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Advantages and Disadvantages of Technology in Relationships: Findings from an Open-Ended Survey

Katherine M. Hertlein

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, katherine.hertlein@unlv.edu

Katrina Ancheta

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Abstract

The technology world has been growing and flourishing the interest in designing technologies that mediate and create a feeling of relatedness within interpersonal relationships beyond the explicit verbal communication. The purpose of this article is to present a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of technology in couple relationships. To accomplish this, we conducted a recursive open-coding analysis on an already existing data set. Findings indicated the advantages of technology in relationships include the contribution to the development of relationships, relationship management, and relationship enhancement. Challenges introduced by technology into relationships include distancing, lack of clarity, and impaired trust. Implications and areas for future research are discussed.

Keywords

Technology, Couples, Internet, Communication, Intimate Relationships

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Advantages and Disadvantages of Technology in Relationships: Findings from an Open-Ended Survey

Katherine M. Hertlein and Katrina Ancheta
 University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

The technology world has been growing and flourishing the interest in designing technologies that mediate and create a feeling of relatedness within interpersonal relationships beyond the explicit verbal communication. The purpose of this article is to present a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of technology in couple relationships. To accomplish this, we conducted a recursive open-coding analysis on an already existing data set. Findings indicated the advantages of technology in relationships include the contribution to the development of relationships, relationship management, and relationship enhancement. Challenges introduced by technology into relationships include distancing, lack of clarity, and impaired trust. Implications and areas for future research are discussed. Keywords: Technology, Couples, Internet, Communication, Intimate Relationships

The technology world has been growing and flourishing the interest in designing technologies that mediate and create a feeling of relatedness within interpersonal relationships beyond the explicit verbal communication (Hassenzahl, Heidecker, Eckoldt, Diefenbach, & Hillman, 2002). Yet communication technologies such as cell phones, the Internet, and social networking sites still have gained a central feature in people's lives as tools for establishing and maintaining these relationships (Bergdall, Kraft, Andes, Hatfield-Timajchy, & Hock-Long, 2012). For instance, Bargh & McKenna stated that over a billion text messages are sent through mobile phones around the world every day (as cited in Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011).

With such advances of technology and communication, it changes how we relate to one another and the affect it has on relationships. Couples cite, for example, the importance of accessibility of one's spouse when there is an emergency situation, when one partner is reaching out for contact, or if a partner is experiencing stress and needed reassurances or emotional soothing (Parker, Blackburn, Perry, & Hawks, 2012). Reviews of the research indicate online gaming may contribute to a couple's ability to fantasize in their relationship, acquire/improve socialization skills, and an ability to better understand their partner's context (Hertlein, 2012). On the other hand, technology introduces a potential to misinterpret messages between patterns may create barriers in problem solving and intimacy development (Henline & Harris, 2006). For example, online gaming in relationships may disrupt intimacy processes and introduce feelings of exclusion from one area of their partner's life, potentially resulting in perceived neglect and jealousy (Hawkins & Hertlein, 2013; Hertlein & Hawkins, 2012).

Whitty (2003) found that if a partner's computer is left accessible or a spouse's password is known, partners will often engage in investigatory behaviors that lead to the discovery of infidelity activities. In addition, social networking sites such as one of the most popular sites, Facebook, also introduce a potential to misinterpret messages and provide access to users to post messages on another's profiles, comment on one another's photographs, send private messages, and chat online. Lumpkin (2012) stated that 33% of divorce cases mentioned Facebook in 2011 while the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers stated that the top Facebook concerns are inappropriate messages to individuals of

the opposite sex (as cited in Cravens, Leckie, & Whiting, 2013). Furthermore, users are able to easily access their social networking sites at work or home without promoting suspicion or getting into trouble due to the privacy kept from others.

Despite the potential disadvantages of the use of technology, it also provides unique opportunities for couples to connect to satisfy both function and emotional needs (Parker et al., 2012). For instance, Pettigrew (2009) found that specific use of text messaging provided couples the ability to stay connected throughout the day based in interviews of dyads that were dating, engaged, married, or cohabiting. Most all couples interviewed perceived the use of text messages as a useful way of staying connected to their partner and provided an enriched or increase in their communication. Pettigrew (2009) also found that text-based nature of text messages allows for information to be communicated without those around the sender or receiver overhearing, which can affect the increase of intimacy and the feeling of closeness with one's partner. Similarly, one study by Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, and Grant (2011) explored the communication technologies individuals within romantic relationships were using to communicate with one another, its frequency of use, and the association between the use of these technologies and couple's positive and negative communication. Married individuals reported using texting, instant messaging, social networking, blogs, and webcams more frequently than couples that were dating. Technology provides a quick and accessible way to deal with marital concerns at any time, such as discussing responsibilities throughout the day.

Coyne et al. (2011) found that individuals who were more satisfied in their relationship reported using the media more frequently to express affection toward their partner. It is likely that highly satisfied individuals are more likely to express affection toward their partner in multiple communication contexts; the media simply provides yet more ways. Coyne et al. (2011) also found that less satisfied individuals, however, were more likely to report using the media to attempt to broach a confrontational subject with their partner such as individuals sending text messages to their partners after an argument to gauge their feelings on the topic of discussion.

While all of these investigations point to the general notion that technology can function as both an asset and detriment when used within the context of intimate relationships, the specific ways in which it accomplishes this has yet to be identified in one study. The purpose of this investigation was to yield the specific ways in which media (and particularly texting) supports and impacts a couple's relational health.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The open-ended items which are the focus of this analysis were part of a larger study described in another article (Hertlein, manuscript submitted) whose purpose was to identify the frequency which people participate in both sending and receiving sexts within an undergraduate population. Compared to the Parker et al (2012) study, we used a larger sample (n = 410) in order to determine how sexting both contributes to the success of or detracts from relationships. Participants who were 18 or older were recruited from a large southwestern metropolitan university campus. Participants were given a link to participate in the study and were offered extra credit in that particular course for participation. The study was advertised in family studies and communication undergraduate courses and was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

Theoretical Orientation

The theoretical approach for this research was a social constructionist perspective (Patton, 2002) in that we were interested in how the people in this study have constructed reality around the use of technology in their relationships. Particularly, we focused on the way that they explain the consequences of such use (both in positive and negative ways) for both themselves and the people with whom they interact – in this case, their partner. This provided a way for us to determine where if at all, there was consensus around the way in which the participants constructed the meaning of technology in their relationships.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The analysis was informed by a grounded theory methodology perspective. This fits the social constructionist perspective in that social constructionism is based on the premise that reality is constructed rather than reliance on a relative truth (Schwandt, 2003). Furthermore, there is an interaction with society in that one's beliefs and perspectives on a given topic are brought to bear in their interaction with others and subsequently shape interactions with others through the consequences of holding and acting on such perspectives (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Because grounded theory is rooted in the belief that we can gain knowledge through exploring how people understand the world, regardless of whether those understandings are underscored by an objective reality, it is consistent with the social constructionist perspective (Andrews, 2012).

The four open-ended questions asked to assess for the benefit and challenges with regard to sexting in relationships were:

- 1) How are people using web-based technology and media to support intimate relationships?
- 2) What are the technology- based healing strategies you think people use in intimate relationships?
- 3) What are the ways technology supports intimate relationships?, and
- 4) What are the ways technology interferes with relationships?

The responses in these questions were analyzed through reviewing the responses to these questions in a recursive fashion. First, each author received a copy of the responses provided by respondents to each of the four prompts (a total of approximately 75 pages). Each author looked for themes within each prompt – that is, each prompt was coded uniquely and the authors did not look for themes across prompts. We independently identified common phrases that emerged in the data in an open, thematic coding (Merriam, 2002). Each author put their themes together on an independent spreadsheet along with associated quotes with those themes. We then met and compared themes, collapsed them, and made a decision to merge the questions related to sexting and relationship support because of the overlap in the themes which emerged.

We then invited another reader who was unfamiliar with the project yet a trained qualitative researcher in order to identify whether our themes were similar to what the third reader would find. We reviewed the findings of the third reader and refined our list of themes again through open coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) and utilization of the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009). Specifically, we were interested in whether there was overlap between the themes the third reader saw and the themes the authors had previously identified. Again, minor disagreements were with regard to themes were resolved through

further discussion (in many cases, relabeling of themes) and subsequent agreement. To some degree, the reliance on the third reader independent from the project was designed to ensure a level of credibility to the analysis in that her themes were similar to the authors. It also provided an opportunity to collapse our themes into same, broader and more representative themes. We then provided the themes back to the third reader as a way to confirm that our revised themes fit with the themes she identified.

Findings

Sample Characteristics

As aforementioned, the sample was comprised of 410 undergraduate students at a metropolitan university in the Southwestern United States. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 53 years, with a mean age of 23.07. A majority of the participants were women (approximately 80%, or $n = 333$) whereas the remaining 20% were men ($n = 76$) or transgender (0.7%, $n = 3$). The sample was composed of a variety of ethnic background with 51.1% ($n = 211$) identifying as White, 14.5% ($n = 60$) identifying as multiethnic, 12.8% as Hispanic ($n = 53$), 10% as Black ($n = 41$), and the remainder ($n = 31$, 7.2%) as Filipino, Indian, Asian Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Pacific Islander, Korean, Vietnamese. Less than 5% ($n = 17$) identified as “other”. A full 50% of the participants were in a committed relationship with one person ($n = 209$) and two participants were in committed relationships with more than one person (0.5%). Fifty-two participants were in casual relationships, with 42 of those participants (10.2%) indicating they were in casual relationships with one person and the remaining 10 participants (2.4%) reporting they were in a casual relationship with more than one person. Most participants were heterosexual ($n = 356$, 86.4%). The remainder identified as same-sex oriented or bisexual, ($n = 26$, 6.3%, $n = 27$, 6.6%, respectively).

Four open-ended questions were asked with regard to technology and relationships:

- 1) How are people using web-based technology and media to support intimate relationships?
- 2) What are the technology- based healing strategies you think people use in intimate relationships?
- 3) What are the ways technology supports intimate relationships?
- 4) What are the ways technology interferes with relationships?

In reading the responses, there seemed to be a quite a bit of overlap between the first three questions. Therefore, we combined the responses to three first three questions which each addressed how sexting supporting intimate relationships in some form or fashion. Under this question, three categories of reasons were identified for using the computer/texting in relationships: relationship development, relationship management, and relationship enhancement.

Relationship Development

Meeting. Technology is used to some degree to develop relationships. Many participants noted the fact that technology helps them to “Meet new people,” allowing “those with similar beliefs, hobbies, and habits to find each other more easily.” One participant stated “It makes it easy to meet people online and talk to friends which can eventually lead to flirting.” Another participant wrote that technology “makes it easier for a partner or both partners to initiate if they are shy.” As one participant noted, “Those who interact initially

online have a more open, honest and overall positive view of each other because their interactions have not been influenced by non-verbal communication.” The ease of developing relationships also seemed to be related to reducing the amount of time and anxiety around developing a physical relationship. The medium allowed for “getting to know someone fast and easy if that’s what you need to become physically involved with someone.” Another participant summarized this by writing: “[technology] allows individuals to become more confident in asking for sex or eluding to future sexual experiences.”

Development of emotional support. Part of initiating these relationships also corresponds to the development of emotional support. One participant exemplified this statement by commenting that “you are able to send adoring messages to one another and have contact throughout the day to discuss important topics. This can be very handy in the beginning phases of a relationship when you are getting to know each other.” This may be because it keeps couples “in constant communication”, “without hardly any wait time” and “provides instant communication to express certain emotions you feel that the time.” Another characteristic of technology assisting with emotional development is the private context in which some of which these relationships emerge. Many participants noted technology provides private methods by which to talk to one another and that “it is easier to be intimate on texts because they are not heard by everyone around you.”

Relationship Management

Information-seeking. The category of relationship management was comprised of several themes. First, people used sexting and technology as a way to get more information, research, or find suggestions and tips on certain things. For example, one participant noted the value of “Looking videos and articles on relationships building and maintaining.” Another participant reported those who use technology “... are able to find videos and online resources that they can use to better support their relationship such as date-night ideas.” Technology was also used to “Google information to find answers, help, guidance, research articles” as well as looking for more specific information to “Finding sites that will spice up the relationship or help the relationship.” Other forms of psychoeducation included “different apps for sexual games,” and “sex position apps.” In addition, participants also identified electronic therapy (or “e-therapy”) as a potential healing strategy in their relationships.

Conflict management. Another theme is that technology and sexting was perceived as serving several vital functions in relationship management. Many participants reported that it was one key way in which apologies could be exchanged. One participant reported “It helps to text when trying to make up from a fight, people apologize easier.” It also assisted in problem resolution other than serving as a forum for an apology. Examples included “‘sorry texts’ and ‘I love you’ texts,” “send[ing] a text or photo to try and smooth things over or ‘test the water’”, especially “when they are too mad to say it in person.”

Part of the reason that technology worked for conflict management appeared to be the asynchronous nature of the communication. As one participant explained, interacting over electronic mediums allowed one to be “...able to think before you react, taking time to prepare a response.” Another participant explained: “Texting allows for slow moving conversations without quick emotional responses so that problems can be discussed rationally.” In the words of one respondent: “Sometimes my partner and I email each other when we’ve run into conflict. It gives us both a chance to really say what we want to and know we’ve been heard.”

Reducing anxiety. Another way technology improves relationships is in reducing anxiety during difficult conversations. One participant described “It allows people to cool off and really get to say what they want without having to see the person in front of you so you

can actually say what you mean without being mad or nervous or anything.” Another echoed this sentiment by saying technology “Helps calm you down if you are upset. Sometimes face to face gets out of hand.” Technology (and particularly text messaging) offers “time to think about a response before stating it” which was connected to “helping people gain confidence” and assisted people who were “hesitant to talk about intimate sexual topics face to face” as well as those who felt “uncomfortable talking about a certain issue.”

Demonstration of commitment. Another way in which participants described the advantage of technology in their relationships was through a lens of commitment. One of the ways in which this commitment was demonstrated was through the public nature of technology. As one participant described, “people post events and their ‘date’ details on social media websites to share with their friends. That promotes ‘wellness’ of their relationship among friends and family.” Commitment is characterized by couples “declaring their ‘relationship status’ via the web for all to see” and that “people make their relationship more publically known.” Another participant described using technology to “tell the world about one another.” Many participants discussed the notion of making a relationship “facebook official” which means “officially dating or together.” Another characterization of commitment was “showing each other their phones in order to feel comfort that their partner is only committed to them.”

Relationship Enhancement

Spicing up one’s sex life. The last category for which sexting and technology augmented relationships was with regard to relationship enhancement. The first theme that emerged was the utility of technology and sexting to “spice up” one’s sex life through such activities as “watch[ing] porn together”, “engage in sexual acts [via Skype]”, “technological sex toys”, “saying sensual things through text messages”, and through “erotic pictures, videos, and texts”. One participant stated: “Some people use it for sexual fulfillment such as porn videos in ways to keep the intimacy in relationships fresh and interesting.” This is due to the fact that, as one participant explained, it is used as a “...medium to fulfill fantasies. Helps partners feel comfortable while willing to try new things and keep a relationship strong when apart by having a means to still feel sexually fulfilled from partner.” In some ways, these technologies might also enhance already existing relationship and put them into another phase of the relationship. One participant noted that individuals used this technology “to show seductive pictures of themselves in order to develop these ‘intimate’ relationships.” Another participant suggested “role play through chat” could be an effective way to bring couples together.

Enhancing long-distance relationships. Secondly, using technology is seen as a key ingredient to maintaining and enhancing long distance relationships. In the words of one participant, “In long distance relationships, technology is the medium through which the relationship can be maintained. If it wasn’t for technologies such as texts, Skype, email, and social networks, these relationships wouldn’t be so feasible.” Part of the reason such relationships can be enhanced is due to the nature of the technology itself – specifically, its accessible and quick nature. One participant stated “Communication is faster, easier, and available when you can’t be with your partner in person.” In some ways, this accessibility allows people to enhance relationships through making information more public. Participants identified technology is “a different form of publically announcing a relationship” and allowed ways for “people to publically show their love for one another” and for couples to “show one another things done throughout the day.” Another participant highlighted technology increased the intimacy by explaining: “We are talking all day and it makes you feel closer when you are physically distant.” Another underscored this by writing: “My

partner and I keep each other updated on our separate schedules by calling or texting each other. We are able to keep line of communication open far more easily.”

Technology's Interference with Relationships

Distancing

Impersonal method of contact. With regard to the elements of technology that interfere with relationships, there were four categories that emerged: distancing, trust issues, clarity, and lack of boundaries. Distancing had two themes underneath this category – in one way, sexting was considered impersonal by a significant proportion of participants. As one participant noted, “Technology is making it so that individuals don’t have to have a relationship before they engage in intimate relationships and then believe its harmful it is ok and not harmful.” One participant characterized sexting as “dehumanizing...it is easy to never hear your partner[’s] voice for an entire day because the only form of communication you did was text.” Another classified texting as something which “Takes away that physical factor when you’re face to face with that person and talking about something important.” Another participant explained this by saying “Sometimes people are more comfortable with showing and doing private things through technology but won’t do/ be the same without technology, this can interfere with the physicality as well as the intimacy in an intimate relationship.” One participant summarized this by writing:

For me, the big issue is how impersonal and detached it makes people. You no longer have to get the courage to ask someone out, [because] you can just text them. You don’t have to go through the growing pains of breaking up with someone because you can just email or text them. You don’t gain the social skills of calling them up to ask them on a date or to plan a party with friends.

Lack of focus. Secondly, sexting is seen to be lacking a focus on the primary partner. One participant noted that sexting “can be distracting. People aren’t always present when they need to be. They get caught up in the technology in front of them.” Another echoed this statement by noting “It seems like people are always on their phones. So, when you are on a date and your partner is on their phone you could feel like you are being ignored.” Similarly, one participant stated relationships became problematic when “one partner is one the phone texting or playing on Facebook when trying to spend alone or intimate time together.”

Interference with intimacy processes. Third, many participants wrote about the ease in avoiding difficult issues through the use of technology. Statements such as “couples can hide behind technology and not completely confront issues in the relationship” and “sometimes can be a barrier for real emotions to be expressed “ speak to the ways in which technology can hinder the developmental process that would have happened offline. Others noted the presence of phones and texting during times in which the couple was to be together. One participant wrote “it keeps people from actually interacting when they are together.” Another participant supported this by stating: “You lose some intimacy when you are not in person.”

Impaired Trust

There were several themes of trust issues that emerged in the findings. First, secrets from partners and the ability to keep certain information private was a key issue in sexting behavior because “people can hide sexts, messages, contacts, etc.” Second, trust was also noted as an issue in part because of the access that it provides to others and distractions. As

one participant noted, “Technology becomes a distraction or provides access to be unfaithful. Trust is tested when individuals are constantly distracted by technology.”

Related to secrets from one’s partner, infidelity and jealousy were noted widely by the participants as issues created by sexting. One participant stated, “Technology can cause a person to use it more often than the partner(s) and this may create issues like jealousy or insecurities.” As one participant stated, “Having a female friend on Facebook who my ex did not know often brought up awkward questions.” Participants also wrote about the ease of infidelity through sexting because sexting makes it easy to cheat, temptation of sexting another women or man and being able to put your phone on privacy” and that it “provides another outlet for infidelity.” Part of the reason is that there is “little chance of being caught or monitored” when infidelity occurs through mobile phones.

A final issue that emerged was the fact that people can give false impressions when they are engaging in sexting, also creating compromises to relationships. One of the primary ways in which participants believe this occurred was through communicating things that were not true about who they were, or “By showing false personalities and appearances.” Another participant noted “They are sometimes not real, people who interact do not live close to each other or the person can be a fraud and that can damage a person emotionally.” Another way in which the false impressions could be the transmission of unrealistic expectations to one’s partner: “Some pornographic content may build up unrealistic expectations of a sexual partner or viewing that content may hurt their partner.”

Lack of Clarity

User’s motivations. A third theme under trust issues identified by participants is the lack of clarity with regard to the intentions of the user. Many participants used phrases such as “can misinterpret what is texted”, “allows for ambiguity” and “leads to misunderstandings” to describe the challenges with regard to expressing oneself clearly through these mediums. One participant clarified this by writing: “Sometimes texting leads to misunderstandings because you can’t see facial expressions or body language.” Another participant noted: “Sometimes things can be taken out of context if you are not careful.” These misinterpretations could have significant consequences and implications for the relationship. Participants described texting and other online communication to “seem that something is going on when nothing is” and that a “partner can think that the other is sexting someone else, when they intend not to.” Another participant noted “it can cause fights if one partner is sexting with or even talking to people outside of the relationship.” Specifically, it might cause conflict because “many people may not/don’t see this form of communication /interaction as cheating but whoever they’re in a relationship with might.”

Misinterpreted message. In addition to the lack of non-verbal communication, there may also be challenges in interpersonal communication when the message is not clear. As one participant noted, “You can’t see them face to face and texting can come across differently than you would normally sound.” Another noted: “Many arguments can be taken out of context when just emailing or texting.” Part of the issue seems to rest in the fact that when the message itself is not clear, the emotions behind the message are also unclear. One participant exemplified this by stating “Sometimes feelings or emotions are not really expressed correctly and get lost in translation so people “mistake what people say and it can cause confusion.” Another participant echoed this by saying “When things are said through technology they can be misinterpreted. It is not the same as a face to face interaction and often leaves someone confused or not understanding what the other person feels.”

Discussion

According to the present study, technology supports relationships through its ability to assist in relationship development processes, relationship maintenance, and relationship enhancement strategies. These general areas support what has been found in the previous isolated studies. For example, the findings from the Parker et al. (2012) and Coyne et al. (2011) studies that accessibility afforded by technology for reaching out to one's partner could be part of the relational maintenance theme that was uncovered in the present study. In addition, the basic findings of the Pettigrew (2009) study that technology again afforded people the ability to stay connected to develop better intimacy processes would also fall under the category of relational maintenance, and more specifically may fall under the category of a demonstration of commitment. In addition, our research was also consistent with the Coyne et al. (2011) with regard to the use of technology as a tool to manage relational conflict, but adds to this body of knowledge by the role that technologies play in reducing anxiety of the individual in order to confront the relational conflict.

The themes uncovered in this study are largely consistent with the Couple and Family Technology (CFT) Framework (Hertlein, 2012; Hertlein & Blumer, 2013), a specific conceptualization of the ways in which technology affects relationships, specifically with regard to the process elements. The related areas under process in the CFT framework note that technology affects relationship initiation, relationship maintenance, and relationship termination. While few participants discussed the role of technology in breaking up, the first two areas received a substantial amount of attention. This information will allow therapists to use technology in adaptive ways with couples in treatment. For example, therapists can work with couples to develop reintroduce each to the other through technology as well as have couples engage in sexting or email with the explicit directive that these are times to build emotional support around one another. Couples could also benefit from a discussion of when to use technology to reduce anxiety in broaching a particular topic area and use technology to practice communication skills that could also be used in their face to face interactions.

Participants in the present study also identified ways in which technology also complicates relationships – through distancing issues, trust issues, and lack of clarity of message and emotional meaning. One of the three elements is attended to in the CFT framework: lack of clarity is known as ambiguity in the framework. Distancing and trust, however, are not explicitly noted in the framework. It is possible these two issues may be contained in the subcomponent of intimacy within relationship maintenance. Further research is needed to determine whether these are distinct phenomenon outside of intimacy processes and, therefore, deserve their own category.

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Author Note

Katherine M. Hertlein, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Program Director, Marriage and Family Therapy Program, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas, NV 89154-3045.

Katrina Ancheta, B.S., Graduate Student, Marriage and Family Therapy Program, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Katherine M. Hertlein, Ph.D. at katherine.hertlein@unlv.edu.

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