

Beyond Politeness: A Systematic Review of Request Strategies and Rapport Management in Student-Lecturer Communication

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Request strategies, politeness and rapport management in student-lecturer interactions within academic contexts have received attention in pragmatics; however, findings on politeness and rapport management remain dispersed across studies. Five research questions guide the study by following (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure a rigorous and transparent selection and analysis process. Searches in Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar for the period (2010-2025) yielded 42 records that met the inclusion criteria. Conventionally indirect strategies are the most used by students to mitigate face-threatening acts, and they employ positive and negative politeness strategies. The review also reveals that the predominance of Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and Blum-Kulka et al.'s CCSARP model, alongside limited adoption of dynamic or relational interpersonal studies. Data collection is dominated by elicitation tools such as DCTs, while authentic and digital interaction remains underutilised. This paper advances theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice in intercultural academic communication. The main contribution of this review paper is the identification of the need for an integrated, multi-layered framework that combines genre analysis, rapport management, and relational work to offer a more comprehensive approach to exploring academic requests.

Keywords: politeness, rapport management, request strategies, student-lecturer interaction

Introduction

In academic contexts, interaction between students and lecturers occurs, and one of the languages used in this communication is the language of requests. Requests play a vital role in managing tasks, negotiating institutional power dynamics, and building relationships (Merrison et

al., 2012; Tsoumou, 2024). However, Akmal et al. (2022) noted that performing a request is not a straightforward act; it is a face-threatening act (FTA) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This can lead to social pressure on the recipient to comply, often risking interpersonal friction, especially in intercultural contexts. This context-rich examination of how linguistic choices, politeness

orientations, and rapport management intersect in academic life. This article addresses these gaps by offering a systematic review of empirical research on request strategies, politeness, and rapport management in student-lecturer interactions in higher education. Five research questions guide the review:

1. What request strategies do students use when addressing lecturers in higher education contexts?
2. How do students manage politeness and rapport in their requests to lecturers?
3. Which theoretical frameworks underpin existing studies of student-lecturer requests, politeness, and rapport?
4. What methodological approaches and data collection instruments are typically employed in this line of research?
5. What gaps and underexplored areas can be identified, and what directions do they suggest for future research and pedagogy?

The review aims to provide a clearer understanding of how politeness and request strategies function in educational discourse across cultures. Ultimately, it provides practical and theoretical insights to enhance pedagogical practices and promote more effective academic communication between students and lecturers.

Literature Review

In pragmatics, requests have been studied from two perspectives: speech act and politeness theory, particularly Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and Blum-Kulka et al.'s (1989) CCSARP framework. These approaches have helped to gain insights into directness, indirectness and mitigation strategies for the realization of requests. In recent studies, a relational approach is taken in which negotiation of face, sociality rights, and rapport in institutional interactions are emphasized (Hodeib, 2024; Spencer-Oatey, 2008; Zhu, 2017). This is partly a reflection of the growing awareness that requests are not merely linguistic but relational practices deeply rooted in socio-cultural and institutional contexts. Student-

lecturer communication has been the focus of recent studies, which show that students often use indirect requests, moves of support, and politeness strategies to handle power differences and sustain academic relationships (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018; Nevisi et al., 2023; Sung et al., 2026). Meanwhile, the rising prevalence of email, WhatsApp, and other digital communication media has introduced new pragmatic challenges, which can result in negative feedback and relational conflict (Al Rousan et al., 2024; Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2024). In terms of methodologically and contextually, previous studies are only based on elicited data and a limited number of educational contexts; relatively few studies have focused on naturally occurring interactions, lecturers' evaluation, the communication of non-native speakers or digital and multimodal academic contexts (Abourahim et al., 2024; Albawardi & Alqahtani, 2022; Al-Otaibi, 2015; Alsharif & Alyousef, 2017; Deveci & Abbas, 2023; El-Dakhs et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2025; Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2024; Morallo, 2026; Saud, 2024). Despite the growing body of literature in this field, it remains highly theoretically fragmented, methodologically diverse, and largely a product of message production that neglects recipients' evaluations. In addition, research so far has primarily focused on interactions between native and non-native speakers or on intercultural communication within a single cultural group, while intercultural communication between non-native speakers has been insufficiently researched. Therefore, a systematic literature review is necessary to synthesize existing findings, identify methodological and or theoretical trends, and gain insight into the role of request strategies, politeness and rapport management in today's student-lecturer digital interaction.

Methodology

PRISMA

The articles selected in this systematic review were identified, screened, and included using the PRISMA methodology. A total of 519 entries were discerned from three digital repositories: Web of Science (WoS) (308), Google Scholar

(197), and Scopus (14). Titles and abstracts were screened, and 415 records were discarded because they were not academic, lacked focus on request strategies or were duplicates. This left 104 full-text articles for the eligibility assessment. The 62 articles excluded from this stage were due to one or more of the following reasons: the article was not about the request speech act ($n = 20$); the

article was about non-academic contexts ($n = 18$); the article was a thesis or conference paper ($n = 3$); the article was about instructional pragmatics ($n = 8$); the article contained no student data ($n = 6$); or the article was a duplicate of the database ($n = 7$). In the end, 42 studies were included and used to synthesize the findings of this review.

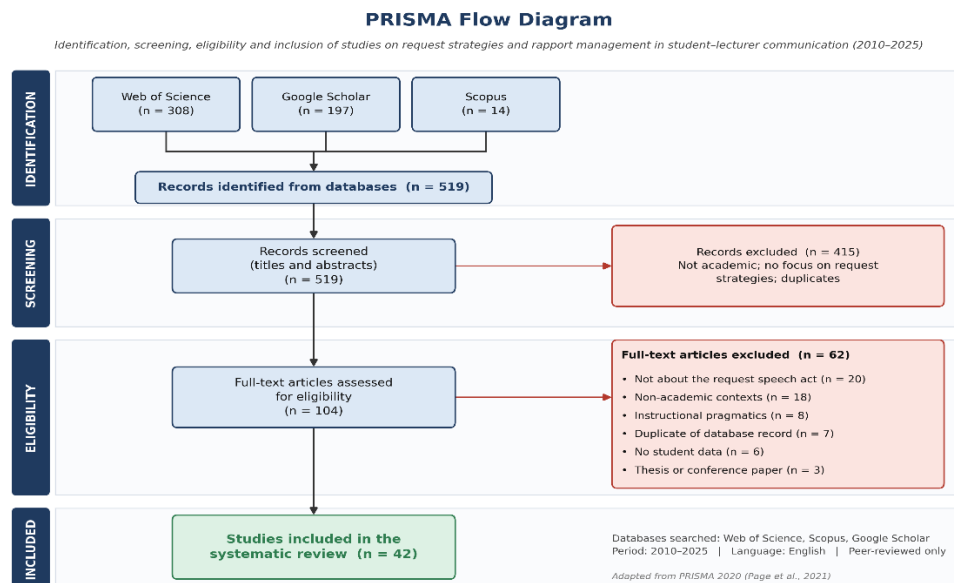


Figure 1 PRISMA diagram showing the identification, eligibility and inclusion

Search Strategy

Three stages are included in the literature search: database identification, keyword search, and screening. To guarantee a thorough and concentrated amalgamation of the literature, this systematic review utilized a methodical search approach across three principal academic repositories: Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. These repositories were chosen for their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed scholarship within applied linguistics, education, and pragmatics. The search was restricted to studies published between 2010 and 2025 to capture contemporary findings relevant to the evolving nature of digital academic communication and intercultural interaction. Boolean operators and keyword combinations were used to identify relevant articles, including:

“Academic request strategies” OR “student email request” OR “academic email request”

“Politeness in request” OR “politeness in academic discourse” OR “politeness in social media” “Rapport management in education” OR “rapport management and relational work”

Following the identification of 519 records, the researchers first screened the titles and abstracts for relevance, resulting in the exclusion of 415 records. The remaining 104 full articles were assessed for eligibility as shown in the PRISMA diagram.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following criteria were used to ensure the relevance and quality of the studies in the current review: the studies focused on the student-lecturer communication in academic contexts; the studies examined aspects of request strategies, politeness, or rapport management; the studies involved English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) learners; the studies were published in English in the period of

(2010-2025); and the studies used qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods research designs. Only articles in English were eligible for inclusion if they were peer-reviewed. On the other hand, studies were not included if they did not include academic interaction, included only teacher discourse or feedback but did not include student requests, included only pragmatic instruction or intervention but not study of natural request use, included requests in other domains of discourse (e.g., business, hospitality) or were non-peer-reviewed sources (e.g., thesis).

Data Extraction and Coding

Systematic extraction of data from the included studies was made in a structured matrix for thematic analysis and comparison. Key information that was captured in the matrix included the author(s), year of publication, and country of study; participant demographics; data collection methods and research design; type of analysis used; and the nature of the student-lecturer interaction studied. It also reported the kind of request strategies analysed, the politeness and rapport management features identified, and the theories used in each study. Lastly, key findings were documented to inform the synthesis of findings across studies and identify patterns and gaps in the literature. The selected studies were then thematically coded to answer the five research questions guiding the review. The coding process was a mix of inductive and deductive coding, with the former used to identify patterns and ideas in the data, and the latter to apply concepts from Politeness Theory, Speech Act Theory, and Rapport Management. The studies were identified, and each one was given a Study ID, which was then coded on the following dimensions: types of request strategies examined (RQ1), features related to politeness and rapport management (RQ2), theoretical

frameworks underlying the analysis (RQ3), research methods and data sources used (RQ4), and any gaps or directions for further research (RQ5). The sociocultural context, or country in which the study was conducted, was also recorded to facilitate cross-cultural comparison. These themes and their corresponding studies are visually summarized in Table 1 in the Appendix.

Quality Control and Screening Process

All studies were reviewed manually for methodological rigor and relevance. To ensure consistency, a second round of screening was applied to confirm thematic alignment and avoid duplication. Studies that lacked sufficient detail on context, data sources, or request strategies were excluded at the final review stage.

Results and Synthesis

The main findings of the systematic review are summarised in this section, presented in the context of the five research questions. The analysis is conducted through thematic coding of 42 selected studies that reveal the students' performance of request speech acts in academic discourse and their strategies for maintaining politeness and rapport with lecturers in different linguistic and cultural contexts. The synthesis also highlights the most prevalent theoretical perspectives on these strategies, research approaches taken and the gaps identified, which suggest future directions in the field. This section highlights similarities and differences in the characteristics of request-making and relational management in the academic context by organising the results around each research question. The 42 studies included were preliminarily categorised into three broad categories: request strategies, politeness and rapport management, or a mixture of both. As shown in Figure 2,

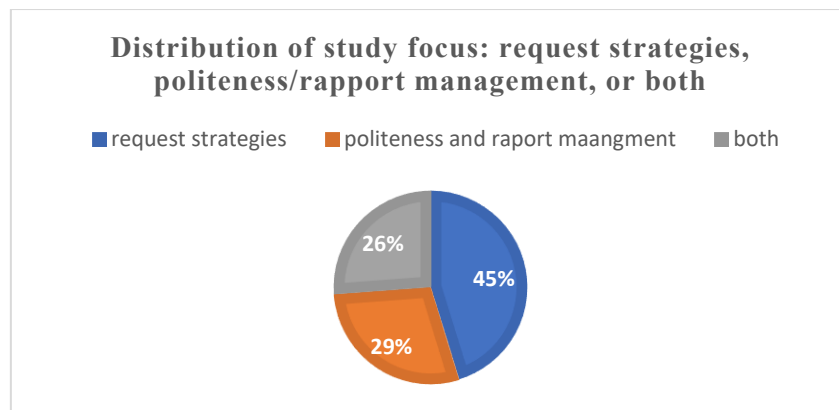


Figure 2 Distribution of study focus: request strategies, politeness/rapport management, or both

The largest research focus (about 45%) focused on request strategies and studied the way students request and organize requests in academic contexts. A smaller group (approximately 29%) was concerned specifically with politeness and rapport management, which involved how students negotiated face, showed deference, and managed relationships with lecturers. The other studies (about 26%) focused on both aspects simultaneously, combining the form of a

language with its interpersonal function. This distribution indicates the emergence of the field's awareness of the complex links between pragmatic competence and awareness of relationships in academic communication and the need for integrative approaches that combine structural and social aspects of student speech acts. The selected studies primarily focused on geographic areas and were highly represented in academic contexts. As shown in Figure 3:

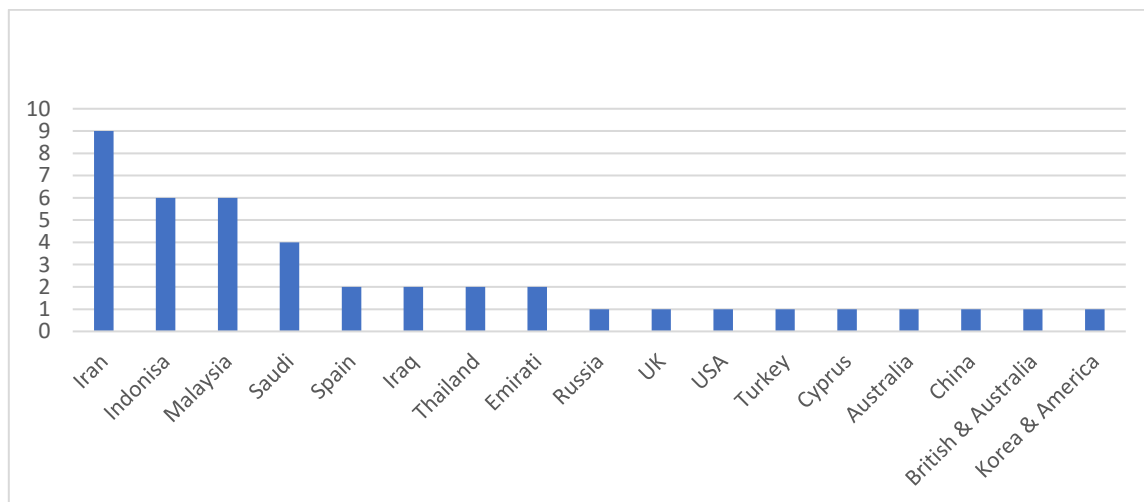


Figure 3 Geographical distribution of the selected studies

Studies were carried out in Iran ($n = 9$), Indonesia ($n = 6$) and Malaysia ($n = 6$), in order of number. The countries are contexts in which research communities are active in the fields of English language education and pragmatics. Saudi Arabia also had a significant number of studies ($n = 4$), and countries such as Spain, Iraq, Thailand, UAE (Emirati), and Russia had two studies each. A few studies have taken place in Western ESL settings (U.K., USA, Australia and Cyprus) and in China,

and Turkey as well as mixed cultural settings (British & Austrian, Korean & American). This distribution shows a clear tendency towards research conducted within EFL contexts in Asia and the Middle East and relatively few studies from ESL contexts and few involving true cross-cultural comparisons studies. Interestingly, most of the studies examined the relationship between non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NSs), e.g., students' writing to Western lecturers.

Interactions between NNSs, however, which are becoming more common in academic contexts across the internationalization of academic discourse were largely neglected. This is an important research point that warrants further exploration in future studies, since pragmatic expectations in NNS-NNS communication may differ from those in NS-NNS communication.

Request Strategies in Student-Lecturer Academic Communication

The request strategies used by students in the 42 studies comprised a wide range, including three types of request strategies that have been identified: direct, conventionally indirect and non-conventionally indirect. The most common and widely used were the conventionally indirect ones, such as query preparatory forms like “Could you...”, “Would it be possible if...”, which were commonly used by students to request from lecturers in both EFL and ESL academic settings. The pattern was consistently found in the studies of Al-Otaibi (2015), Al-Shawesh & Hussin (2015), Alzebaree & Yavuz (2017), Çetinavcı (2020), El-Dakhs et al. (2023), Merrison et al. (2012), Nevisi et al. (2023), and Song (2014), who highlighted learners' sensitivity to academic hierarchy and their desire to avoid face threats by using polite and deferential language. Direct request strategies, however, tended to be used in situations where students felt there was less social distance or informality. Studies by Daneshpazhuh & Shahrokhi (2016), Deveci & Abbas (2023), Deveci & Hmida (2017), and Elasfar et al. (2023) highlighted the use of imperatives, want statements, or obligation structures in less formal exchanges, though these strategies were sometimes associated with pragmatic failures or unintended impoliteness, especially in intercultural communication.

Overall, the use of conventionally indirect strategies is predominant in both ESL and EFL settings, but many factors influence the use of direct and non-conventionally indirect strategies, including cultural norms, power distance and pragmatic competence. The need for targeted pragmatic instruction aligned with learners'

cultural and academic environments is also evident in the variation across settings.

Politeness and Rapport Management

The reviewed studies have shown that students use different positive and negative politeness strategies to negotiate power dynamics and maintain rapport with lecturers. Generally, positive politeness strategies such as greetings, expressions of gratitude, solidarity markers, and friendly closings were often employed to lower the social distance and build positive relationships especially in writing emails (Jannah & Ghofur, 2022; Jihong et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2025; Pasaribu et al., 2021; Sembiring & Sianturi, 2021). The NPS included hedging, indirectness, apology and honorifics were more frequent in high power distance contexts and were used to show respect for authority and to avoid imposing oneself (Al-Otaibi, 2015; Alsout & Khedri, 2019; Kuhi & Jadidi, 2012). The results indicate, however, that indirectness is not necessarily seen as polite and directness as impolite. In certain educational settings, the direct and unambiguous nature of requests in combination with the use of relevant polite expressions was deemed more effective (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2018; Saadna, 2024). Across all studies, successful rapport management was strongly associated with the skills of intercultural pragmatic awareness and adapting language choice based on the audience, context, and relational purpose. On the other hand, pragmatic mismatches often resulted in communication problems, a lack of rapport, and adverse academic results (Santamaría-García, 2017; Tsoumou, 2024).

Theoretical Frameworks

Specifically, the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson (1987) and CCSARP (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) were selected. Brown and Levinson's model was most often employed, either as a standalone model or as a supplemental one, in at least 16 studies; primarily, it was applied to the students' handling of social distance, power and face in classroom demands. In the same way, CCSARP was used in at least 12 studies, sometimes in conjunction with politeness theory to capture the structural and relational

components of communication. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) typologies continued to be used in other studies. For yet another example of the ongoing significance of these foundational models, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's typologies were used in other studies. Compared to this, there were relatively few studies that used the Rapport Management Model of (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), which has the potential to account for relational and transactional goals in intercultural interaction among students. Some studies were also based on bottom-up models of politeness, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis to investigate emergent interactional practices. Other models which were used were Scollon et al.'s, (2012) politeness model. Luke and Gordon (2012) model, models of rhetorical and discourse-moves, corpus-based models, and the taxonomy of request modifications. While these other cross-cutting approaches have expanded the analytical field, traditional politeness frameworks remain dominant. The theoretical concentration has helped ensure analytical consistency, but it has constrained existing research in ways that reflect the complexity of digital communication, intercultural interaction, and changing practices among students and lecturers.

Research Methods and Analytical Models

The reviewed studies used different research designs and methods to examine student's request strategies, politeness, and rapport management in academic contexts. Most studies (16) employed quantitative designs, such as Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), questionnaires and coding frameworks to examine request strategies and politeness features. 14 studies used qualitative methods, focusing on the pragmatic implications, interpersonal aspects, and cultural approaches to communication, as evidenced by interviews, open-ended responses, and discourse analysis of authentic communication. In total, there were a further 12 studies that used mixed methods designs, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to better understand linguistic behaviour and speakers' intentions. Among data collection methods, the most common was the DCT (13 studies), followed by authentic email

data (11 studies). Interviews, classroom interactions, WhatsApp conversations, recorded academic discussions and questionnaires were used in other studies. The popularity of WhatsApp and online group messages indicates interest in digital communication. Although DCTs provided methodological control and comparability, some studies mentioned their lack of authenticity. Naturally occurring data were found to provide more insightful information about rapport management and politeness in the real world, albeit with greater ethical and analytical challenges.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Although there has been a wide range of research on the strategies students use to request and the politeness in academic settings, there are still some gaps in the literature. Moreover, most studies have been about communication between a non-native-speaking student and a native-speaking lecturer, with little research on communication between non-native speakers whose mother tongues differ. English is the language of international universities and understanding how pragmatic norms can be negotiated without reference to English as a native language is crucial. Second, the models still heavily rely on traditional models such as Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory and CCSARP model (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). While these models can be useful, they might not capture the full richness of modern academic communication amid cultural, digital, and relational complexity. Thus, dynamic theories, including Rapport Management Theory and Relational Work, should receive greater attention. Both ecologically and methodologically, many studies still rely on elicited data, such as Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), which provide good methodological control over analysis but low ecological validity. In comparison, only a handful of studies make use of natural data, including real-life e-mail exchanges, classroom exchanges, or even WhatsApp conversations, and even fewer of those use it alongside the participants' own reflections. Furthermore, the lecturer's evaluations of students' requests remain

underrepresented, and thus, the understanding of how requests are interpreted and how rapport is negotiated from production to reception is limited. More integrated approaches, which include authentic communication data and perspectives from students and lecturers, should therefore be employed in future research to provide a more comprehensive understanding of rapport management in contemporary academic contexts.

Discussion

The 42 studies reviewed show a complex interplay among linguistic, cultural, and relational factors that influence academic requests. In all situations, students preferred conventional indirect request strategies, especially query-preparatory ones, to reduce imposition and address power differences in student-lecturer communication. Indirectness, however, was not the only significant factor in requests. The results suggest that the effective use of rapport management strategies in both positive and negative politeness resources (greeting, apology, hedging, honorifics and supportive moves) is crucial for academic communication. The conventional belief that being more indirect is also more polite was undermined in several studies, which indicated that indirectness is context-specific and depends on cultural norms, institutional requirements, and relational objectives. The results confirm the current relational view, as in Rapport Management Theory, which sees requests as communicative actions that negotiate face, sociality rights, and interactional intentions, rather than as the minimization of face-threatening acts. The review also identifies significant gaps in the existing literature at the theoretical, methodological, and contextual levels. There is a strong reliance in the field on Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, the CCSARP categories, and elicited data collection methods (Discourse Completion Tasks), with comparatively few studies using Rapport Management Theory, Relational Work, or naturally occurring communication data. Moreover, the research remains largely devoted to student-requested productions, with little

attention to lecturers' perceptions, interactions with non-native speakers, and the evolving nature of digital communication in multicultural academic settings. Current knowledge of the co-construction and negotiation of rapport in real-world interactions is limited by the lack of authentic, multimodal data. This would be best achieved using more relationally oriented theory, which involves incorporating the voices of the student and lecturer and examining naturally occurring communication in various intercultural situations to provide a more rounded view of politeness and rapport in modern academic discourse.

Conclusion

The aim of this systematic review was to examine the strategies used by EFL/ESL learners in making requests, showing politeness and maintaining rapport in academic contexts with lecturers, by summarizing 42 peer-reviewed studies. Results indicate that the students' main way of coping with the academic hierarchy and maintaining politeness is through conventionally indirect request strategies, particularly preparatory forms of query. Positive and negative politeness strategies are influenced by cultural norms, power relations, and students' perceptions of social distance. It was found that rapport management was context-dependent and not only linguistic in nature, but also cultural and pragmatic in competence. Although the review yielded some insights, many gaps remained. Theoretical studies remain overly dependent on traditional politeness models; research on NNS-NNS interaction, generational language change, and digital pragmatics remains limited. In addition, naturalistic data and teacher views are seldom incorporated, limiting our understanding of the full relational dynamics in academic contexts. Future research should utilize more context-aware frameworks, and incorporate real-time or multimodal data, as well as students' and lecturers' voice. Such directions are essential to inform pedagogy enabling pragmatically competent, relationally aware, and culturally responsive academic communication among diverse learners.

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