

**THE INFLUENCE OF TIKTOK USE ON YOUNG PEOPLE'S IDENTITY
FORMATION AND VIRTUAL SOCIALISATION**
**LA INFLUENCIA DE TIKTOK EN LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD Y
SOCIALIZACIÓN DE LOS JÓVENES**

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ABSTRACT

Key words:

TikTok, identity, teenagers, social media, Turkey.

In contemporary society, the influence of social media on young people, along with its impact on interpersonal dynamics and self-perception, is classified as a pervasive phenomenon that not only shapes everyday interactions, but also significantly shapes the construction identity and virtual socialization patterns. In particular, TikTok has become a prominent platform for the younger population. Taking this into account, the present research focuses on the effects of TikTok on the identity construction and virtual socialization of students between 18 and 26 years old enrolled at the University of Ankara. To empirically address these objectives, a total of 30 students from Ankara University actively participated in this research by completing a questionnaire based on the object of study. This instrument was designed with the purpose of describing the case study and the resulting dynamics in identity formation, virtual socialization, and the perception of popularity by the sample. The findings obtained provide a concrete insight into the digital landscape among students at the University of Ankara. Consequently, this study not only sheds light on the complexities of digital identity formation but also emphasizes the intricate network of interactions that influence the social experiences of young individuals in these environments.

RESUMEN

Palabras clave:

TikTok, identidad, adolescentes, redes sociales, Turquía.

En la sociedad contemporánea, la influencia de las redes sociales en los jóvenes, junto con su impacto en la dinámica interpersonal y la autopercepción, se clasifica como un fenómeno omnipresente que no solo configura las interacciones cotidianas, sino que también

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modela de manera significativa la construcción identitaria y los patrones de socialización virtual. En particular, TikTok se ha convertido en una plataforma destacada para la población más joven. Teniendo esto en cuenta, la presente investigación se centra en los efectos de TikTok en la construcción de identidad y socialización virtual de estudiantes de entre 18 y 26 años matriculados en la Universidad de Ankara. Para abordar empíricamente estos objetivos, un total de 30 estudiantes de la Universidad de Ankara participó activamente en esta investigación completando un cuestionario basado en el objeto de estudio. Este instrumento fue diseñado con el propósito de describir el estudio de caso y las dinámicas resultantes en la formación de identidad, la socialización virtual y la percepción de la popularidad por parte de la muestra. Los hallazgos obtenidos ofrecen una visión concreta sobre el panorama digital entre los estudiantes de la Universidad de Ankara. Como resultado, este estudio no solo arroja luz sobre las posibles complejidades de la formación de la identidad digital, sino que también subraya la intrincada red de interacciones que influyen en las experiencias sociales de los jóvenes en estos entornos.

Introduction

The use of social networks has not stopped growing for more than twenty years (Mendoza et al., 2015), having a great impact on society and its daily life. To the point of presenting a duality between what people are inside and outside social networks. Therefore, modifying beliefs, what is given relevance, and even the way we perceive ourselves and interpersonal relationships we establish (Gómez et al., 2022). A clear example of the impact of social networks on our daily lives is confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to this situation, academic, social or leisure activities were affected and therefore changed (Cuadros & Torra, 2022). Because of isolation, social network consumption has increased (Cívico et al., 2021).

In this research, we consider social networks as defined by Lozares (1996, p. 108) a well-defined set of actors, whether individuals, groups, organisations, communities, global societies, etc., linked through relationships. In other words, social networks are a set of platforms that provide communication, interaction, and content creation services through the Internet in a way that is accessible to anyone (Gómez et al., 2022).

The social network that will be the subject of this study is TikTok as it has had a significant growth, especially since the pandemic, and now has millions of downloads on Play Store and App Store. The aim of TikTok is to create videos of up to three minutes that are repeated in a loop, similar to other applications such as Snapchat or Vine. They can also record and share selfie-videos of themselves or other people with background music. It also allows you to edit videos before making them public, as this social network stands out for the variety of filters it offers. In TikTok there is a chat function to interact with other users and a browsing function to find the most viral videos of the moment (Cuadros & Torra, 2022). This draws attention to the social influence of young people as 85% of TikTok subscribers are between 13-24 years old (Avilés & Peralta, 2020).

When you go to TikTok, you will find two main pages: the "For you" page and the "Following" page. On the "For you" page, you can see the TikToks that have been selected by an algorithm and according to the interests of each user (Cuadros & Torra, 2022). On the following page, you can only see TikToks from people you follow, unlike the "For you" page, where you can see videos created by people you do not follow. In TikTok, thanks to the algorithm, content goes viral much more easily than on other platforms such as Instagram (Cuadros & Torra, 2022).

Regarding the algorithms used by TikTok, this application is characterised by having the most advanced algorithm system, namely in terms of engagement, interaction types and content (Zhang et al., 2019; Iram & Aggarwal, 2020). These algorithms contribute to making this application more addictive compared to other social networks. The term social media addiction refers to a behaviour that is characterised by an uncontrollable and insatiable desire to be constantly online, neglecting other areas of one's personal life (Brailovskaia et al., 2020). This type of addiction is more difficult to treat due to its nature, i.e. it is intangible. That is, social networks resort to algorithms to make users stay longer on it, exploiting the desire for social recognition and providing intermittent reinforcement to stimulate compulsive behaviour (Chien et al., 2023). In the case of TikTok, other risk factors for addictive use include that the audience is young, low income and low education (Huang et al., 2022). Researchers on this topic consider that it cannot be treated as an addiction unless five to seven hours a day are reached, which would be harmful and could affect mental health (Pato, 2023).

Experts generally acknowledge that there is a closed-loop relationship between TikTok addiction and algorithm optimisation (Zhao, 2021). This materialises in that users

seem to be trapped in an entertainment spiral (Quin et al., 2022). Some studies on social network addiction suggest that there are certain external factors that cause this behaviour, for example technical factors (Hasan et al., 2018). Furthermore, other studies suggest the influence of internal factors such as the experience of flow on addictive behaviour. This refers to the internal feeling of enjoyment, time distortion and concentration (Zhao & Zhou, 2021).

As for the users, this social network is mostly used by teenagers who share their experiences, feelings, or thoughts with which more than one person can identify (Cuadros & Torra, 2022). Therefore, many teenagers are influenced by this type of virtual media when forming opinions on themselves and others (Navarrete et al., 2017).

As a result, the need arises to investigate the influence that TikTok has on the construction of identity in teenagers, which is more noticeable in high school and especially during university since young people are more exposed to a variety of factors that can change lifestyles and beliefs (Gómez et al., 2022). In this context, social networks, specifically TikTok, play an important role as they are considered the tools most used by teenagers to communicate ideas between groups or individually (Fuertes & Armas, 2018; Mendoza et al., 2015).

Teenage period is defined in science and psychology as "the developmental transformation between childhood and adulthood that brings about significant physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes in the individual" (Papalia et al., 2009, p. 461). This involves changes in different spheres of life that will influence their further development and identity formation.

Adolescence begins and ends differently for each individual and is later for males. This period is considered a transitional stage because there is an evolution in physical appearance, emotional, social and intellectual status. But the individual will continue to experience some evolution throughout life (Cuadros & Torra, 2022).

Sandoval (2018), on the one hand, states that it is a period of great enthusiasm, vitality, desire for autonomy, independence from the family environment and the desire to find opportunities in the world. But on the other hand, he also states that it is a stage in which the individual presents conflict with the body, emotional instability related to the search for their identity, the desire to stop being a child and to grow up and be recognised as such, and an unsatisfied need to make their own decisions.

Papalia and Martorell (2017) state that with regard to physical development, the change is notorious, puberty begins, and the main risks revolve around behavioural problems such as eating disorders or drug addiction. Regarding cognitive development, there is a development of scientific reasoning and abstract thinking, sometimes maturity in decision-making and in some behaviours. Finally, in psychosocial development, the search for identity and the positive and negative influence of the social group to which they belong can be observed (Cuadros & Torra, 2022).

For the purposes of this research, we take as a basis the conceptions of Marcia (1966), who elaborated Erikson's proposal and argued that during adolescence there is no conclusion or confusion of identity but rather the individual explores and engages with identity in various areas of life such as career, politics, friendships or social roles.

Thus, during teenage, an identity crisis occurs as they begin to question childhood patterns and take on new roles. Consequently, their attachment to their parents fades and in contrast, they begin to develop closer relationships with adolescents with similar characteristics in search of acceptance (Cuadros & Torra, 2022). At this stage, group and self-loyalty is essential because when they do not form a clear identity, they lose loyalty and can be easily rejected by the group (Robles, 2008).

The quest to establish that identity can be traced back to adolescents' efforts to define and redefine themselves, as well as recognition by others and comparison with themselves as discussed by Erickson (1968). This is key during this time and in early adulthood as self-recognition will provide them with the security to form their own identity and comparison with others can lead to them changing aspects of their identity. In addition, Sandoval (2018) states that at this stage the opinion of the environment is very relevant, and it is also very important what adolescents think of themselves, how they are perceived and how they feel that they are the focus of attention (Sandoval, 2018).

Marcia (1980) proposes another very interesting perception of identity through his theory of the four stages or levels of identity: the first level is the diffusion of identity, they have not yet experienced identity crises and there are no concrete beliefs adopted. Later, when they start to commit to beliefs or goals, they move to the second level, which is strongly determined by social influence. When they go through an identity crisis or moratorium they would be at the third level. Finally, the fourth level occurs once the identity is already defined (Cuadros & Torra, 2022).

Identity according to Marwick (2013) is all the characteristics that we construct socially in our interactions with those in our lives. Identity encompasses the following aspects: subjectivity (how we see ourselves); self-representation (how we present ourselves to others) and representation (the way in which the different aspects of social identity and media are manifested) (Cuadros & Torra, 2022). Thus, social networks occupy an important space as they are presented as a space for engagement and relationship building where young people socialise and interact with others (Zapatero, et al., 2009).

Marcia (1993) distinguishes four identity states marked by the presence or absence of crisis and commitment. By crisis she refers to the period of making conscious choices in relation to identity construction. These four spheres are as follows:

1. Identity achievement (crisis leads to commitment): a crisis occurs and then a series of decisions are made to which the individual commits, in this period alternatives are explored. The individual is able to identify with the values he or she has chosen after learning about the different possibilities available to him or her. This sphere is the ideal culmination of the process of personal identification (Cuadros & Torra, 2022).

2. Moratorium (crisis without commitment): in this state a process of exploration is experienced but commitments are vague or absent. They work towards commitment, but the struggle to realise their identity is contradictory. They alternate between rebellion and submission (Cuadros & Torra, 2022).

3. Exclusion (crisis-free commitment): in this case the person accepts the ideological positions of his or her guardian since he or she does not engage in choosing between the various alternatives offered by life but commits to the project that another person established for his or her life. Thus, identity is adopted through the assimilation of other people's norms, values and ideologies (Cuadros & Torra, 2022).

4. Identity diffusion (no commitment or crisis): in this case the individual experiences little or no identity crisis and no commitment (Cuadros & Torra, 2022).

Thanks to the above mentioned in relation to identity, we can determine that it is the main factor between two essential actions for the psychic balance of any human being. The first one is related to giving a positive self-image and the second one is related to adapting to the environment in which the person lives (Velasco, 2002, p. 4). Regarding the second, due to the Internet, the social environment has moved to the virtual environment, which is accessible to all, and which also allows for the creation of an identity through its

online tools. Therefore, it allows adolescents to show what they have learned and makes them creative and free to express what they want (Gómez et al., 2022).

The fact that the social environment has moved to the virtual environment has meant that the search for and creation of identity has also moved to the virtual spectrum. This concept of virtual identity in social networks refers to the way in which users establish similarities according to certain trends brought about by the virtual environment. This allows them to publish, modify or delete the information presented about them through the virtual identity that social networks offer (Rojas, 2020).

Likewise, Tuğtekin and Dursun (2020) state that virtual identities in social networks are the most powerful technological tools in the digital age we live in.

In the realm of contemporary digital communication, the construction of identity takes on a multifaceted and intricate nature. The rapid proliferation of platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and others has significantly reshaped the way individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by others. Eftimie's (2019) observations about the relevance of virtual communication in understanding identity in the last century still hold true today, with even more pronounced implications.

The phenomenon of virtual communication, particularly on platforms like TikTok, is emblematic of the contemporary era's complex relationship between identity formation and digital media. The continuous sharing of user-generated content, often characterized by short video clips on TikTok, not only reflects an individual's self-presentation but also serves as a medium for engaging with and shaping one's identity within a larger social context. Galindo (2019) highlights the role of platforms like TikTok in fostering new cultures and socialization among teenagers. These platforms are instrumental in shaping their self-identities, as they strive for popularity and recognition among their peers. This phenomenon underscores the dynamic nature of identity construction in a digital age.

The influence of these digital environments on the development of individuals' virtual identities and their impact on real-world social dynamics are topics of growing interest (Tuğtekin & Dursun, 2020).

In this context, it is vital for scholars and society at large to comprehend the dynamics and potential risks associated with TikTok and identity construction, especially among young people who are at a stage of life where identity exploration is paramount. The digital landscape offers both opportunities for self-expression and the potential for identity manipulation, demanding a nuanced approach in research and education to navigate this ever-evolving terrain effectively.

Method

Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to analyze the utilization of the social network TikTok and its impact on the construction of identity and virtual socialization among students aged 18-26 at Ankara University. To achieve this, a quantitative approach has been employed, following the sequential and evidential processes outlined by Hernández (2014).

Procedure

This study adopts a cross-sectional design, employing the chosen variables at a specific moment in time. The scope of the research is descriptive, which consists of describing phenomena, situations, contexts, and events. Thus, this research aims to

delineate the properties, characteristics, and profiles of individuals in the specified age group (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2010, p.80). Therefore, it is only intended to measure or collect information on the variables that are the object of study (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2010, p.80).

Participants

The target population comprises students aged 18-26 years old at Ankara University. The sample consists of 30 participants who were selected through convenience sampling, which implies that the sample is non-probabilistic and therefore the data is not generalisable to the rest of the population. Exclusion criteria were applied to exclude those under the age of 18 or older than 26, non-users of TikTok and those not enrolled at Ankara University. Inclusion criteria encompassed students belonging to Ankara University, between the aforementioned age ranges, of either gender and regular users of TikTok.

Instruments

To collect data, a structured survey (10.6084/m9.figshare.24783279) was developed and organized into three sections based on the variables under consideration:

1. Demographics characteristics
2. Use of TikTok: This section comprises five questions, including demographic information such as gender and age. Participants are also asked about their primary social networks and the duration of TikTok usage.
3. Virtual Identity, Virtual Socialization, and Popularity: The second part includes five questions with multiple-choice answers, except for the popularity variable, which allows for selecting more than one response.

Results

The following section outlines the key findings derived from the survey instrument, shedding light on the nuances of TikTok usage, virtual identity, virtual socialization, and popularity among the selected group of Ankara University students aged 18-26.

Population characteristics

In terms of demographics, we carefully considered factors such as gender and age (Table 1). This research exhibits a notable gender distribution, with a higher participation rate among males, constituting 60% of the research. Moreover, examining the age distribution within the designated range of 18 to 26 years old, a distinct pattern emerges. The age group that demonstrated the highest engagement comprised individuals aged 21-23, constituting 50% of the participants. Conversely, the age bracket of 24-26 years old displayed the lowest participation rate at 13.33%.

Table 1*Population characteristics*

Population characteristics		
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Woman	12	40%
Man	18	60%
Total	30	100%
Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-20	11	36.67%
21-23	15	50%
24-26	4	13.33%
Total	30	100%

Description of the use of the social network Tik Tok

To delve into the habits of young people on TikTok we asked for the variable shows in Table 2. The findings reveal that Instagram is the predominant choice among respondents, with a substantial 56.67% utilizing the platform, dedicating a significant portion of their time to it. In contrast, TikTok lags Instagram, capturing the attention of 30% of the surveyed demographic.

When delving into the time spent on TikTok, a noteworthy 50% of users engage with the platform for 1-2 hours daily. While 14.3%, which represents the smallest percentage, spend more than 2 hours on this social network.

Additionally, a compelling aspect for our study is the phenomenon of temporal disorientation experienced by users on TikTok, where a striking 83.33% of respondents admitted to losing track of time while immersed in this social network.

Table 2

Description of Tik Tok usage

Description of Tik Tok usage		
Use of social networks		
	Frequency	Percentage
Instagram	17	56.67%
Twitter	4	13.33%
TikTok	9	30%
Total	30	100%
Hours of TikTok use		
<1 hour	10	35.71%
1-2 hours	14	50%
>2 hours	4	14.3%
Total	28	93.33%
Lost track of time by TikTok		
Yes	25	83.33%
No	5	16.67%
Total	30	100%

Virtual socialisation

Once the demographic and usage data were known, we proceeded to analyze the next variable: virtual socialisation. This aspect encompasses three distinct responses. The first denotes a low level of socialization, indicating that young individuals refrain from interacting with those outside their known social circles. The second represents a moderate level of socialization, signifying occasional interactions with unfamiliar individuals. The third characterizes a high level of socialization, wherein respondents actively engage with people they do not know through the social network.

As depicted in Table 3, a substantial 73.33% of university students exhibit a low level of virtual socialization. This implies that they predominantly utilize the social network for video consumption, limiting interactions to their existing circle of friends and eschewing engagement with individuals beyond this familiar group.

Table 3*Virtual socialisation*

Virtual socialisation		
	Frequency	Percentage
1 (Low level)	22	73.33%
2 (Moderate level)	6	20%
3 (High level)	2	6.67%
Total	30	100%

Identity

In the context of creating a virtual identity, crucial insights emerge from the data presented in both Table 4 and Table 5, wherein pertinent survey questions shed light on factors influencing the development of this online persona. Specifically, 56.67% of the selected sample in the Ankara University acknowledged having actively assimilated values from the videos found on the social network. Notably, a significant portion of this demographic further concedes to altering their perspectives on various issues based on content consumed through this platform.

Table 4*Values acquisition*

Values Acquisition		
	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	17	56.67%
No	13	43.33%
Total	30	100%

On the other hand, in Table 5, more than half of the students, specifically 70%, have stated that some of their habits and behaviours are reflected in the videos they see on TikTok and have even confirmed that they themselves could make some of the videos that they have seen in the "For you" page of this social network.

Table 5

Reflection of your behaviours on TikTok's "For You"

Reflection of your behaviours on TikTok's "For You"		
	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	21	70%
No	9	30%
Total	30	100%

Popularity

The aim of the popularity variable is to find out how the viral nature of one or more of the videos uploaded to their profile affects young people's self-esteem and confidence. In this case, only those who had viral videos responded to the survey. As can be seen in Table 6, five responses were proposed to address this variable. In response one, the viralisation of one or more of the respondent's videos increased their self-esteem and confidence. In response two, the respondent felt the same as always, it did not affect his or her perception of popularity. In response three, he/she felt that he/she stood out in something and thus got the attention of others. In response four, the student felt recognised by others thanks to the viral video he uploaded. Finally, response five refers to the fact that he wanted to upload more videos to become viral and popular in the world of TikTok.

Once the possible responses raised in the survey are known, it is worth noting that 35% of young people said that when they uploaded a video and it went viral, they felt the same as always. It did not affect their self-esteem or confidence. However, 15% wanted to upload more videos to go viral and increase their popularity on this social network. It is also worth noting that another 15% of respondents said that when they uploaded a video and it went viral, their self-esteem and confidence increased thanks to the recognition they felt from other users of this social network.

Table 6
Popularity

Popularity		
	Frequency	Percentage
1 (The viralisation of one or more of the respondent's videos increased their self-esteem and confidence)	3	15%
2 (The respondent felt the same as always)	7	35%
3 (The respondent felt that he/she stood out in something and got the attention of others.)	4	20%
4 (The respondent felt recognised by others thanks to the viral video he uploaded)	3	15%
5 (The respondent wanted to upload more videos to become viral and more popular)	3	15%
Total	20	100%

Discussion and conclusions

The main objective of this research was to explore the influence of the social network TikTok on identity construction, virtual socialisation and popularity in the selected sample. That is, 30 students from Ankara University, aged between 18 and 26 years old. Through a detailed analysis of demographic characteristics, TikTok usage, virtual socialisation, identity construction and perceived popularity, we sought to understand the nuances of the interaction of these factors in the lives of university students using this social network.

To begin with, in terms of the characteristics of the sample, the results reveal a higher participation of males and a peak of activity between the age of 21 and 23. This result confirms previous studies such as the one by Avilés and Peralta (2020), which states that 85% of TikTok subscribers are between 13 and 24 years old. Or the study by Gómez et al. (2022), in which they state that the influence of TikTok on the construction of identity is more noticeable in high school and university because young people are more exposed to various factors that can modify their beliefs.

In terms of TikTok usage, the significant amount of time spent on the platform stands out. Fifty percent of users spend between 1 and 2 hours per day, which indicates that they are not addicted to social networks according to Pato (2023). However, this social network encourages users to spend hours and hours watching videos due to its algorithm and short video format, as explained by Todorovich (2021). He added that the algorithm knows the likes and dislikes and uses this information to make users stay as long as possible on the app. So, undoubtedly, the potential dependency could intensify over time. Although Instagram is the social network most used by young people (56.67%), the exponential growth that TikTok is experiencing is expected to possibly overtake Instagram among young people in a few years owing to the format of this social network.

In the same way, the effectiveness of the algorithm in retaining users on the app is evidenced by the fact that 83.33% of respondents claimed to have lost track of time when using Tik Tok.

Regarding virtual socialisation, the predominance of a low level of interaction (73.33%) indicates a preference for limiting interactions to the known circle. This is in line with the results found by Davis (2013) which confirm that students use social networks to communicate and keep in touch with their friends (i.e. their known circle). However, the preponderance of a low level of socialisation contradicts previous findings suggesting a higher degree of interaction and presenting social networks as a space for engagement and relationship building (Zapatero et al., 2009).

With regard to virtual identity, a possible influence of Tik Tok on virtual identity can be elucidated. More than 50% of respondents assimilate values and change perspectives based on the content of the platform. This is in line with Gómez et al. (2022) that social networks exert so much control in people's lives that they even modify beliefs, what is given relevance or how we perceive ourselves. And therefore, it supports the idea that interactions and viewing online content influences the identity formation of young people (Tuğtekin & Dursun, 2020). Likewise, the results of this variable support Erickson's (1968) assertion that virtual identity formation can be traced back to young people's efforts to define themselves, compare themselves to others, and seek recognition from others. And they may come to see the opinion of others as reinforcement or punishment for their behaviour Erickson (1968). This means that their values and thoughts can be influenced and shaped by the TikTok accounts they consume. Thus, it also ratifies the idea that virtual interaction combines with the creation of social status and personality characteristics of individuals, showing that they have an effect on manipulable virtual identities and their development (Tuğtekin & Dursun, 2022).

In terms of popularity, 15% experienced an increase in self-esteem by getting viral videos and another 15% expressed a desire to share more viral content to increase their popularity. So, on the one hand, this confirms what Sandoval (2018) states about the importance of environmental views and what adolescents think of themselves, how they are perceived and how they feel they are the centre of attention. But on the other hand, a significant finding is that 35% of our sample said that the viralisation of one of their videos did not affect their confidence or self-esteem. This contrasts with what Galindo (2019) states, since the young people surveyed do seek attention, but they do not strive for popularity and recognition. That is, they do not strive to carve out a privileged niche within their interactive online world through the creation and dissemination of viral videos.

Despite the achieved successes, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of this research, particularly the small sample size of 30 participants. As a result, the data lacks the statistical robustness required for meaningful generalizations, making the sample unrepresentative of the broader population. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the research seeks to describe a case study (student in Ankara University) which implies that the findings are relative to the study data and therefore apply only to those participants. Although the fact that the results cannot be extrapolated, it should be noted that they do satisfy the research objective. These limitations suggest the need for future research with more diverse samples and mixed methods to obtain a more complete and objective understanding.

In terms of future perspectives, comparative studies across different age groups, cultures and university contexts are suggested to broaden understanding of how TikTok and other platforms may impact on identity construction and virtual socialisation. In

addition, it would be valuable to further explore users' subjective experiences to capture nuances and complexities not fully addressed in this study.

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