

Binge Watching, Loneliness, Interpersonal Competence and Interaction Anxiety in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

We live in a world of digitization. Information, transactions, communication and relationships have transformed through online media. With access to series, the online audience is increasing rapidly. Young adults and teenagers are exposed to virtual content and are not even aware about how it impacts their thoughts, feelings and actions. The aim of this study is to find out how binge watching is related to loneliness, interpersonal competence and interaction anxiety in young adults aged between 18-30 years. A random sample with 112 participants was administered standardized measures of Binge-Watching Addiction Questionnaire (Forte et al,2021), DeJong Gierveld Loneliness Scale (DeJong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006), Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (Buhrmester et al, 1988) and Interaction Anxiousness Scale (Leary, 1983). The responses were analyzed through SPSS Statistics Version 29. The findings revealed significant relationship between binge watching and interaction anxiety. The implications of findings for young adults along with suggestions have been discussed.

Keywords: *Binge Watching, Loneliness, Interpersonal Competence, Interaction Anxiety*

Binge watching is a common phenomenon among young individuals these days. Teenagers and adults are now witnessing a massive surge in access to digitized content from all over the world. This experience has been engaged by the prevalence of online streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney to name a few. Dentsu Aegis Network Report of 2020 revealed that 49% youth in urban India spends 2-3 hours a day streaming shows and movies (DAN Report, 2020). Literature shows that this has led to creation of an audience which is experiencing a psychological change with respect to thought, behavior, and emotions. The experience for the users has been smoothed as they can access the entire season of a show at once instead of waiting for a fresh episode every week. This would facilitate fastened development of a habit pertaining to viewing behavior (Ahmed, 2017). Binge watching is defined as continuous streaming of more than 1 episode of a particular content. This can be one show or multiple shows that are streamed simultaneously (Flayelle et.al, 2019).

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Gerbner (1998) classified binge watchers as heavy (4-24 hours), medium (3 hours) and light (1-2 hours) watchers. Flayelle et.al (2019) have characterized the population of binge watchers into four categories. These are named as regulated watchers, unregulated watchers, avid binge watchers, and recreational binge watchers. The parameters of differentiating between them include the level of stimulation/sensation desired, urgency, motivation for watching and emotional reactivity. Certain adaptive behaviors about social interaction have the potential to be imbibed by the viewing audience. Considering the above mentioned, online streaming has some benefits. The person is motivated to watch a show in order to discuss it with fellow watchers which would lead to an experience of positive emotions. The chain of effects impacts relational, and communication behaviors (Panda & Pandey, 2017; Starosta et al, 2019).

Findings by Starosta et al (2019) suggest that people engage in binge watching behavior in order to escape the reality which is often very daunting. The process of being engaged in the narrative while not facing reality is a reinforcing factor to indulge in this behaviour. This is analogous to addiction manifestation such that the viewers need to watch more and more episodes in order to achieve the desired level of relief and escape from reality. This reinforcing factor which was originally achieved by lower number of episodes now increases in threshold, and the addicted audience acquires an automatic response to watch more. Often when watching a particular show or even during a discussion of the show the individual might be primed to experience certain emotions. Research evidence highlights that increased binge watching is associated with increased levels of loneliness, depressive symptoms and anxiety (Singh and Singh, 2022; Starosta Izydorczyk & Lizinczyk, 2019). This in turn has an impact on how one perceives self and others.

Uses and gratification

Binge watching as behaviour has been used to satisfy different needs of people which include the motivations for engaging in it. One might use it to escape loneliness, escape reality, recreation, entertainment and as a means to become a part of social groups. This community of watchers has witnessed a massive influx over the past few years. Some people use binge watching as a way to get information, to make social connections, to stimulate themselves intellectually or get ideas. Bloggers on social media these days are taking inspiration from television shows to create content and connect with their audience. The use people have for indulging in this behaviour determines the preferences and what they choose to watch. This utility and selection are determined by the intentionality which in turn impacts what people choose to consume. Creators these days are focused on delivering user-oriented stories which fulfil most desired wants (McQuail, 2010).

Cultivation

This theory talks about how exposure to media and digital content shapes our thinking about different things. It gives us a frame to see the world. Entertainment content is also a way for institutions to put forward their ideas and messages to the audience (Gerbner,1998). The more engrossed we are in a particular content the more likely we are to have stronger perceptions pertaining to the content being consumed. Criticisms for this research emphasize that comparisons between different categories of binge watchers does not paint a clear picture of the phenomenon. Precise conclusions can be drawn only when this group is compared with control groups (Hughes, 1980). According to Gerbner's findings people consuming higher amounts of digital content are likely to experience Mean World Syndrome. Here, individuals have negative perceptions about others and think that they are mean. This impacts how they respond to others in their environment and hence, is important

to be researched further. The implications for interpersonal well-being can be vast reaching and thus, is the focus of this study.

Loneliness

The rising trend of loneliness in India has been attributed to varied factors like urbanization, migration away from home for better opportunities, education, financial conditions, marital status, religion, age, employment status among others. Considering the scope of this study, the focus would be on binge watching relating to loneliness in young adults in India. Across nations, different age groups are impacted by loneliness owing to varied reasons.

Elderly are hugely impacted by loneliness with potential causes lying in retirement, low family interaction, heightened health concerns, and low social engagement with society at large. Loneliness doesn't mean being alone, rather it refers to the feeling of not belonging or feeling unconnected even when we have friends or other people around us. Their conclusions pose an important notion of loneliness being a function of how an individual relates to self (Bandari et al, 2019; Hossian et al, 2020; Hawkey & Cacioppo, 2010). Weiss (1973) proposed a model of loneliness where in different aspects makeup loneliness. The first one being social loneliness which talks about a deficit of quality relationships with anyone. The other dimension is emotional loneliness which is concerned with lack of positive attachment figures (Dahlberg & McKee, 2014).

Gierveld & Kamphuis (1985) identified three parameters for loneliness which include the perceived level of deprivation experienced by the individual due to loss of relation. The value a bond holds for a person plays a crucial role here. Secondly whether the person thinks that loneliness is a permanent or a transient state also makes a difference. Lastly, the emotions one feels due to this phenomenon are key indicators. Individuals who report high levels of loneliness also report high levels of negative affect, impaired health, poor quality of life, depression, cognitive deficits, and cardiovascular deterioration (Yanguas, Pinazo-Henandis & Tarazona-Santabalbina, 2018; Herrera-Badilla et. al, 2015).

Multiple mental health issues like depression, anxiety, emotional problems and self-harm tendencies have been found related to loneliness. The low amount of perceived connectedness with others makes one see themselves as not belonging anymore. The perception of being alone impacts different areas of an individual's life viz their work, family dynamics, marital relations, health behaviors, and self-concepts (Cacioppo & Hawkey, 2006, 2010).

In India, young adults experience loneliness which can be due to academic reasons, professional demands, familial discord, peer relations, relationship issues, disruption in physical or mental health among others. Hawkey & Cacioppo (2006,2009) propose a model of loneliness wherein lack of social connection propels a vicious cycle wherein the individual views the world through a distorted perception. They perceive others' behaviour to be driven by malicious intentions and the biased expectations make them look for negative behaviours even in otherwise normal scenarios. Most of the findings in literature argue that there is a positive correlation of binge watching with loneliness. It is a mechanism for coping with negative emotions associated with the experience of lack of social connection (Narain & Sahi, 2021). The phenomenon perpetuates a cycle wherein a pattern is established. The temporary relief from loneliness is a motivating factor which maintains the escapist habit (Alfonsi et al, 2023). The exposure to social experiences is hampered (Gabbadini et al, 2021). This addictive behaviour shows high correlation with loneliness

(Mathurawala, 2022). The replacement of social connection with self-indulgent habits rates a gap in positive self-concepts and adaptive functioning of the individual.

Interaction Anxiety

Social anxiety refers to the apprehension resulting from fear of social situations; it is a characteristic of situations wherein people have a fear of being judged negatively (Jaiswal et.al, 2020). These worrisome tendencies are also observed when individuals interact with others. They would appear out of breath, low eye contact, speaking hastily, and unresponsive to the whole communication. These actions can get generalized to other scenarios as well. They anticipate that the conversation will have adverse outcomes with them being seen negatively. Interaction anxiousness is a subtype of social anxiety along with performance anxiety. Both share a feature of apprehension and negative evaluation in social situations whereas the difference lies in the type of situation. Former is concerned with routine interactions whereas the latter is concerned with performing in front of an audience. Interaction anxiety also has consequences for mental health in terms of depression, low esteem and reduced interest. Focusing on statistics, women are likely to experience social anxiety more than men. Maladaptive behaviours of substance abuse are also related to interaction anxiousness (Cu et al., 2012; Kim & Duval, 2022). Due to negative perceptions associated with communication children who report high level of interaction anxiety also report low levels of social competence ratings.

Binge watching is related to anxiety. The emotional comfort experienced by the viewer after watching a show is a reinforcing attribute which helps in escaping negative emotions. The lack of impulse control and immediate gratification received from the exposure to digitized content has evidence in research. The anticipation and steps taken to initiate watching a show or movie can itself stimulate positive feelings of satisfaction. As this tendency intensifies over time the audience feels increasingly safer in this digital space. One would require immediate access to a show or movie due to diminished impulse control; they could get agitated if their access gets obstructed. As one becomes increasingly dependent their social interaction reduces. They are likely to prefer the screen over interacting as it makes them feel safe. Thus, when an opportunity to engage socially arises they would appear highly nervous. Their need for interaction is being met by consumption of shows and movies. High level of anxiety in communication is also related to preference for online communication which is linked to internet addiction (Caplan, 2006; Chen, 2019).

Interpersonal Competence

Interpersonal competence talks about the different skills which are useful in dealing with people and navigating social situations. Multiple competencies have been identified by research over the past years. These skills determine the level of effectiveness with which we deal with other people. People who report high levels of interpersonal competence also report high resilience, better social support and better communication. Interpersonal competence as a construct has been very useful in understanding social relations and devises interventions in group settings to cater to mental health needs. One cannot only understand relationship dynamics but also late effective strategies to build healthy bonds while modifying maladaptive ones (Fitts,1970).

Studying interposal competence in workplace and academic settings helps in understanding peer relations. Such can be instrumental in bringing about policy changes and measures to facilitate positive relation dynamics. The way in which an individual perceives their partner is also impacted by interpersonal competence; this in turn has an effect on their satisfaction

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(Lamke et al., 1994). It plays an important role in facilitating adaptation in the field work of students (Je, Park & Hwa, 2019). Adjustment in college, effectiveness in communication and character attributes also impacted this dynamic.

In this study, focus is on the dimensions of interpersonal competence given by Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg & Reis (1988). These include initiating relationships, negative assertion, disclosure, emotional support, and conflict management. Such skills help the individual in directing and planning their actions such that they are beneficial for self and others. How one responds to other people in their surroundings is also a reflection of how they think about themselves. Social competence includes self-concept, individual strengths, and purpose (Han & Kemple, 2006).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The behavior of heavy watching is associated with high amount negative emotions experienced by an individual. Unproductive thinking plays a significant role in this association. Consecutive screening of televised content drastically affected different areas of well-being like sleeping behavior, eating patterns and mental health. The findings are from pandemic time and on adolescents. The viewer base has expanded since along with age categories. The diverse impact calls for study of influence of this phenomenon in social life of the individual (Billaux, Billieux, Gartner, Maurage & Flayelle, 2022; Jindal, Pannu, Sardana & Marjara, 2021).

One study found that poor health consequences like feeling dizzy, aloofness, tiredness and loss of constructive behavior are associated with problematic viewing. The sample for focus groups was drawn from students and the authors identify reasons viz leisure academics etc. for engaging in the behavior and its psychosocial effects on the viewer (Mahmoud & Wahab, 2021). Binge watching has severe impact on affectivity and thoughts of viewers. When exposed to content depicting self-harm, many views reported suicidal ideation and low mood states (Rosa, Andrades, Caye, Hidalgo, Braga de Oliveira & Pilz, 2019).

When an individual consumes massive amount of content on OTT platforms, they would report a deficit in mental well-being. High levels of loneliness, anxiety in social scenarios and depressive behaviors are likely to result (Sun & Cheng, 2021). Comparative study by Anghlecev et al (2022) revealed that the fear of missing out is highly prevalent in heavy watchers which motivates them to engage in social interaction. The conversation emerges from fear rather than interest in others. Heavy viewers also experience low level of health issues compared to light viewers. Low levels of interpersonal abilities are highly associated with internet addiction.

Excessive viewing is highly related to disruptions in interpersonal domain of life. It is used as an escape route to avoid dealing with real issues (Hoffman, 2019). People who are overtly social may use their phones more as their need for expression and communication can be high as well. According to their findings they are likely to view mobile and other digital devices as a medium to verbalising themselves to others. This symbol of expression however, is also maladaptive with high potential of developing into addiction. They define social skills as verbal expression and emotional regulation. In the present study the definition of interpersonal skills is more extensive (Munderia & Singh, 2019).

On the other hand, we find studies with no relation between maladaptive use of technology and social behaviors (Ghosh, Ghosh & Khasnobis, 2021). A new perspective was taken by

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Ramayan, Angello Louise & Intan Abida (2018) wherein binge watching helped in building social bonds with fellow viewers, a phenomenon they called 'Binge Bonding'. It implied better social functioning however limited to avid watchers. Samsuddin (2022) Conducted a quantitative study to understand how watching content on Netflix impacts communication behaviours of respondents. However, there focus was on verbal aspect of communication and did not focus on skills required for the same. Addiction to social networking sites correlated highly with interpersonal competence and psychological distress (Satici, Saricali, Satici, & Eraslan Capan ,2014).

Wheeler (2015) found that people experience high level of attachment anxiety and depression when they binge watch. They find it difficult to engage in long lasting relations. The skills for maintaining social bonds and how they relate to internet behaviours should be dealt with in further studies.

Rationale

Binge watching is a new area of study. Research shows its influence in our thoughts, emotions and behaviours. Interaction in any social scenario is a product of perceived competencies. Research has found that the higher the involvement in social setting and communication with peers, the lower is the amount of television viewed. Loneliness has been reported as a cause and consequence of binge watching in literature. Low contact with others and withdrawing into the safe comfort of virtual world propels apprehension in dealing with people. There is a gap in scientific evidence with regard to how the skills which make up the construct of interpersonal competence are related to this phenomenon. Social skills can reduce ill effects of internet addiction behaviours and protect one against them. Findings would have implications for theory, future research and practice.

METHODOLOGY

Objective

To measure the correlation between binge watching, loneliness, interpersonal competence and interaction anxiety.

Hypothesis

H1: There will be a correlation between binge watching and loneliness.

H2: There will be a correlation between binge watching and interaction anxiety.

H3: There will be a correlation between binge watching and interpersonal competence

Sample

A random sample was drawn. The sample comprised 112 participants (68 Females and 44 males). Individuals between the age group of 18 to 30 years were included in the study. Literature shows that individuals in this category are avid watchers (Deloitte, 2017; DAN Report, 2020). The mean age of the sample was 23.06 years (SD 2.81). 54.46% of the sample were students while the remaining were working professionals. Participants had educational backgrounds in humanities, sciences, and professional courses. 58.92% participants were pursuing undergraduate courses or had completed the same, 33% were pursuing or had completed their post-graduation and 8% were enrolled in professional courses. Table 1 depicts the sample demographics.

Instruments

Four measures have been used in this study.

1. Binge Watching Addiction Questionnaire

This measure helps in distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy levels of viewing based on participant responses. The tool has been developed by Forte, Favieri, Tedeschi & Casagrande (2021). The test has four dimensions namely Craving, Avoidance, Dependence and Anticipation. The questionnaire has 20 items placed on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 to 4. The lowest possible score in the tool is 0 while 80 can be the highest score. The different levels of binge-watching behaviour have been categorized based on the final score. Total scores between 51 to 69 indicated moderate level of binge watching and scores above 69 indicated problematic binge watching. The tool is highly internally consistent with Cronbach alpha value of 0.89.

2. Interaction Anxiousness Scale

Developed in 1983 by Leary, the scale assesses the level of anxiety experienced by the individual in social situations. There are 15 items in the test ordered on a 5 point Likert scale from 1 to 5. The scores range between 15 to 75. Items 3,6,10 and 15 are reverse scored. The tool measures the level of anxiety faced by an individual in interactions. The items are scored for the option selected (1= not at all characteristic of me, 2= slightly characteristic of me, 3= moderately characteristic of me, 4= very characteristic of me and 5= extremely characteristic of me). The scale has high internal consistency varying between 0.87-0.89. The test retest reliability coefficient was found to be 0.83 (Leary, 1983). The test has high convergent validity with Social Avoidance and Distress Scale. For the current study Cronbach value was 0.80 which implies high reliability.

3. DeJong Gierveld Loneliness Scale

The six item scale was developed by De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg in 2006. The tool has two dimensions namely emotional and social loneliness. There are three negatively framed items and three positively framed. Yes, More or Less and No are alternatives given to respondents. The Rasch model used for the tool by DeJong Gierveld & Kamphuis (1985) provides guidelines for scoring. Scores range between 0 to 6 with scores greater than or equal to 3 indicating loneliness. Yes, and More or Less responses are representative of loneliness and are given a score of 1 for negative statements. No and More or Less responses are scored as 1 for positively framed statements. The scale is reliable with Cronbach alpha values between 0.70 and 0.76.

4. Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed in 1988 by Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg and Reis. The initial version of the scale has 40 items. Coroiu et.al (2014) developed a 15 item version of the questionnaire. There are five dimensions of initiation, negative assertion, self-disclosure, conflict management and emotional support. Each dimension has 3 items placed on a 5 point Likert scale (1= I'm poor at this, 2= I'm only fair at this, 3= I'm OK at this, 4= I'm good at this and 5= I'm extremely good at this). The total score ranges between 15 to 75. Reliability analysis revealed Cronbach alpha value to be 0.845.

Procedure

The participants were selected randomly based on the inclusion criteria. They were informed about the purpose of the study. Confidentiality and use of data for academic purposes was assured. A questionnaire was created and consenting participants were surveyed. It consisted of the face sheet of demographic information along with measures for binge watching,

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loneliness, interpersonal competence and interaction anxiety. The questionnaire was shared with the participants in person and through online mediums. There were a total of 56 items which took 10-15 minutes to complete. The form was administered to participants and the obtained responses were subject to statistical analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics 29 software. Pearson coefficient of correlation was computed for the obtained responses in the variables. Data was compiled and analyzed using SPSS.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 Results for descriptive statistics for the variables under study

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Binge watching	112	32.96	13.53
Loneliness	112	4.03	1.42
Interpersonal Competence	112	48.51	9.34
Interaction Anxiety	112	39.46	8.82

Table No. 2 Correlations between binge watching, loneliness, interpersonal competence and interaction anxiety

Variable	Loneliness	Interpersonal competence	Interaction anxiety
Binge watching	0.082	0.071	0.415**
N	112	112	112
Sig for 2 tailed test	0.23	0.16	0.008

** Correlation is significant for two tailed test ($p < 0.01$)

There is a significant positive correlation of binge watching with interaction anxiety. This implies that people who watch more series also likely to display signs of nervousness in daily communication which hampers their relations. Binge watching is not related to loneliness and interpersonal competence which means that social skills of the participants and the perceived social contact does not vary with tendency to view television.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this project was to study the relationship of binge watching behaviour with loneliness, interpersonal competence and interaction anxiety. Quantitative approach was adopted for the same. A random sample of 112 participants in the age group of 18-30 years was included in the study. The gender composition of the sample was 64 females and 48 males. Tools for measuring levels of binge watching, loneliness, interpersonal competence and interaction anxiety have been utilised.

It was hypothesised that there will be significant correlation binge watching and loneliness. No significant relation of binge watching was observed with loneliness. The obtained correlation coefficient implies negligible insignificant positive correlation between the two variables $r = 0.082$, $p > 0.05$. Thus, if level of binge watching changes then loneliness scores will not change simultaneously. There was no correlation of binge watching with social ($r = 0.07$, $p > 0.05$) and emotional loneliness ($r = -0.005$, $p > 0.05$). Binge watching and loneliness being unrelated is not in line with past studies that individuals with high scores on loneliness also report high level of binge viewing (Batik & Demir, 2022). Finding is supported by Mezielis (2021) wherein no relation was found between binge streaming and loneliness. This relationship on further exploration was posited to be explained by temporary mood states of loneliness rather than long term emotional patterns. H1 specifying correlation between binge watching and loneliness is rejected.

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Findings revealed that significant positive correlation was found between binge watching behaviour and interaction anxiety. The hypothesis is accepted as the results show a significant positive correlation between interaction anxiety and binge watching $r = 0.415$, $p < 0.01$. Thus, if the binge watching behaviour increases so would the interaction anxiety. The relationship is moderate in magnitude. This implies that the two variables change together in same direction. Literature shows that anxiety of social settings and interaction can motivate one to engage in isolating activities like streaming and excessive use of technology. It not only reduces apprehension and helps in evading fear, but has a reinforcing value that can develop addictive patterns. Simultaneously it meets the need for social interaction via technology. In therapeutic settings this maladaptive behaviour can be reduced through targeted interventions which create patterns of moving communication to physical setups. H2 detailing a correlation between binge watching and interaction anxiety is accepted.

Lastly, it was hypothesised that there will be a correlation between binge and interpersonal competence. Binge watching and interpersonal competence were not correlated. The hypothesis is rejected as the results show negligible insignificant positive correlation $r = 0.071$, $p > 0.05$. Interpersonal competence scores do not vary with binge watching behaviour. With self-disclosure a significant positive correlation was obtained ($r = 0.188$, $p < 0.05$). With other competencies no correlation was found (Table 5). These warrants further studies of varied skills in relation to online streaming. Self-disclosure was related to binge watching which highlights the need to conduct more studies in this area. Thus, H3 positing a correlation between binge watching and interpersonal competence is rejected.

The above findings highlight that binge watching is a rapidly emerging phenomenon with a huge array of health and well-being consequences. The scientific community is beginning to recognize its prevalence, epidemiology, and severity as an addiction manifestation. Deeper investigation concerning this behaviour is necessitated through massive relations to daily functioning of individuals.

Limitations

The study is correlational in nature and does not indicate any causal relation between the variables under study. Secondly, the construct of social competence includes vast number of competencies, however, in the present research five competencies has identified by Buhrmester et al (1988) have been studied. Thirdly, the findings are generalizable only for urban youth in Delhi-NCR in the age group of 18-30 years. There is a gap when it comes to effective measures of assessing binge watching. Lastly, in the sample, heavy watchers were not identified thus; comparisons could not be drawn with counterparts in relation to the variables which could have yielded better insights.

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The significant relationship of self-disclosure with binge watching hints that interpersonal competencies should be studied in relation to binge watching in future researches. Secondly, binge watching was significantly related to interaction anxiety; future research should emphasise on factors which can mediate this relationship. Thirdly, larger samples should be studied for improved knowledge of this phenomenon as India has one of the highest numbers of digital audience in the world. The severity of this occurrence in clinical and non-clinical populations should be studied in relation to psychological characteristics. Interventions can be designed to inculcate positive behaviours during conversations and fulfil the need for connection via real world rather than virtual one. Future studies should

also focus on obtaining an improved understanding of prevalence, diagnosis and external manifestation of binge watching phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

Individuals who are prone to high levels of television consumption are more likely to display anxiousness, worries and apprehension in social scenarios. They are vulnerable and exhibit low confidence in routine conversations. Secondly, there was no correlation evident between binge watching behaviours, loneliness and interpersonal competence. Contrary to previous research there is a need to investigate this phenomenon in depth.

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Conflict of Interest

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