional satisfaction arises from the consumption of familiar tropes. The repeated engagement with these symbols transforms *Kawaii* into an affective economy of recognition and comfort.

However, as (S. Lieber-Milo & Nittono, 2019) cautions, the global diffusion of *Kawaii* risks decontextualizing it from Japan's ethical roots, where cuteness originally implied humility, sincerity, and care for others. The challenge of *Kawaii*'s globalization lies in balancing universality with cultural integrity. While it has become a universal signifier of positivity and playfulness, understanding its Japanese moral-ethical foundations remains essential for interpreting its deeper meanings.

In this context, *Kawaii* can be understood as a living discourse that reflects transformations in Japanese society shifts in gender roles, emotional expression, and aesthetic sensibility. Existing research has examined *Kawaii* through psychological, gendered, and cultural-historical frameworks (Bae, 2018). Yet few studies integrate these perspectives into a longitudinal interpretation spanning the Showa, Heisei, and Reiwa eras. Moreover, there remains limited attention to intergenerational perceptions of *Kawaii* how different age groups internalize and reinterpret its meanings within evolving cultural contexts. This study addresses that gap by combining multimodal analysis and qualitative inquiry to trace the semantic and aesthetic evolution of *Kawaii* across a century of Japanese media and social life. Through this interdisciplinary approach, it illuminates how *Kawaii* operates as both cultural artifact and emotional practice, embodying Japan's enduring capacity to reimagine tradition through the aesthetics of feeling

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative multimodal design, integrating discourse analysis, semiotic interpretation, and intergenerational interviews to trace the historical and cultural transformation of Kawaii in Japan. Qualitative inquiry is particularly appropriate for this research because Kawaii operates not only as a lexical sign but also as a cultural aesthetic a complex system of visual, emotional, and social codes. As Creswell (2018) explains, qualitative research allows for the exploration of meaning-making processes within specific cultural contexts. By combining textual, visual, and oral data, the research aims to capture Kawaii as a lived and evolving discourse.

Multimodality, as defined by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), recognizes that meaning is produced across multiple semiotic modes language, image, color, and gesture. In the case of Kawaii, these modes intertwine to create an aesthetic and affective experience that cannot be fully grasped through linguistic analysis alone. Therefore, this study employs multimodal analysis to examine how images, words, and social practices work together to construct the perception of Kawaii across time. The study also applies a historical-comparative framework, analyzing materials from three major cultural eras: Showa (1926–1989), Heisei (1989–2019), and Reiwa (2019–present). Each period represents a distinct socio-political environment that shaped aesthetic sensibilities and gender ideals. By situating Kawaii within these temporal frames, the research identifies how social change and cultural production intersect to redefine aesthetic meaning.

Historical Visual Media

The first dataset consists of archival visual materials drawn from Japanese magazines, advertisements, and illustrations that exemplify the changing aesthetics of *Kawaii*. Central among these sources is *Shoujo no Tomo* (Girls’ Companion), a pre-war and wartime magazine published from 1908 to 1955, which played a key role in defining the visual representation of girlhood and femininity (Bae, 2018; Dollase, 2019). Selected covers and feature illustrations were analyzed to trace how facial expressions, fashion, and composition articulated ideals of purity, strength, and national duty.

Additional post-war sources include manga panels, fashion magazines, and pop-cultural artifacts from the Heisei era specifically Margaret, Popteen, and Zipper. These texts were chosen for their strong visual engagement with youth identity, self-expression, and consumer aesthetics. For the Reiwa era, digital media artifacts such as social media campaigns, idol group imagery, and visual performances by female athletes and influencers were included. Each artifact serves as a lens for understanding how *Kawaii* functions as a multimodal sign system that evolves alongside technology and society.



Figure 1. Shoujo no Tomo, pre-war edition

Source: Author's Database



Figure 2. Popteen magazine, 1990s

Source: Author's Database



Figure 3. Contemporary influencer aesthetic, Reiwa era

Source: Author's Database

Visual materials were analyzed using a semiotic approach derived from Barthes (1977) and van Leeuwen (2001), focusing on the denotative and connotative meanings of design elements such as color, line, and gaze. The analysis also considers compositional structures, emotional tone, and symbolic attributes that construct “cuteness” as a gendered and affective category.

Interviews and Participants

The second dataset consists of semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 Japanese participants (eight female, five male, and two nonbinary) aged between 18 and 68. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to represent three generational cohorts corresponding to the study’s historical framework: (1) Showa generation (ages 55–68) – individuals who experienced post-war cultural recovery and early globalization; (2) Heisei generation (ages 30–54) – those shaped by mass consumerism, digital expansion, and pop culture proliferation; (3) Reiwa generation (ages 18–29) – the digital-native youth who experience *Kawaii* through online and globalized contexts. Interviews were conducted in Japanese and transcribed into English for analysis. Each session explored participants’ personal associations with *Kawaii*, their memories of its imagery, and their opinions on how the term has changed meaning across generations. Open-ended questions allowed participants to reflect on both linguistic and visual experiences of *Kawaii* (Creswell, 2014).

Analytical Procedure

The analytical process combined discourse analysis and thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcripts and visual data were coded inductively to identify recurring patterns and emergent meanings. Three dominant themes surfaced: (1) *Kawaii* as emotional tenderness and innocence; (2) *Kawaii* as self-expression and individuality; (3) *Kawaii* as empowerment and resistance. These themes were then correlated with historical imagery to observe how the affective and visual dimensions of *Kawaii* evolved over time. Reflexive notes and inter-coder discussions ensured analytical validity and minimized researcher bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Generational Perceptions of *Kawaii*

Across all interviews, participants expressed *Kawaii* as a deeply emotional and context-dependent term. However, generational contrasts were striking. Showa participants described *Kawaii* using words such as *yasashii* (“gentle”), *otonashii* (“quiet”), and *junshin* (“pure”). For them, *Kawaii* evoked nostalgia for simpler times, associated with modest fashion and moral decency. They recalled the imagery of pre-war and post-war magazines where young women were “neither loud nor bold,” reflecting social ideals of humility (2019).

Heisei participants defined *Kawaii* as an extension of *jibun rashisa* (“being oneself”). They associated it with freedom of style, emotional authenticity, and self-creation through consumer goods. One respondent noted that in the 1990s, “*Kawaii* became our identity; we used it to express who we wanted to be, not just what others expected.” This sentiment echoes (Kinsella, 1995) observation that *Kawaii* functioned as an act of rebellion disguised as sweetness. Reiwa participants

emphasized *Kawaii* as inclusive and fluid. For them, it encompasses athleticism, confidence, and gender diversity. A younger interviewee remarked that “even a strong body or a tough girl can be *Kawaii*,” signaling a paradigm shift where *Kawaii* connotes strength and authenticity rather than fragility. These generational variations suggest that *Kawaii* evolves as a social language reflecting shifting cultural values. What unites all three cohorts, however, is the recognition that *Kawaii* carries emotional warmth what (A. Lieber-Milo et al., 2019) term “positive affective contagion.”

Thematic Patterns from Visual Analysis

The visual analysis reinforced the generational findings. Showa imagery emphasized symmetrical composition, muted tones, and downward gazes. The color palettes sepia, ivory, and pale pink communicated delicacy and restraint. The dominant symbols were flowers, ribbons, and domestic interiors, visualizing femininity as moral virtue (Bae, 2018). Heisei-era media introduced vibrant colors, dynamic poses, and fragmented layouts reflecting media pluralism. Pop idols and manga heroines projected cheerful autonomy, combining innocence with self-assertion (Nittono et al., 2012). Consumer brands like Sanrio and Shibuya street fashion solidified *Kawaii* as performative identity rather than inherited virtue. Reiwa aesthetics display hybridity and hybridity-consciousness. Athletic women, digital avatars, and gender-nonconforming performers embody a confident, post-binary *Kawaii*. Visual styles employ bold contrasts, metallic tones, and exaggerated gestures signaling empowerment through affective intensity rather than passivity. Across all periods, *Kawaii* remains a distinctly emotional aesthetic. Yet, its evolution from sentimental purity to assertive inclusivity mirrors Japan’s broader redefinition of gender and emotion in public life.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the data reveal that *Kawaii* operates as a cultural continuum linking Japan’s past and present. In the Showa era, *Kawaii* reinforced moralized femininity; in the Heisei era, it became a medium of personal expression; and in the Reiwa era, it symbolizes emotional freedom and diversity. These transformations underscore that *Kawaii* is not a static descriptor but a dynamic moral-aesthetic system, one that adapts to the emotional needs and social realities of each generation.

Moreover, the transition from submissive to assertive *Kawaii* indicates a shift in Japanese emotional culture from restraint toward self-affirmation. The Reiwa reimagining of *Kawaii* aligns with contemporary feminist and queer discourses that advocate inclusivity, authenticity, and affective agency (Urakami et al., 2021). Ultimately, the findings suggest that the semantic life of *Kawaii* exemplifies Japan’s ability to reinvent tradition through emotional and aesthetic innovation.

Generational Shifts in Emotional Aesthetics

The evolution of *Kawaii* across the Showa, Heisei, and Reiwa periods reveals how emotional aesthetics mirror Japan’s social transitions. In the Showa era, *Kawaii* functioned as a moral and affective ideal rooted in humility, obedience, and collective sentiment. The pre-war *shoujo* imagery of *Shoujo no Tomo* captured a melancholic innocence that offered psychological refuge during political turbulence (Bae, 2018; Dollase, 2008). This sensibility reflected Japan’s negotiation between modernity and traditional virtue, where emotional restraint became an ethical form of beauty.

In the Heisei era, *Kawaii* underwent aesthetic democratization. As consumer capitalism expanded, the concept detached from its moral connotations and became a vehicle for self-expression and identity formation (Kinsella, 1995; Nittono et al., 2012). Young women used *Kawaii* to navigate contradictions between individual desire and social conformity. This transformation parallels Ahmed’s (2004) notion of “affective economies,” where emotion circulates as social currency, shaping belonging and differentiation.

In the Reiwa era, *Kawaii* has matured into an inclusive and reflexive aesthetic that transcends gender and age boundaries. Digital platforms amplify *Kawaii* as both personal brand and communal empathy. The shift from submissive sweetness to confident self-display suggests that Japanese emotional culture now privileges authenticity and self-definition. As Nittono et al. (2012) demonstrate, the affective responses elicited by *Kawaii* warmth, focus, and protection remain constant, yet their moral framing adapts to generational expectations.

Kawaii and Gendered Agency

The gendered dimensions of *Kawaii* illustrate how aesthetic discourse mediates power relations. Historically aligned with the *yamatonadeshiko* ideal of domestic virtue (D. Miller, 1983), *Kawaii* initially reinforced patriarchal norms by celebrating fragility and decorum. However, beginning in the 1970s, it evolved into a subtle counter-discourse. As Kinsella (1995) observes, young women employed *Kawaii* handwriting, fashion, and demeanor to resist adult responsibilities and male-defined rationality. Such performative regression redefined vulnerability as a source of autonomy.

From the perspective of Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity, *Kawaii* constitutes a stylized repetition of gestures that can either reproduce or subvert gender expectations. When women consciously exaggerate cuteness, they expose the constructed-ness of femininity itself. This interpretation aligns with Allison’s (2006) argument that *Kawaii* operates within a commodified affective economy, enabling women to transform emotional labor into visibility. By appropriating *Kawaii*, female subjects reclaim control over their image, converting passivity into symbolic agency.

Contemporary iterations extend this agency to men, queer identities, and non-binary expressions (Occhi, 2012; Urakami et al., 2021). The diversification of *Kawaii* subjects dismantles its historical confinement to female virtue and repositions it as a universal emotional register. In this context, *Kawaii* performs what Saito (2019) calls “post-gender aesthetics,” where tenderness and openness supersede binaries of masculinity and femininity. The evolution of *Kawaii* thus parallels Japan’s broader movement toward affective equality, transforming sentiment into empowerment.

Aesthetics of Empowerment and Resistance

While *Kawaii* retains traces of conformity, it also embodies subtle rebellion. The Heisei youth’s adoption of exaggerated colors, layered textures, and playful accessories exemplifies Barthes’s (1977) idea of the “mythic sign,” where surface pleasure conceals ideological resistance. Within the aesthetics of *Kawaii*, joy itself becomes defiance a refusal of monotony and normative discipline.

Daniel (2024) suggests that emotions create “attachments that bind us to the world.” In this sense, *Kawaii* binds individuals to optimism and community in times of social pressure. During economic stagnation and digital saturation, performing *Kawaii* provides psychological relief and collective belonging. The act of crafting or displaying cuteness reclaims agency in spaces dominated by commercial and patriarchal expectations.

Furthermore, *Kawaii* operates as what (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) might call a “minor aesthetic” a creative practice that subverts dominant hierarchies through small, intimate gestures. By infusing daily life with color, humor, and tenderness, practitioners of *Kawaii* resist alienation and rehumanize public interaction. The coexistence of irony and sincerity in contemporary *Kawaii* underscores its dual capacity: it simultaneously critiques and comforts, reflecting the complexity of emotional modernity.

Global Semiotics and Cultural Integrity

The globalization of *Kawaii* demonstrates how affective symbols transcend national boundaries while retaining cultural specificity. Through anime, fashion, and digital art, Japan projects *Kawaii* as a form of “soft power” that fosters cross-cultural affinity (Nittono et al., 2012; Nye, 1990). Yet global audiences often reinterpret *Kawaii* through their own cultural frameworks, generating hybrid meanings that range from irony in Western subcultures to sincerity in Southeast Asian youth communities (Akalu et al., 2024).

This diffusion aligns with Appadurai’s (1996) concept of “mediascapes,” wherein cultural symbols circulate freely yet unevenly across global networks. The appeal of *Kawaii* lies in its emotional legibility its ability to evoke empathy independent of language. However, (Dollase, 2019) cautions that detaching *Kawaii* from its Japanese ethical roots risks reducing it to mere aesthetic consumption.

Authentic *Kawaii* historically encompassed humility, compassion, and respect for harmony; without these moral undertones, global cuteness can become superficial.

Thus, sustaining the cultural integrity of *Kawaii* requires contextual literacy. When appropriated with awareness, *Kawaii* becomes a site of intercultural dialogue rather than homogenization. Its worldwide popularity underscores Japan’s contribution to global emotional culture a model of beauty grounded in empathy rather than domination.

CONCLUSION

The historical transformation of *Kawaii* in Japan reflects an enduring dialogue between cultural tradition and modern sensibility. In the early Showa period, publications such as *Shoujo no Tomo* (少女の友) established the first recognizable image of *Kawaii* through depictions of young girls with large eyes, slender figures, and delicate expressions. These illustrations encapsulated ideals of innocence and moral virtue, shaping collective perceptions of femininity in both pre-war and post-war society. Yet, as Japan entered a militarized phase, the aesthetic of fragility was replaced by depictions of vitality and patriotism. Under wartime restrictions, only “healthy-looking” women symbols of physical and national strength were permitted as models for youth, demonstrating how political ideology could redefine the moral and visual boundaries of *Kawaii*.

In the mid-Showa period, *Kawaii* began to re-emerge through the representation of rounder and more childlike forms, particularly in mascots and *yurukyara*, which conveyed comfort and emotional softness. This shift signaled a return to empathy and affection as cultural values. Nevertheless, the artistic legacy of Nakahara Jun’ichi’s *Shoujo no Tomo* illustrations continued to influence girls’ literature and the emerging shoujo manga of the early Heisei period. Magazines such as *Margaret* (マーガレット) adapted his visual language large eyes, gentle features, and introspective emotions into a new medium that preserved the emotional depth of *Kawaii* while situating it within the context of modern self-expression.

By the late Heisei and early Reiwa eras, *Kawaii* evolved from illustrated ideal to lived aesthetic. Fashion magazines, advertisements, and social media platforms replaced drawn characters with real models who embodied the visual traits of earlier shoujo imagery. While traditional elements such as large eyes, innocence, and emotional sincerity remained central, their meaning expanded beyond fragility. In contemporary Japan, *Kawaii* no longer describes a passive or dependent persona; it can equally define an athletic, confident, or even muscular individual who retains warmth, empathy, or playful charm. This evolution illustrates how *Kawaii* has become an inclusive moral-aesthetic system that integrates strength and softness, individuality and connection.

Ultimately, the journey of *Kawaii* from *Shoujo no Tomo*’s sentimental heroines to today’s plural expressions demonstrates Japan’s unique ability to reinterpret aesthetic codes without severing them from emotional heritage. Across generations, *Kawaii* has shifted from a symbol of vulnerability to a versatile language of empowerment an emotional aesthetic that mirrors Japan’s broader pursuit of balance between modern transformation and the preservation of sincerity, affection, and empathy at the heart of its cultural identity.

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