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Communication behavior and protest participation in the refugee debate: The role of personal conversations, mass media and social media usage in citizen participation

Kommunikationsverhalten und Protestpartizipation in der Flüchtlingsdebatte: Zum Einfluss persönlicher Gespräche und der Nutzung von Massenmedien und Social Media auf die Partizipation der Bürger

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Abstract: Beginning in summer 2015, the increasing number of refugees coming to Europe and the question of how to handle this challenge has ignited a heated public debate in many European countries. In Germany, public discourse has become progressively intense, and on both sides of the controversy, citizens have attempted to actively influence and to shape the public debate through their actions. Against this background, this paper examines whether or not personal conversations, mass media and social media usage make it more likely for citizens to participate in the public debate on refugees. To do this, an online survey (N = 1,579) was conducted in February 2016, in the midst of the German refugee debate. The results show that different sources of information and forms of communication related to refugees may either foster or hinder people's participation in a public demonstration against or in support of refugees.

Keywords: Political participation, demonstrations, interpersonal communication, mass media, social media, refugee debate

Zusammenfassung: Die zunehmende Anzahl der nach Europa kommenden Flüchtlinge und die Frage nach der Bewältigung dieser Herausforderung haben in vielen europäischen Ländern im Sommer 2015 eine heftige öffentliche Debatte ausgelöst. In Deutschland ist die öffentliche Debatte zunehmend intensiver geworden und auf beiden Seiten der Kontroverse versuchen die Bürger, den Verlauf der Debatte durch ihr Handeln aktiv zu beeinflussen und zu gestalten. Ausgehend davon untersucht diese Studie, inwiefern die Partizipation der Bürger an der öffentlichen Debatte über Flüchtlinge durch persönliche Gespräche sowie die Nutzung von traditionellen Massenmedien und Social Media beeinflusst wird. Hierzu wurde im Februar 2016 im Kontext der deutschen Flüchtlingsdebatte eine Online-Befragung (N = 1.579) durchgeführt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die unterschiedlichen Informationsquellen über das Thema Flüchtlinge eine Teilnahme der Bürger an öffentlichen Demonstrationen gegen als auch für die Aufnahme von Flüchtlingen sowohl verhindern als auch fördern können.

Schlagwörter: Politische Partizipation, Demonstrationen im Kontext der Flüchtlingsdebatte, interpersonale Kommunikation, Massenmedien, Social Media

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1. Introduction

During 2015, the number of people seeking asylum in Europe because of war, oppression and poverty in their home countries increased dramatically and caused a contentious political debate on the delimitation and coordination of the movement of refugees, both within and between various European countries (Hanewinkel, 2015). Likewise, in Germany, a controversial public debate on the immigration of refugees and the resulting consequences rapidly surfaced and continues today. Although Chancellor Angela Merkel initially defended Germany's "welcoming culture" and repeatedly stressed that "we" can handle challenges associated with the refugees' immigration, throughout 2015 her political course was intensively criticised, even from within Merkel's own party. Most notably, Merkel's handling of the refugee debate has come under heavy fire from the Christian Social Union (CSU), which calls for upper limits, stricter deportations and shorter asylum procedures. However, the refugee issue is not only highly controversial in politics but also among the German population. On the one side, there are those who tirelessly try to help the refugees by improving their situation and without whose engagement the handling of refugees in Germany would probably have long since collapsed. On the other side, there are vehement opponents who try to prevent the admission of refugees and the establishment of refugee centres. In short, the immigration and integration of asylum seekers is currently one of the most urgent political controversies in Germany, with people on both sides trying to influence public debate and political outcomes through their actions.

Given that personal conversations and the mass media are, for most people, the main sources of information on political issues, it seems plausible that interpersonal and mediated communication play a significant role in empowering citizen participation in the refugee debate. However, in light of the fundamentally changing media landscape in which social media platforms are gaining more prominence, it seems reasonable to expect that this political participation is also motivated by the media's informational and expressive functions. Thus, to gain deeper insights into the relationship between communication and citizen political participation in the refugee crises, this paper proceeds as follows: first, different forms of political participation and the effects of communication on these forms of participation are discussed. Second, the data and methods used in this study are presented. Third, the findings are presented and discussed in the last section.

2. Theoretical background: Political participation and communication

In general, the concept of *political participation* has been defined as any action taken by ordinary citizens to directly or indirectly influence political decision-making processes or political outcomes (Brady, 1999). However, given the wide range of participatory activities such a wide definition includes, scholars have established different criteria to systematize political participation. In a newer typology Ekman and Amnå (2012, p. 292) distinguish between manifest and latent political

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participation, also labelled as *civic participation*, on the highest level. On the sub-level, manifest political participation is further differentiated into *formal participation* (e.g. voting or signing a petition) and *extra-parliamentary participation* in terms of political activism (e.g., demonstrations or protest). However, given the growing importance of the Internet, another criterion is to distinguish between *online* and *offline* political participation. In general, several online political activities, with the exception that they are undertaken using digital media (e.g. e-voting, signing an e-petition, contacting politicians or editors by sending an e-mail), can be defined in the same way as offline political participation (Emmer, Wolling, & Vowe, 2012; Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Moreover, due to the growing popularity of social media, various new forms of online activities related to politics have emerged (e.g. expressing political views in social networks, tweeting or retweeting political statements and publishing a political blog). Hence, in view of the traditional conceptualization of political participation, these online activities are less instrumental and directly targeted towards political outcomes but can rather be defined as individualized forms of political self-expression (Bennet, 2012; Hosch-Dayican, 2014). Consequently, various communication research scholars define political expression in social media as being conceptually distinct from political participation as well as from social media use for news and information (Gil de Zúñiga, Bachmann, Hsu, & Brundidge, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016; Yang & DeHart, 2016).

According to recent research, the effects of communication on political participation are generally positive. Regarding traditional mass media, numerous studies have reported positive effects, whereas the ways in which reading newspapers affect political participation have been shown to be stronger and more consistent than watching television news (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). In terms of online media, the results of a meta-analysis of 38 studies revealed an overall positive but rather weak relation between Internet use and political participation. However, the relation seems to be stronger when using the Internet for information purposes (Boulianne, 2009; see also Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Correspondingly, the findings of a meta-analysis of 22 studies on the effects of using social media on political participation confirmed positive relations for both informational and political expressive social media use but not for identity- and entertainment-oriented social media use (Skoric et al., 2016). Yang and DeHart (2016) even found that an intensive general usage of Facebook and Twitter negatively affect political participation but positively affect political expression. Moreover, the results of a second meta-analysis of 36 studies showed that the effects of social media on protest participation seem to be generally stronger than on formal forms of participation (Boulianne, 2015). Finally, various studies have shown that interpersonal communication about politics directly motivates political participation (Emmer et al, 2012; McLeod et al., 1996, 1999) and additionally mediates the effects of mass media (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Shah et al., 2007).

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To conclude, with reference to existing typologies of political participation, this study focuses on people's participation in public demonstrations, a manifest extra-parliamentary form of political participation (Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 292). However, given the strong polarization associated with this issue, it seems reasonable to consider the intended direction of influence of public demonstrations, which may be either against or in support of refugees. Regarding the presumed effects of communication, independent of the intended political outcome, the following assumptions can be drawn from previous research: Firstly, *this study expects that the informational use of mass media will achieve positive results and that social media is positively related to political participation (H1)*. Secondly, *a positive relation between an expressive use of social media and participation is presumed (H2)*. Lastly, *the study assumes that interpersonal communication about refugees motivates political participation (H3)*.

3. Data and methods

To address these hypotheses, the study used data from a quantitative online access panel, which were made available by a professional market research provider. The data collection took place between February 1st and February 10th 2016 (in the midst of a heated stage of the refugee debate, given that just a month earlier hundreds of women were sexually assaulted and robbed on New Year's Eve in Cologne, "most of it apparently committed by foreigners" (Spiegel Online, 8th January 2016). The sample of N = 1,579, which is representative of the over-18, German-speaking population, was based on obtained quotas related to age, sex and education.[1] The sample consisted of 50 percent women and 50 percent men between 18 and 82 years (M = 44 years). The levels of education represented in the sample were distributed as follows: 42 percent low level of education, 22 percent middle school, 9 percent high secondary school degree, and 27 percent university degree.

3.1 Measurements

Participation in public demonstrations. In this study, people's participation in public demonstration related to refugees was examined in terms of two dimensions: the intentioned direction of actions (those against refugees vs. those in support of refugees) and the chronological viewpoint (past vs. future). Consistent with other studies, the overall level of participation is rather low, and people's self-reported willingness to participate in a demonstration in the future is higher than their actual past participation (Table 1).

Communication related to the refugee issue. In view of the previously derived assumptions on the effects of communication on people's political participation in the refugee debate, this study

1 The obtained quotas are based on the market media study "best4planning", provided by the Society for Integrated Communication Research (GIK). See also https://online.mds6.de/mdso6/b4p.php. Hence, given the newest statistics for the German online population based on the ARD-ZDF online study 2015 (Frees & Koch, 2015), the sample is slightly biased as it represents 80 percent of the German population: those who actually use the Internet at least occasionally. This causes bias particularly in the older segment, as only 50 percent of people older than 60 years use the Internet at least occasionally, whereas 98 percent of those aged 20–29 and 94 percent of those aged 30–39 do (Frees & Koch, 2015).

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Table 1. Participation in public demonstrations in the refugee debate

	Intentioned direction of participating in public demonstrations			
	against refugees		in support of refugees	
chronological viewpoint	Yes (1)	No (0)	Yes (1)	No (0)
past: prior participation[1]	7%	93%	8%	92%
future: willingness to participate	16%	84%	20%	80%

examined three forms of communication variables (Table 2): Firstly, the frequency with which people perceived information on refugees from mass media and social media was measured for five different information sources. Secondly, the frequency of conversations about refugees with close and more distant others was observed. Thirdly, it was examined with two single items whether people have used social media to express their views on refugees in the past by commenting on posts about refuges and publishing one's own posts about refugees.

Control variables. Besides sociodemographic variables, the data were controlled for various political dispositions that have been proven to be influential in political participation research. Using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 ("very little interest") to 5 ("very strong interest"), people's political interest was assessed via two items related to having a general interest in politics on the one hand and, on the other, having an issue-specific interest in refugee politics. The

Table 2. Operationalization of communication related to the refugee issue

Reception of information about refugees from mass media and social media[1]
The following various information sources are listed. Please mark how often you have received information about refugees from each information source in the last few months.
'I received information about refugees from . . .
… public television channels (no matter whether offline or online)' (*M* = 2.8; *SD* = 1.6)
… private television channels (no matter whether offline or online)' (*M* = 2.4; *SD* = 1.6)
… newspapers or magazines (print, e-paper or online)' (*M* = 2.1; *SD* = 1.4)[2]
… Facebook' (*M* = 2.0; *SD* = 1.9)
… Twitter' (*M* = 0.4; *SD* = 1.0)

Interpersonal conversations about refugees[2]
And how often have you talked with others about refugees in recent months? No matter whether this conversation took place personally or was carried by media like telephone, smart phone or Skype.
… with family members and close friends (*M* = 2.7; *SD* = 1.2)
… with working colleagues and more distant friends (*M* = 2.3; *SD* = 1.3)

Expressive social media use related to refugees[3]
Commenting on posts about refugees (*M* = 0.4; *SD* = 0.7)
Publishing one's own posts about refugees (*M* = 0.2; *SD* = 0.5)

Note. [1]Mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) on a 6-point scale of 0 = "never", 1 = "less than once a week", 2= "about once a week", 3= "several times per week", 4 = "daily", and 5 = "several times a day"; [2]index of two items for a) local or regional newspapers and b) national newspapers or magazines; [3]Mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) on a 3-point scale of 0 = "never", 1 = "once", 2 = "more than once."

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responses were then compiled into an index (M = 3.4; SD = 1.0; α = .81). Political orientation was measured with one item for self-placement on a left–right scale ranging from 1 ("very left") to 7 ("very right") (M = 3.8; SD = 1.1). Finally, political attitudes regarding perceived responsiveness, perceived self-efficacy and satisfaction with the government's performance were examined issue-specifically on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 4 ("strongly agree"). People's perception of political efficacy was measured with the statement that citizens have almost no influence on what the federal government is doing about the refugee issue (M = 3.4; SD = 0.8). Finally, citizens' satisfaction with their government's decisions on the refugee issue was assessed (M = 1.7; SD = 0.9).

3.2 Strategy of analysis

Since the dependent variables are binary-coded, logistic regressions were conducted (see Table 1).[2] Thus, it was assessed whether information and communication related to refugees increase or decrease the probability that people participate (1) or do not participate (0) in a public demonstration against or in support of refugees. As a result, positive logit coefficients indicate that participation becomes more likely with higher independent variable scores, while negative logit coefficients indicate that participation becomes less likely. The results of the logistic regression models are summarized in Table 3.

4. Results

Regarding the influence of socio-demographic characteristics, the results showed only a few effects on participation which are that more highly educated people and women seemed less likely to participate in a demonstration against refugees. Additional t-tests revealed that men (M = .09; SD = .29) already have participated significantly more often than women (M = .04; SD = .20) in a demonstration against refugees in the past ($t_{(1386)}$ = 3.505, p < .001) and that men (M = .10; SD = .30) are also significantly more willing than women (M = .06; SD = .25) to participate in a demonstration against refugees in the future ($t_{(1465)}$ = 2.706, p = .007). However, this general gender difference in participating in demonstrations against refugees becomes only evident when prior participation is included in the model. In contrast, there is no gender difference regarding participating in public demonstrations in support of refugees.

Overall, people's political attitudes seemed to be more important. In particular, the findings concerning people's political orientation indicate that people who are politically more right-oriented are more likely to have demonstrated against refugees in the past or are more likely to participate in future demonstrations, whereas those politically more left-oriented are more likely to politically engage in support of refugees. Moreover, those who are more satisfied with the government's decisions related to the refugee debate are more likely to already have joined, and

2 First, before the logistic regression models were executed, multicollinearity checks were conducted for all independent variables using the common tests from the OLS regression analysis (Urban & Mayerl, 2011). In light of a commonly given rule that variance inflation factors (VIFs) of 10 or higher are an indicator for multicollinearity, no such problem exists in the present study, as all VIFs have values < 3.

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prospectively will join, a demonstration supporting refugees. In contrast, those who reported stronger dissatisfaction were more likely to participate a demonstration against refugees in the future. People that perceive low political efficacy related to the refugee issue are more likely to participate in a future demonstration against refugees, while those who reported a high level of perceived political efficacy are expected to engage in demonstrations in favor of refugees. Interestingly, considered on its own higher interest in politics, including refugee politics, makes participating in upcoming demonstrations against refugees more likely, but not in demonstrations in favor of refugees. However, the picture looks differently consisting the effect of an interaction between higher education and political interest (see Table 4 in the appendix). Thus, higher educated politically more interested people are less likely to take political actions against refugees, but more likely to support refuges.

With reference to the presumed positive relations between communication and participation, the results are rather diverse. Regarding the role of interpersonal communication, quite interestingly, discussing the refugee issue with family and friends does not motivate participation in a demonstration. However, those having more discussions about refugees with colleagues and acquaintances seem to be more likely to have participated in a demonstration either against or in support of refugees in the past. Moreover, they are more likely to join an anti-refugee-demonstration in the future, although this effect disappeared after controlling for prior participation behavior. In terms of mass media, the results revealed opposing effects on the perception of information about refugees obtained from either public or private broadcasts: People more frequently exposed to public broadcast information about refugees are less likely to have taken political action against refugees in the past, and more likely to have participated in a previous demonstration in support of refugees. In contrast, those who more frequently receive information from commercial television are more likely to join an anti-refugee demonstration in the future and less likely to take political action in favor of refugees. This demobilizing effect remained even after controlling for past participation. Strikingly, participation was not at all affected by obtaining information from newspapers and magazines, both offline and online. As expected, social media plays an important role in motivating protest participation. The informational use of Twitter related to refugees – which, it must be acknowledged, is generally minimal – had made past participating in public demonstrations on both sides of the controversy more likely. Thus, after controlling for past participation, this effect did not remain. Moreover, an expressive use of social media is a strong predictor of taking political actions either against or in support of refugees. Firstly, people that comment on posts about refugees often join, and are also more likely to join, refugee-related public demonstrations. This effect remains stable even after controlling for previous participation behaviors. Secondly, publishing one's own posts about refugees seemed to have made previous participation on both sides more likely.

Not surprisingly, past participation was the strongest factor in predicting future participation, both against and

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in favor of refugees. In contrast, people more frequently reviewing information about refugees on Facebook were less likely to have participated in a previous demonstration in support of refugees.

5. Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the role of personal conversations, mass media and social media in citizen participation in public demonstrations related to the refugee debate. To explore the interplay between communication and participation, the study used data from a quantitative online survey that was conducted in February 2016. The empirical outcomes of this study make three important contributions to the existing research. Firstly, public demonstrations occur in a specific societal context and

Table 3. Logistic regressions predicting demonstration participation in the refugee debate

	Participation against refugees			Participation in support refugees		
	in the past	in the future	in the future (with past)	in the past	in the future	in the future (with past)
Nagelkerke R^2	.27	.30	.47	.34	.45	.55
Socio-demographic and political characteristics						
male (yes)			-.43			
age (in years)	-.03			-.03		
education (high)	-.24					
political interest (strong)		.23	.36			
political orientation (right)	.35	.58	.56	-.29	-.55	-.55
satisfaction with governments' decisions (high)				.36	.57	.55
perceived political efficacy (high; recoded)		-.41	-.70	.67	.84	.69
Conversations about refugees (frequency)						
with family and friends				-.29		
with colleagues and more distant friends	.27	.20		.29		
Reception of information about refugees from (frequency)						
public television channels	-.18	-.14		.26		
private television channels		.14		-.29	-.27	-.21
newspapers and magazines						
Facebook				-.17		
Twitter	.31	.22		.33	.24	
Expressive use of social media related to refugees						
commenting on posts about refugees	.76	.42	.33		.39	.36
publishing one's own posts about refugees	.55			.63	.46	
prior participation	-	-	3.98	-	-	3.06

Note. All coefficients in the model are statistically significant for $p < .05$

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aim to cause social or political change; therefore, instead of considering people's general political communication behaviors (as most studies do), it seems more reasonable to examine people's issue-specific communication behaviors, such as their actual exposure to information about refugees in the current debate, which was examined in this study. Secondly, because various forms of political communication (e.g. informational vs. self-expressive) are made possible by online media, the study results emphasize the importance of considering both, different sources of information regarding political issues (e.g. interpersonal discussion, mass media and social media) and different forms of political communication, such as (intentional or accidental) perceptions of political information via social media and using social media intentionally for political expression. Thirdly, this study demonstrates that when participation in public demonstrations is explored in the middle of an ongoing public controversy, it is important to consider the intentioned direction of the political actions (e.g. against or in support of refugees) to gain deeper insights into the crucial role of communication in motivating participation on both sides of the controversy.

In sum, this study provides some insights into what makes people's participation in public demonstrations in the context of the refugee debate more likely, both, in the past and in the future. However, as public debates on refugees and refugee politics will certainly go on in Germany and many other European countries in the future, there are some findings that should be addressed further in future research. Firstly, public and private broadcast seem to have opposing effects on people's participation. While public broadcast is positively related to participation in support of refugees, private broadcast is negatively. In contrast, to stimulate participation in demonstrations against refugees the effects of public and private broadcast go in the opposite directions. Against this background, future research should examine the framing of the refugees' debate in public and private broadcast using content analysis on the one hand and examine the effects of different frames on people's perceptions and attitudes on the other hand. Secondly, while conversations about refugees with family and friends are negatively related to past participation in support of refugees, conversations with more distant people have been shown to have a motivating effect. Thus, in view of Granovetter's study (1973), these findings could be an indicator for the "strength of weak ties". However, to really understand the role of strong and weak ties in shaping public debates on refugees, context and content of conversations should be explored more systematically in future research. Thirdly, this study underlines the potential of expressive social media use to even encourage offline participation. However, to really understand the role of online expression via social media in the context of the debate about refugees, deeper insights in the content and tone of people's comments on posts and their own posts are needed.

Finally, this study has methodological and theoretical weaknesses that need to be discussed. The first limitation relates to the different levels of exactness. Given the public controversy about refugees, it has been quite helpful to distinguish between the intended

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direction of actions (for or against refugees) to develop a more comprehensive insight regarding the role of communication. Such a differentiation would have been desirable in the case of measuring people's expressive use of social media, too, as both forms turned out to be strongly related to participation in public demonstrations, both for and against refugees. Consequently, many questions regarding the conditions under which expressive social media use makes offline participation more likely remain unanswered. Secondly, knowing that 20 percent of the German population still do not use the internet at least occasionally (Frees & Koch, 2015), but the findings of this study represent base on a generally more "online-orientated" sample, therefore some of the media effects, especially those of expressive social media use, might be different in a sample consisting of both "onliners" and "offliners". The third limitation involves using cross-sectional survey data. In particular, due to the dynamics of the refugee debate on the one hand and the temporal restriction of using cross-sectional data on the other hand, the results provide only a limited understanding of the role of communication in citizen participation in the current context. Thus, to gain deeper insights into the interplay between citizens' communication and participation behaviors, and given the development of the public debate on refugees, even changes with respect to the direction of participation over time, a long-term perspective using panel data is essential for future research. Finally, it must be acknowledged that from a theoretical point of view this article assumes strong effects of media usage on participation. However, on the basis of selective exposure theory various scholars have shown that people selectively expose themselves to media content that reinforces their pre-existing dispositions (e.g., attitudes and beliefs) and avoid potentially opposing information (for an overview see Valkenburg, Peter, Walther, 2016). From this perspective, it also seems worthwhile to test in future research in how far individuals selectively expose themselves to information about refugees as a result of their pre-existing political attitudes and behaviors (political participation).

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APPENDIX

Table 4. Logistic regressions predicting demonstration participation with interaction

	Participation against refugees			Participation in support of refugees		
	in the past	in the future	in the future (with past)	in the past	in the future	in the future (with past)
Nagelkerke R^2	.27	.25	.43	.35	.45	.55
Socio-demographic and political characteristics						
male (yes)						
age (in years)	-.03			-.03		
education (high) x political interest (high)	-.33	-.16		.13	.28	.30
education (high) x political orientation (right)	.17	.21	.19	-.24	-.35	-.32
satisfaction with governments' decisions (high)				.34	.57	.56
perceived political efficacy (high; recoded)		-.51	-.77	.67	.87	.73
Conversations about refugees (frequency)						
with family and friends			.22	-.29		
with colleagues and more distant friends	.31	.23		.28		
Reception of information about refugees from (frequency)						
public television channels		-.13		.27		
private television channels		.17	.18	-.28	-.27	-.22
newspapers and magazines						
Facebook				-.17		
Twitter	.33	.22		.33	.23	
Expressive use of social media related to refugees						
commenting on posts about refugees	.76	.45	.36		.38	.34
publishing one's own posts about refugees	.63	.37		.62	.41	
prior participation			3.91			2.98

Note. All coefficients in the model are statistically significant for $p < .05$

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