

AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP, ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY OF SOUTHERN ROMANIA

Laurențiu-Stelian MIHAI^{a}, Florin Aurelian BIRCHI^b, Denisa Maria COJOACĂ (ALNIȚI)^c*

a, b, c University of Craiova, Romania

ABSTRACT

Our paper analyzes the relationship between transformational leadership, organizational culture, and employee performance in the hospitality industry of southern Romania. The study was conducted on a sample of 193 operational employees from hospitality and other related industries, testing three hypotheses related to the abovementioned variables using the partial least square structural equation modeling. Our findings have shown that the transformational leadership style has a strong and positive influence on organizational culture and employee performance, and, at the same time, organizational culture strongly and positively influences employee performance. Hospitality managers and HR professionals can use our results to create and develop a positive organizational culture based on commitment, creativity, innovation, and leadership development programs to increase employees' performance.

KEYWORDS: *employee motivation, hospitality, leadership, organizational culture, transformational leadership.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Several empirical investigations have examined the link between transformational leadership, organizational culture, and employee performance within diverse contexts in recent years. However, the findings could have been more consistent, leading to inconclusive results. While earlier studies by Gu et al. (2018) and Chen et al. (2014) have reported positive associations between transformational leadership and outcomes such as satisfaction and creativity, more recent research (Diana et al., 2021; Harijanti et al., 2021; Muzondiwa et al., 2022) has highlighted its positive influence on performance. This lack of consistency in the literature hampers theoretical advancements and impedes practitioners' ability to formulate clear strategic directions. Moreover, researchers encounter challenges in formulating definitive, empirically grounded assertions regarding transformational leadership and organizational culture and their potential impact on performance.

A comprehensive literature review regarding organizational culture and leadership revealed independent associations with employee performance. Researchers have investigated the relationships between leadership styles and performance (Avolio, 2005; Bass, 1985; Bass and Avolio, 1993; Schein, 2010) as well as between organizational culture and performance (Diana et al., 2021; Muzondiwa et al., 2022). Moreover, various aspects of the organizational culture literature imply the role of leaders in shaping and sustaining specific cultural characteristics (Bass,

* Corresponding author. E-mail address: laurentiu.mihai@edu.ucv.ro

1985; Schein, 2010). Simultaneously, the leadership literature suggests that comprehending and operating within a given culture is fundamental to effective leadership (Diana et al., 2021).

Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the link between leadership and culture in organizational theory, there needs to be more critical research focused on understanding the implications of this association for employee performance. Surprisingly, there is a lack of literature exploring the performance implications of the links between organizational culture and leadership, despite the significance of these concepts in organizational functioning (Schein, 2010; Muzondiwa et al., 2022).

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Transformational leadership (TL)

Leadership encompasses the capacity of a leader to exert influence and provide guidance to subordinates, intending to attain organizational objectives (Kartono, 2016). Building upon this notion, Busro (2018) asserts that leadership style manifests as a consistent behavioral pattern exhibited by leaders while exerting influence over others.

Harijanti et al. (2021) posit that leadership can be defined as exerting influence over individuals to align their efforts with organizational objectives. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced an additional layer of complexity that organizations must navigate. Muzondiwa et al. (2022) emphasize that despite some leaders perceiving crisis management as beyond their purview, fostering robust and resilient organizations in uncertainty necessitates a fresh mindset, which must emanate from upper management (Burlea et al., 2017). Once effective in a rapidly evolving world, certain leadership styles may need to be revised to address the current leadership challenges. Therefore, ongoing development of employee potential within the organization is considered indispensable for maintaining competitive advantage (Avolio, 2005).

Leadership style refers to the observable patterns of behavior a leader displays in their efforts to influence and guide others toward attaining organizational goals (Robbins, 2006). Kartono (2016) asserts that leadership style manifests as the distinctive traits, habits, temperament, character, personality, behavior, and interaction style a leader exhibit. It encompasses the way a leader operates, distinguishing them from others. In line with this perspective, Busro (2018) defines leadership style as a consistent behavioral pattern enacted by leaders while exerting influence over others.

Robbins (2006) asserts that the transformational leadership style entails leaders respecting and considering the opinions and suggestions of their subordinates. A transformational leader actively involves his subordinates in the decision-making processes, and this leadership style is generally associated with higher levels of morale in various leadership contexts. Transformational leaders guide group members, actively engage in group activities, and solicit input from their subordinates (Sharma and Singh, 2013).

On the other hand, Kartono (2016) describes TL as a process employed to coordinate the work and responsibilities of all members, emphasizing a sense of responsibility and fostering practical cooperation. This leadership style is characterized by efforts to establish and cultivate solid interpersonal relationships based on mutual respect among organizational members. Leaders

adopting this style consistently seek to leverage the potential of all individuals they lead (Diana et al., 2021).

Sharma and Singh (2013) outline TL predictors, such as motivating members to employ cognitive abilities in problem-solving and encouraging innovative and creative approaches to task execution. Additionally, democratic leadership involves the involvement of both leaders and members in decision-making processes and problem-solving endeavors. Promoting harmonious relationships between superiors and subordinates is also emphasized to create an environment of cooperation and mutual support in fulfilling duties and obligations (Nam and Park, 2019).

2.2 Organizational culture (OC)

Culture originated from examining ethnic and national differences in various social science disciplines. In management and organizational studies, scholars have adopted the concept of OC in recent decades. Schein (2010, p.23) defines OC as a set of *basic assumptions invented, discovered, or developed* by a specific team or group that strives to address internal integration and external adaptation obstacles.

Drawing from the literature, the concept of OC encompasses four key elements (Bass and Avolio, 1993; Schein, 2010). First, OC is a shared phenomenon, indicating that it is collectively held and experienced by members of the organization. Second, OC can be understood at both visible and less visible levels, implying that certain aspects are readily observable while others are more implicit or deeply embedded. Third, each new organization member learns the culture, suggesting that individuals assimilate and internalize the organization's shared beliefs, values, and norms as they become a part of it. Last, culture tends to change gradually over time, implying that shifts in OC are typically evolutionary rather than abrupt.

OC can be classified into various categories based on different frameworks proposed by scholars (Avolio, 2005; Schein, 2010). One commonly used categorization includes clan, hierarchy, adhocracy, and market cultures, differentiating OC based on leadership styles, cohesion, dominant attributes, and strategic emphasis (Burlea et al., 2016). For instance, clan culture is characterized by participation and teamwork, while a market culture emphasizes competitiveness and goal achievement. Research has shown that market culture significantly impacts organizational performance, whereas hierarchy culture has the least impact (Burlea-Schiopoiu and Mihai, 2019).

2.3 Employee performance (EP)

According to Busro (2018), performance refers to the outcomes achieved by employees within an organization, both on an individual and group level. EP entails fulfilling obligations in alignment with their assigned duties and responsibilities (Nam and Park, 2019). It involves exercising the organization's authority and responsibility to attain its vision, mission, and goals while demonstrating capabilities, resilience, and autonomy within specified timeframes, adhering to legal requirements, and upholding ethical and moral standards. Diana et al. (2021) further emphasize that leadership, OC, and work environment are among the factors that influence performance.

According to Busro (2018), EP is closely aligned with the organization's authority and responsibility to accomplish its vision, mission, and goals, considering factors such as persistence, independence, problem-solving abilities within designated timeframes, and adherence to moral and ethical principles.

Harijanti et al. (2021) describe EP as the result or level of success attained by an individual, which is evaluated based on the overall duration and accomplishment of a task compared to predefined standards, targets, or criteria. Intended performance encompasses employees' achievements, individually and as a group, within specific timeframes and aligned with the planned organizational goals. Furthermore, Ferine et al. (2021) and Diana et al. (2021) note that EP is manifested through the quality and quantity of work employees accomplish in fulfilling their responsibilities.

Building on this definition, our understanding of EP aligns with the tasks and responsibilities outlined in an employee's job description as formally designated by the organization. It encompasses the actions, behaviors, and outcomes that employees contribute to achieving organizational goals by adhering to expected work behaviors outlined by the organization's rules and procedures (Campbell, 1999). In this study, EP refers to employees' perceived work performance to their assigned job roles to attain the organization's objectives, as evidenced by previous research conducted within specific job descriptions, drawing from the research of Nam and Park (2019).

2.4 Hypotheses development

Numerous scholars, such as Bass (1985) and Ogbonna and Harris (2000), have highlighted the strong correlation between TL and OC. However, a significant debate persists regarding the origin of culture and the extent to which leaders influence its formation. Some theorists, including Nam and Park (2019) and Schein (2010), propose that culture is synonymous with the organization itself and can be manipulated by leaders. Therefore, leaders are expected to manage somewhat and shape the culture. In contrast, others, such as Acar (2012), Hofstede (2011), and Schein (2010), argue that the actions of organizational founders and/or leaders possess the potential to create and undeniably impact the formation of OC.

TL is crucial in formalizing and preserving an organization's purpose, values, and vision. The current role of leaders in implementing directional changes driven by a vision (Ogbonna and Harris, 2000) holds significant potential for shaping and maintaining an organization's culture. Hence, it can be stated that the thoughts, emotions, and responses of leaders are shaped by the prevailing culture (Bass and Avolio, 1993; Schein, 2010).

The transformational leader plays a crucial role in initiating the process of culture creation and is responsible for managing and influencing OC (Schein, 2010). One key differentiating factor between transactional and transformational leadership is their approach to culture. Transactional leaders work within the existing culture, while transformational leaders actively seek to change the OC to align with their vision. Therefore, influential leaders exhibit TL qualities that enable them to modify aspects of OC to enhance organizational performance (Avolio, 2005; Nguyen et al., 2020).

Based on these theoretical implications, we developed the first research hypothesis of this study:

H1: The leader's transformational leadership (TL) behavior positively influences the organizational culture (OC).

Several scholars (Nguyen et al., 2020; Mihai et al., 2017; Nam and Park, 2019) suggest that leadership style positively impacts EP. They indicate that effective leadership styles can lead to improved performance outcomes.

Furthermore, Ogbonna and Harris (2000) emphasize the combined influence of leadership style and OC on EP, indicating that a good leadership style, accompanied by a supportive OC, can enhance EP.

Based on these theoretical implications, we developed the second research hypothesis of this study:

H2: The leader's transformational leadership (TL) behavior positively influences employee performance (EP).

The literature suggests that OC shapes performance outcomes (Paais and Pattiruhu, 2020). A positive and adaptive culture, which encourages creativity and innovation, can favor overall performance. In their research, Schein (2010) found that OC impacts the level of authority and the decision-making process within an organization. It highlights the significance of measuring the organization's ability to innovate and adapt to cultural changes and how it affects performance (Diana et al., 2021). Ferine et al. (2021) emphasize the role of OC in encouraging calculated risk-taking behaviors, innovation, and creativity. The extent to which employees are

encouraged to take innovative risks is determined by the prevailing OC. A culture that promotes and supports innovation can positively affect EP. Paais and Pattiruhu (2020) found that the values, beliefs, and practices embedded in the OC can shape employee behavior and performance.

Based on these theoretical implications, we developed the second research hypothesis of this study:

H3: Organizational Culture (OC) positively influences employee performance (EP).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to investigate the relationship between three variables: Transformational Leadership (TL), Organizational Culture (OC), and Employee Performance (EP). Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the relationship between TL, OC, and EP.

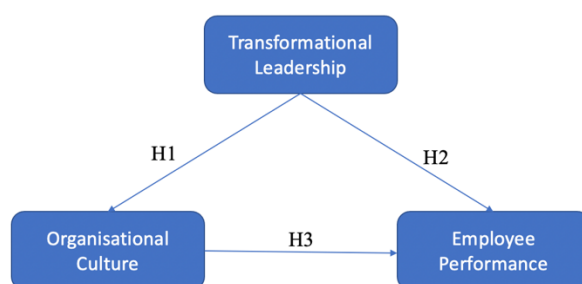


Figure 1. Theoretical research model

Source: authors' contributions

As we can see from Figure 1, the three variables were organized into three research hypotheses, which were tested using a survey with 31 5-point Likert scale items: 12 items were related to TS and were adapted from the short form of the Multi Factor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass and Avolio, 1993) 5 items were related to OC and were drawn from Janz (1987) organizational culture survey and finally, seven items related to EP which were adapted from Robbins (2006) and MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012), being related to concepts such as work quality and efficiency, punctuality, performance evaluation, and commitment. The last seven items of the survey were control variables related to the respondent's position in the organization, their organization's industry, their age, gender, length of service, contract duration, and their working hours. The survey underwent a rigorous pre-testing phase to identify and eliminate any ambiguous or double-barreled questions, following the guidelines set forth by MacKenzie and Podsakoff (2012). All three constructs exhibited internal consistency, as indicated by Cronbach's Alpha coefficients exceeding 0.800 (OC – 0.829, TS – 0.789, EP – 0.752).

The data was gathered between January and April 2023, the targeted respondents being staff with operational roles from hospitality and other related industries from southern Romania (Oltenia region: Dolj, Gorj, Vâlcea, and Mehedinți counties). The survey was sent to 223 hospitality employees, out of which we managed to register 192 valid responses, which were subjected to examination through the lens of Armstrong and Overton's (1977) theory of non-response bias, thereby resulting in the selection of 181 responses for subsequent analysis and evaluation.

The sample structure of this study incorporates seven control variables: gender, age group, type of organization, position, length of service, contract duration, and working hours. Concerning gender, 51% of the respondents were male, while 49% were female. In terms of age group, 35% fell within the 18-29 years range, 30% were between 30 and 39 years old, 23% were between 40 and 49 years old, 8% were between 50 and 59 years old, and 4% were over 60 years old. The distribution of respondents by type of organization was as follows: hotels, hostels, and other accommodation

businesses – 30%; restaurants, clubs, bars, or coffee shops – 24%; tourism agencies – 17%; travel companies – 13%; entertainment – 9%, airlines – 5% and other hospitality-related services – 2%. Regarding positions, 55% were contact personnel/front office, 26% were back-office employees, and 19% were support staff. Regarding the length of service, 22% had worked for less than a year, 35% between 1 and 3 years, 25% between 3 and 5 years, 11% between 5 and 10 years, and 7% had worked for more than ten years in their current organization. Regarding contract duration, 58% had indefinite contracts, and 42% had fixed-term ones. Finally, regarding working hours, 61% were employed full-time (8 hours per day, five days per week), while 39% worked part-time (less than 8 hours per day, five days per week).

The data analysis was performed utilizing the PLS-SEM (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling) function within SmartPLS 4.0 software, which is recommended by Hair et al. (2022), who advocate for its applicability due to its incorporation of both formative and reflective measurements as well as its suitability for studies involving multiple variables and causal relationships. Both indicators, Excess Kurtosis (ranging from -1,311 to 0,057) and Skewness (ranging from -0,998 to -0,197), show a symmetrical distribution.

The covariance matrix reveals robust correlations among the three variables, with all values surpassing the accepted threshold of 0.500 (Hair et al., 2022). The correlations range from 0.789 (TS-OC) to 0.934 (EP-OC). Furthermore, examining collinearity among the variables indicated a low risk of multi-collinearity for each item, as evidenced by Variance Inflation Factor values below the minimum accepted threshold of 5.0.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The initial step in analyzing the research results involved testing the model and examining the outer loadings of the items, and it was found that each item exhibited significant outer loadings, all surpassing the threshold of 0.70. The smallest loading (0.707) was observed for TL2 ("My supervisor is constantly involving me in the decision-making process"), while the largest loading (0.953) was observed for EP6 ("How often do you exceed your KPIs?").

Furthermore, the composite reliability (CR) of each variable was evaluated. The obtained CR values were as follows: 0.901 for OC, 0.912 for (TS) and 0.931 for (EP) These values demonstrate the internal reliability of the variables, in line with the criteria set by Hair et al. (2022).

Convergent validity was also assessed by examining whether the average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded the threshold of 0.5. The AVE values ranged from 0.645 for Transformational Leadership to 0.845 for Employee Performance, indicating satisfactory convergent validity.

Finally, the analysis considered the SRMR (Standardized Root Mean Square Residual), which yielded a value of 0.079, and the NFI (variance inflation factors), which displayed a value of 0.934. These results confirm the validity of the three-variable model and indicate the absence of collinearity issues among them.

To assess the validity of our hypothesis, we employed a bootstrapping methodology, employing 500 resamples. Furthermore, we applied a bias-corrected confidence interval of 95% to account for any potential biases. To evaluate the statistical significance, we conducted a two-tailed test.

Table 1. Hypothesis testing

HYPOTHESES	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Standard Dev.	T Statistics	P Values	Results
H1: TL → OC	0.492	0.512	0.045	6.891	0.002	Supported
H2: TL → EP	0.345	0.367	0.051	7.002	0.001	Supported
H3: OC → EP	0.415	0.234	0.056	6.458	0.003	Supported

Table 1 shows us that all three hypotheses have been validated, which means that these findings support our assumptions that the leader's TL behavior is influencing OC and EP while OC is influencing the EP.

The validity of our first hypothesis implies a strong and direct correlation between TL and OC, which is in line with several studies, such as Bass and Avolio (1993), which conducted a study that revealed that the formation of an organization's culture is attributed to its leaders, and in turn, culture plays a significant role in shaping the development of leadership within the organization. Muzondiwa et al. (2022) state that influential leaders must pay close attention to the prevailing beliefs, values, and assumptions that constitute the organizational culture. Bass and Avolio (1993) and Ferine et al. (2021) are other studies confirming the relationship between these two constructs. A very interesting result has been achieved by Omira (2015), whose study found a strong correlation between leadership and culture but with a negative coefficient, which implies that leadership can negatively influence culture and the other way around. Muzondiwa et al. (2022, p.8), commenting on Omira's (2015) surprising result, states that "There are some cultures that make it very difficult for leaders to be effective." Despite this myriad of studies that have achieved similar results to our findings, there are a few researchers who did not manage to prove a robust and direct relationship between TL and OC, such as Chen et al. (2014), Kim and Beehr (2020) and Tourish and Pinnington (2002) who found TL alone did not determine the OC, suggesting that other factors and contextual variables may influence the culture as well, such as organizational structure, contextual elements, employee empowerment or job satisfaction.

This correlation between transformational leadership and organizational culture can have several practical implications, such as that organizations should actively invest in developing and promoting transformational leaders to foster a culture that aligns with the company's goals and values. When transformational leadership leads to a culture of employee empowerment, growth, and fulfillment, the organization becomes an appealing place for prospective employees. Additionally, employees are more likely to stay in an environment where they feel valued and supported.

H2's validity implies that the leader's TL behavior directly and positively influences EP, which aligns with research published by Chen et al. (2014) and Muzondiwa et al. (2022). Moreover, our findings are supported by Nam and Park (2019), who found that TL has a positive and direct impact on EP, mediated by the influence of motivation, a variable not included in our study. Their research suggests that transformational leaders instill confidence in employees, fostering a belief in their ability to achieve desired outcomes.

Yukl (2002) states that it is expected that the manager's leadership behavior will have a significant influence on the individual and collective activities which lead to achieving personal or organizational goals, which is in line with Ferine et al. (2021), which also acknowledge leadership as a critical determinant for EP. While there is an almost universal consensus regarding the relationship between leadership and employee performance, studies that discuss which leadership styles influence performance have found somewhat contradicting results. Most scholars (Ferine et al., 2021; Muzondiwa et al., 2022; Nam and Park, 2019) agree that the most suitable style for improving employee performance is transformational leadership, which supports our findings, Saleem et al. (2019) found that while there is a moderate positive relationship between TL and EP, the transactional leadership style has a much more significant influence on EP.

On the other hand, Chen et al. (2014) and Dewi et al. (2022) found a weak or non-significant relationship between transformational leadership and objective measures of individual performance. They suggested that the impact of TL on EP may be mediated by other factors, such as motivation or job satisfaction, which were not included in our current research. At the same time, Schaubroeck et al. (2012) found that while TL was positively related to follower performance, the relationship was stronger for supervisor-rated performance than for objective performance measures.

In practice, transformational leaders create a work environment where employees feel valued and supported. This positive relationship between leaders and employees increases job satisfaction, leading to increased performance output. Moreover, when leaders model collaborative behavior, employees are more likely to work together effectively, share knowledge, and combine their strengths to achieve common goals. This synergy enhances overall team and organizational performance.

Our last hypothesis, **H3**, is related to the influence of OC on EP, and its validation is in line with research conducted by Nam and Park (2019), Harijanti et al. (2021), and Diana et al. (2021). A superior organizational culture can positively influence the performance of individuals and organizations. This assertion aligns with Ferine et al.'s (2021) perspective, emphasizing that organizational culture is a longstanding practice employed in work activities to bolster employee capabilities. Furthermore, Diana et al. (2021, p.550) found a relationship between all three variables used in our study, stating that "organizational culture mediates the democratic leadership influence on employee performance." Paais and Pattiruhu (2020) suggest that employees' level of innovation and risk-taking is determined by the extent to which they are encouraged to take innovative risks, and that implies that a supportive and encouraging organizational culture fosters employee performance by promoting a climate that values innovation and allows for calculated risks.

There are a few studies that tend to contradict the assumption that the OC has a direct and positive influence on the EP, such as Trice and Beyer (1993), Ashkansay et al. (2000), and Trivellas et al. (2021). Some scholars argued that the relationship between OC and EP is complex and context-dependent, with varying results across different industries and organizations. In contrast, others found that this relationship is mediated by other factors such as leadership style, job characteristics, and design or individual characteristics.

From a practical point of view, organizations with a positive culture that encourages creativity and risk-taking foster innovation. Employees in such cultures are more willing to experiment with new ideas and approaches, leading to the development of innovative products, services, and processes that can positively impact performance. At the same time, employees' attitudes and behaviors are directly linked to the customer experience. A positive organizational culture translates into employees who are more attentive, caring, and responsive to customer needs. Satisfied customers are more likely to become repeat customers and advocates for the organization.

Our findings are helpful for hospitality organizations since they should develop a positive OC that aligns with their goals and values to foster improved EP. Promoting teamwork, collaboration, innovation, and continuous learning enhances employee performance and organizational effectiveness. Leaders and managers play a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing the desired culture through communication, recognition, training, and performance management. At the same time, HR professionals could use our results to create leadership development programs and culture change initiatives. Investing in programs that train and promote transformational leadership behaviors can foster a positive and adaptive organizational culture.

Developing transformational leaders is a strategic approach for improving or reshaping existing cultures, as leaders can act as role models and catalysts for cultural change. Finally, organizations and their leaders seeking to enhance employee performance can benefit from our results in leadership development programs that cultivate transformational leadership behaviors. Organizations can foster a leadership culture that promotes employee performance by training leaders in these behaviors. Additionally, our findings aid in developing employee engagement and commitment, which are key performance indicators. Transformational leaders engage employees through individualized support, high expectations, and compelling vision, leading to improved performance.

3. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shed some light on the relationship between transformational leadership, organizational culture, and employee performance in the hospitality industry of southern Romania. During this research on a sample of 193 hospitality employees with operational roles, we tested and validated three hypotheses regarding the link between the three variables. Thus, in line with most of the research in this field, the leadership style (transformational, in our case) strongly and positively affects organizational culture and employee performance. In contrast, organizational culture strongly and positively influences employee performance.

The novelty aspect of our research consists of the fact that this is one of the first studies to tackle the correlation between transformational leadership, organizational culture, and employee performance in the context of the hospitality industry of southern Romania. Our results should prove helpful for hospitality managers and HR professionals in supporting them in developing a positive organizational culture that fosters creativity, innovation, commitment, and leadership development programs (Burlea-Schiopoiu, 2007).

The main limitation of our research is that we have used only three variables. According to the literature on this subject, motivation and job satisfaction have been proven to have significant effects on employees' performance or to be mediators between organizational culture, leadership style, and employee performance. At the same time, our study is limited because we have used only one leadership style (transformational). Future researchers should also study other leadership styles, such as transactional, laissez-faire, charismatic, democratic, paternalistic, or authentic, and their relationship to organizational culture, employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance.

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