

In What Ways does Celebrity Worship Impact the Social and Emotional Well-being of Teenage Fangirls in East Asia?

Rou-Syuan Huang

*New Taipei City Yuteh Private International Senior High School, No. 1,
Baijiefao Rd., Tucheng Dist., New Taipei City 236, Taiwan*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impacts of celebrity worship on teenage fangirls, emphasizing how the phenomenon of celebrity idol influence shapes the mental well-being, social interactions, and daily lives of fangirls aged 10 to 19 in East Asia. Data was collected through journal articles, essays, and online interviews with 11 adolescent girls from Taiwan. The findings suggest parasocial relationships can provide emotional support, boost confidence, and create a sense of community for fangirls. However, they have the potential to affect time management negatively, create unrealistic relationship expectations, increase emotional vulnerability, and contribute to self-doubt. This research contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between media, culture, and adolescent development.

Keywords: Celebrity Worship; Parasocial Relationship; Teenage Fangirls; Mental Well-being; Fans Community; East Asian culture

INTRODUCTION

Celebrity worship is an obsessive fascination with a public figure (1). These public figures can be people of social importance, such as entertainment figures, politicians, social influencers, or athletes. In the past, the interaction between celebrities and fans could only happen on television, radio, or in newspapers; fans had limited venues. Nowadays, social media and online streaming channels have been developed, allowing celebrities and

fans to interact in real-time, which has significantly transformed the nature of celebrity worship.

Because of celebrity worship, teenagers are often willing to spend time and money supporting their favorite celebrities. Celebrity worship, particularly “idol worship,” is a significant part of East Asian culture, especially in South Korea, Japan, and China (2). This phenomenon and its influence on adolescents may be attributed to the East Asian cultural emphasis on group identity and social harmony, intensifying fan devotion and organizing fan activities (3). This cultural characteristic, called collectivism, values group identity over individual independence. An example is the South Korean boy band Seventeen, whose album *FML* was named the best-selling album in the world in 2023 by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, selling 6.4 million copies.

Corresponding author: Rou-Syuan Huang, E-mail: rosaly.huang617@gmail.com.

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Received November 18, 2024; **Accepted** December 23, 2024
<https://doi.org/10.70251/HYJR2348.24197205>

However, this high sales volume is primarily driven by photocard culture, where fans buy multiple copies of the same album to collect various photocard versions or to support their favorite artists in music awards rather than solely due to the album's popularity. This practice underscores the extent to which East Asian fans are willing to spend large amounts of money not just out of necessity but as a demonstration of their devotion and support for their idols. Similarly, entertainment companies like YG Entertainment, JYP Entertainment, and HYBE Corporation spend money on producing music videos and fan platforms like Weverse and Bubble in order to receive significant financial returns.

The culture of fan devotion, deeply rooted in collectivist traditions, not only shapes individual consumer behavior but also mirrors a broader societal shift towards prioritizing entertainment as a powerful tool of influence, which has significantly contributed to the rise of celebrity worship. In East Asian countries, there is an increasing emphasis on soft power, which Nye (2004) defines as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments" (4); he also mentions how soft power could be developed through cultural exchanges which would result in a favorable opinion of public comparing to "hard power." Countries like South Korea have used soft power over the past 20 years to influence people's attitudes and perceptions globally through its pop culture (Korean Wave), taekwondo, Korean cuisine, and esports (5). This demonstrates how East Asian countries leverage pop culture to enhance their global image and influence, making it a vital component of their economic strategy. In previous studies, girls were found to have a higher possibility of forming intense parasocial relationships since females often engage in parasocial activities with a higher frequency and intensity than males (6).

Celebrity worship has become part of people's lives in the 21st century, which could significantly affect teenagers in various ways. This research aims to create a broader understanding of the relationship between media, culture, and adolescent development so that educators and parents can better support adolescents who engage in celebrity worship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parasocial relationships

A parasocial relationship occurs when a viewer, listener, or reader develops a one-sided psychological relationship with a media persona, such as a character, celebrity, or news anchor (7). For example, fans consider their favorite

celebrity as their friend when the celebrity does not know them. People can form parasocial relationships through various forms of media and offline activities. Horton and Wohl (1956) mention that through television, when a performer repeatedly performs a supposed response of the audience, the audience anticipates and reacts to these cues, and a parasocial relationship begins to form (7). Television performers in the past performed in repetition (one time per week, two times per week); repetition leads to anticipation; anticipation develops into parasocial expectations and relationships. Previously, the leading media was television, but the invention of smart devices like phones and computer tablets has changed how people access media. Those inventions have made it easier and more common for people to access media nowadays (8).

The invention of smart devices has made media consumption more accessible, and the invention of social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, X, and Weibo) creates more parasocial interactions that are more robust than traditional platforms such as television, radio, and newspapers. Moreover, social media allows celebrities to create an online persona, leading to different experiences and enables an audience to feel closer and more connected to the celebrities who resonate with their style, fashion taste, and vibe (8). Sharing daily life photos and videos or live streaming on social media, along with fans giving likes and commenting, allows celebrities to connect closely with their fans. Boyd et al. (2024) show that more frequent engagement with celebrities' online content leads to stronger parasocial relationships (8). Kim and Kim (2020) found that celebrities who engage with fans using a personal and intimate tone on social media can develop more parasocial relationships with their audiences (9). For example, Seventeen's DK, one of the singers, reminds fans to eat regularly and stay happy and healthy in a warm tone on the fan platform (10). Fans may feel a deep emotional connection as if they are receiving direct communication from him.

Fan communities and sense of belonging

The transcultural community that allows people from different nations, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds are called online fan communities (11). Fan communities mainly operate on online platforms, like Weibo's Huati, Facebook groups, and Reddit. These platforms allow fans with diverse backgrounds to discuss and share their opinions about their favorite celebrity (12). Companies in Korea have created apps like Weverse, Bubble, and Universe for fan communities. These apps allow users to post comments, write letters, purchase artist-related

merchandise, send direct messages, and join paid memberships (exclusive content) (12). This allows more direct interaction between the celebrity and their fans and creates a stronger bond between the fan community.

A robust community allows fans to do things that they consider positive for their idols. A notable example is BTS's member Jimin's fan base, the "Army," working together and donating 709 kg of rice to Goyang, Gyeonggi-do Children's Regional Center Council to help children affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (13). The Army also hosted an exhibition, donating the profits to the National Council for the Blind. However, the behavior of fan communities in defense of their idols can sometimes backfire. Research has shown that while fans, including the Army, often rally to defend their idols from perceived threats or criticisms (such as during controversies or cancellations), these types of behaviors have led to toxicity and online harassment (14). For example, a participant mentioned getting attacked by the Army on Twitter because her statement was contrary to the majority of people (14). Rather than protecting their idols, such actions can create a hostile environment that damages the celebrity's reputation and undermines the positive influence of fan-driven charitable work. This highlights fan communities' powerful and complex nature and multiple societal impacts.

Social development

Parasocial relationships play a crucial role in social development. Adolescents who develop parasocial relationships often see celebrities as partners who provide emotional support (15). Parasocial relationships allow adolescents to envision equal or hierarchical relationships and enable them to explore different social roles and expectations without the risks associated with real-life interactions (16). By observing and imitating their favorite celebrities, teenagers can develop social skills (17). However, while parasocial relationships offer a safe environment for social skills development, they can also result in unrealistic expectations of real-life relationships. Adolescents may become overly reliant on these one-sided connections, hindering their ability to navigate interpersonal interactions.

Emotional well-being

Parasocial relationships and fan communities influence fans' well-being. Research shows a positive link between parasocial relationships and fans' well-being (9). Fan communities provide social interaction and support, enhancing well-being. However, some studies

link fandom with teenage depression. Research by Son and Lee (2023) indicates that increased participation in fandom activities correlates with higher depression levels in adolescents, creating a cyclical effect (18). It suggests that as adolescents experience higher levels of depression, they tend to participate more in fandom activities. This, in turn, leads to an increase in depression, creating a mutual feedback loop. This highlights the need for further research to understand whether fandom activities offer comfort or contribute to greater emotional challenges in adolescents.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design: This study adopted a qualitative research methodology, utilizing a case study design to explore celebrity worship's social and emotional impacts on teenage fangirls. The case study method allowed for an in-depth examination of individual experiences and provided rich, detailed data about how these relationships influence various aspects of the participants' lives.

Participants

This research involved 11 Taiwanese teenage girls between the ages of 15 and 18, with a median age of 17. Nine of the participants were current high school students, while the other two were recent high school graduates.

Potential participants were recruited through various channels, including personal networks and social media platforms like Instagram. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. She identifies as a Taiwanese girl,
2. Between the ages of 13 and 18,
3. Demonstrated interest in celebrities by having particular celebrities they consider their favorite celebrity,
4. General knowledge about celebrity culture, without requiring extreme involvement,
5. Willingness to participate in the research and provide detailed responses to interview questions.

Before the interviews, informed consent was obtained from the participants including potential risks of study participation, an overview of the study's aim, and a review of the study procedure. For participants under 18, parental consent was also obtained. Interviews were scheduled at convenient times for the participants.

Qualitative interview

Interviews were conducted online with video calls on Instagram as it allowed for flexibility and convenience for

the participants. The calls lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour and were recorded, with the participants' consent, to capture all details accurately and ensure no information was omitted. Only the participant was present during these calls. Since all participants were Taiwanese and spoke Mandarin as their first language, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin and later translated into English for further analysis. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, using interview guidelines to ensure consistency while allowing for exploring individual experiences. Questions were open-ended, and participants were allowed to respond with anything they believed was relevant. Examples of the questions are included below.

1. Who is your favorite celebrity or group?
2. How did you learn about them?
3. Please briefly introduce them (What is their profession? How did they get their fame?)
4. What part of them attracted you the most (e.g., personality, talent, image)?
5. How do you engage with content (e.g., videos, posts, interviews) featuring your favorite celebrity?
6. How often do you engage with their content? How frequently (e.g., daily, weekly)? How long each time?
7. Have you ever interacted with your favorite celebrity directly or indirectly (e.g., through social media, concerts, or fan meetings)? How did it make you feel?
8. How would you describe your relationship with your favorite celebrity?
9. Do you feel like you have a personal connection with them?
10. What would you say to them if you could talk to your favorite celebrity right now?
11. Does your favorite celebrity influence your daily life? (time management, sleeping schedule, and spending money)
12. Does your favorite celebrity influence how you see yourself?
13. Has there ever been a time when your favorite celebrity's actions or words strongly impacted your emotions? Please describe.
14. How do you think your engagement with your favorite celebrity affects your mental well-being (positively, negatively mixed, no effects)?
15. Are you part of any fan communities or clubs related to your favorite celebrity or other ways to interact with fans?
16. What are the membership requirements (if any) for joining these fan communities/clubs (e.g.,

- membership fee, number of events to attend, rules)?
17. Have you ever changed your daily habits or routines because of your involvement in the fan community? If so, how?
18. Do you feel a sense of belonging or community with other fans of your favorite celebrity?
19. How does social media (e.g., Instagram, Twitter) affect your interactions with and perceptions of your favorite celebrity?
20. Has the fan community ever influenced your emotions or mental well-being?

Social media observations

In addition to the interviews, participants' social media accounts, primarily Instagram (as most participants identified it as their most frequently used platform), were observed to gather supplementary data. The observation focused on several key areas:

1. Whether the participants followed their favorite celebrity on social media.
2. Whether participants mentioned their favorite celebrity or included elements related to them in their profile bio.
3. The type of posts related to their favorite celebrities, including various forms of engagement, such as reposting content directly from the celebrity's account and sharing photos of merchandise.
4. Whether participants created highlight stories specifically dedicated to their favorite celebrity.

RESULTS

The results were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding the participants' responses and Instagram activity. This process identified key themes such as the intensity of parasocial relationships, the emotional support derived from celebrity worship, and the role of fan communities. The analysis revealed how celebrities influence teenage fangirls by examining both responses and online behavior.

Celebrity type

When participants were questioned regarding their favorite celebrity or group, their profession, and what qualities made them appealing, the 11 participants mentioned a range of celebrity types, including K-pop idols (n=7), actors (n=1), musicians (n=2), and athletes (n=1). Celebrities that were mentioned include K-pop idols such as Seventeen, Tomorrow by Together, and Stray Kids; actor Yibo Wang; musicians Sabrina Carpenter and

Chappell Roan; and athlete Lee Chih-Kai. To analyze the celebrity, they were categorized based on their primary roles. However, some celebrities have more than one career, often pursuing multiple roles such as dancing, acting, singing, and producing. For instance, Yibo Wang was mentioned as having multiple roles, including actor, dancer, singer, rapper, and professional road motorcycle racer.

The participants expressed varying reasons for their attraction. Six out of 11 participants were most attracted to their celebrity's talent and skills, while four out of 11 were drawn to their personality and creativity. Other factors contributing to attractiveness include appearance, humor, the contrast between their personality and appearance, and the bond between other group members. Additionally, four participants who were attracted to their celebrity's talent and skills mentioned that they are involved in similar activities, such as singing or gymnastics.

Engagement with celebrity

To understand how participants engage with their favorite celebrity, they were asked to state the platform and the time consuming context related to celebrity. The average time spent on the celebrity was 1.77 hours daily, mainly through social media. Each participant spends a different amount of time with celebrities; the longest is eight hours a day, and the least is thirty minutes a week. Many participants mentioned that the time varies depending on whether it is a weekday or weekend. Some also mention that they do not set specific times for the celebrity, but as they follow them on social media, they see their content whenever they open it.

According to the responses and observations of participants, all participants follow their favorite celebrity on Instagram and use social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube as the main ways to engage with their favorite celebrity. 10 out of 11 reports that they causally watch interviews of the celebrity.

Parasocial relationships

Questions regarding the subjects' relationships with their favorite celebrities were asked to understand better the emotional impact of parasocial relationships on adolescents' lives. Six out of 11 participants described their favorite celebrity as "emotionally supportive," akin to a friendship. One of these six participants described their favorite celebrity as their "virtual husband." Another four participants mentioned that they would sometimes see their favorite celebrities as their boyfriends whenever that celebrity performs a personal, romantic gesture

online (e.g., blowing a kiss at the camera). One of them also mentioned that whenever they experience challenges with socialization at school, they would turn to their favorite celebrity for company and support. She feels comforted by the fact that she would not face judgment from her favorite celebrity.

Five out of 11 participants felt that they had personal connections with their favorite celebrities despite the one-sided nature of the interaction. These participants felt that they could resonate with their favorite celebrities' thoughts and behaviors online, allowing them to feel a special connection.

Impact of celebrity worship in daily life

To understand how celebrity worship affects adolescents' daily lives, questions that involve how they shaped their daily routines around certain celebrities were asked. All mentioned that their favorite celebrity influenced their daily routine, including time management and spending habits. Nine out of 11 participants reported spending money on merchandise or subscriptions related to their celebrity. One mentioned that she would stay up till 3 am to watch her favorite celebrity's content, sometimes leading to her being late for school. Another mentioned that she started to learn to draw and play the piano because of her favorite celebrity. One more of these seven suggests learning Korean to understand their idol better. One mentions that celebrity worship has a higher standard for choosing boyfriends as she always expects too much. Regarding the financial aspect, none of the participants stated that purchasing merchandise significantly impacted their regular spending habits.

Furthermore, observations of participants' Instagram accounts revealed that eight participants actively shared posts or stories about their favorite celebrities, demonstrating the impact of celebrity worship on their social media behavior. These posts varied in form: some shared album covers with the music, while others posted handwritten lyrics, reposted content directly from the celebrity's account, or shared pictures of merchandise. Some participants shared photos taken in the exact location or angle as their favorite celebrity, while others posted concert photos or images from fan activities. Additionally, a few participants posted artwork they had created of their favorite celebrity, and four of them even created special highlight categories dedicated to them.

Nine out of 11 participants indicated that interacting with celebrity content positively impacted their mood and self-esteem. The other three participants reported mixed influence on themselves. Among those eight who

reported having positive feelings, their celebrity shared a trait of saying words like “You should love yourself,” “Be yourself,” and other comforting words that have encouraged and positively influenced them. Those two who reported mixed feelings and influence all believed watching their favorite celebrity provided them joy. One mentions that celebrity worship has made her doubt herself as she feels bad that she cannot achieve the skills of her favorite celebrity. The other participant reported that compared to other celebrities, her favorite celebrity does not show lots of his daily life to his fans, making her feel ignored and sad.

Community and sense of belonging

Eight out of 11 were members of fan communities, both online and offline. Among these eight, seven reported feeling a strong sense of belonging within these communities, which they found to provide emotional support. However, two of the seven who felt this sense of belonging also mentioned experiencing conflicts or negative interactions within these fan communities. The two who reported feeling conflicted are both fans of K-pop groups. Their negative emotions, like anger, are caused by fans of specific members arguing with fans of other members over the idols’ skills, behavior, or appearance. Two of those participants mentioned making friendships within the fan community, and one of them mentioned that they feel comforted by other fans.

Other observations

The interviews also revealed different relationship patterns associated with various types of celebrities. Among the three main types of celebrity that were involved in the research, the different ways the celebrity engages with their fans have shown different effects on their parasocial relationship. K-pop idols that have been reported to be highly engaged with their fans were frequently mentioned in relation to daily routines, emotional support, and active engagement, indicating a strong influence. For example, participants who like K-pop idols often adjusted their schedules around content releases and spent significant time engaging with fan communities. Actors were appreciated mainly for their roles in specific dramas or films, and while they had an emotional impact, the level of daily engagement and influence on routines was generally less intense than K-pop idols. Most content about athletes is their training and competition. Athletes were more focused on inspiration and motivation, particularly in terms of physical activity and pursuing sports. K-pop fans often

engage with their idols daily through multiple channels, including social media, live streaming platforms, fan apps like Weverse, and regular content releases (e.g., music videos, vlogs, and reality shows). The frequency and intensity of these interactions are generally higher than other types of celebrities, which strongly influence their fans’ daily routines and emotions.

DISCUSSION

Celebrity type

The participants in this study mentioned various celebrity types, including K-pop idols, actors, musicians, and athletes. This diverse range of preferences highlights celebrities’ broad appeal across different entertainment fields for adolescents. Although the participants are attracted to different types of celebrities, they tend to be drawn to celebrities with similar characteristics. Most participants mentioned being attracted to their celebrity’s creativity, talent, and appearance, though some also cited qualities like humor. This suggests that the appeal of celebrities varies based on each individual’s personal preferences.

Different celebrities with different traits attract different types of teenagers, catering to various aspects of identity formation. In this research, several participants admired celebrities who excel in activities related to their interests. This supports the idea that adolescents may seek out celebrities who reflect their ambitions, interests, or desired traits. Such admiration is part of the process of identity formation, as teenagers often look up to celebrities who represent idealized versions of themselves or embody qualities they aspire to develop.

Engagement with celebrity

The regularity of this engagement with celebrities suggests that these interactions are not just passive consumption but are part of the participants’ routines. Many participants reported frequent, casual consumption of their favorite celebrity’s content, often through platforms like Instagram and YouTube. This habitual engagement implies that celebrity worship has become a part of their lives, as they consume content regularly without viewing it as an intentional task.

This high frequency of engagement suggests that these interactions substantially impact the participants’ thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. Since many participants follow their favorite celebrities on social media and frequently engage with their content, the repetition could shape their worldview, emotional responses, and identity.

Parasocial relationships

The participants' responses demonstrate how parasocial relationships can meet adolescents' emotional and social needs, particularly during periods of significant developmental change. These relationships allow celebrities to offer comforting words and emotional support, such as encouragement to pursue dreams, in a personal and non-judgmental manner. Some participants even perceive these celebrities as close friends or romantic partners. Such relationships can positively impact adolescents' motivation in both school and life, as they often strive to emulate their favorite celebrities' positive attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, while some participants view their favorite celebrities as friends or "virtual husbands," they also demonstrate an awareness of the one-sided nature of this relationship. The participants reported that they recognize that the intimacy they feel is not reciprocated in reality and that they would not engage in inappropriate behavior or make unrealistic demands if they were to meet the celebrity in person. However, the participants have yet to have close interactions with their favorite celebrity, so this is mostly their expectation that the accuracy could still be questioned.

Although the responses indicate that parasocial relationships can provide emotional support, boosting confidence and joy for adolescents, they also reveal the potential for negative effects. It is also shown that there could be negative influence by the celebrity's behavior. Some participants felt disappointed when their favorite celebrities altered their appearance or were absent from certain events. Participants reported feeling sadness or disappointment in these instances, highlighting the emotional vulnerability tied to their attachment to the celebrity's behavior and presence.

Impact of celebrity worship in daily life

Celebrity worship can affect adolescents' daily lives, influencing behaviors in both positive and negative ways. The findings reveal that participants' attachment to their favorite celebrities affects time management, spending habits, and emotional well-being. On the positive side, participants have been motivated to take up new hobbies or learn new languages to feel more connected with their idols, which suggests that celebrity worship can be a source of inspiration and self-improvement. However, on the negative side, some participants reported staying up late to watch celebrity content, negatively impacting their academic performance and daily routines. Celebrity worship also appears to influence adolescents' relationship standards, as some participants indicated that their

favorite celebrities set unrealistically high expectations for their future partners.

Regarding emotional well-being, most participants expressed that watching their favorite celebrity's content brings joy and relaxation. The content is often light-hearted and fun, providing a sense of escape from everyday stress. This emotional connection to celebrities is a form of comfort and emotional support, supporting the idea that parasocial relationships with celebrities contribute to a higher level of life satisfaction and the well-being of fans (12).

Community and sense of belonging

Fan communities play a significant role in shaping adolescents' lives by providing a sense of belonging. These communities offer spaces where fans can share experiences, support one another, and connect with others who share similar interests. This connection is especially crucial during adolescence, a developmental stage where forming social bonds and identities is important (19), making fans more susceptible to influence from events within the fan community.

The influence of fan communities can extend beyond simple interaction. Two participants in this study noted that they felt a deep sense of belonging to their fan communities, and their mood was affected when conflicts arose within the group. This suggests that the emotional well-being of fans can be closely tied to the dynamics within the community. The response indicates that a fan community might be associated with Social Identity Theory when people categorize themselves into different social categories (in-groups) to build their own social identity (20), which is the fandom.

The findings show that while fan communities provide emotional support and a sense of belonging, they can also be sources of conflict and frustration, influencing the mental well-being of young people.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insight into the impact of celebrity worship on teenage fangirls in East Asia. The results show that celebrity worship has a mixed influence on adolescents, with a tendency toward more positive effects. The one-sided relationships can offer emotional support, boost confidence, and foster a sense of community, which are crucial during the challenging phase of adolescence. However, there are potential risks associated with intense celebrity worship, like having unrealistic expectations of future partners or spending too

much time on the celebrity's daily routine.

It also shows a strong sense of belonging in the fans' community. Conflict in the fans' community will also influence fans' emotions. This research could help educators and parents better support adolescents by setting internet and social media guidelines, ensuring that fan communities do not negatively affect their sense of self and belonging, and regularly checking their mental state and daily life. Establishing a parental forum could provide a platform for parents to support one another and share information, potentially reducing the risks associated with celebrity worship negatively impacting their children.

Teenagers could also recognize when their behavior starts to negatively affect their everyday lives due to celebrity worship, such as spending too much time-consuming content or self-doubt. This would allow them to develop a healthier and more positive relationship while learning from the celebrities they admire. At the same time, it is essential to understand how different individuals interact with celebrities.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The small sample size, with only 11 participants, makes the results less generalizable. It could not apply to all teenage fangirls in Taiwan or other East Asian countries. Additionally, disclosing or accurately recalling their experiences entirely relies on self-reported data, which introduces the potential for bias, as participants may have yet to fully disclose or accurately recall their experiences. Observer bias could also have influenced the interpretation of the data, as the researcher's expectations subtly shaped the analysis.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of parasocial relationships on mental health, particularly how these relationships evolve as adolescents transition into adulthood. Moreover, a more comprehensive analysis of how different types of celebrity worship influence adolescents is needed, considering a larger and more diverse sample to enhance the generalizability of the findings.

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