

# Perception of Social Media Harm and Regulation in Egypt

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**Abstract:** Millions of Egyptians are increasingly depending on social media in their everyday lives. Although social media technology offered Egyptian citizens a free platform to learn, interact and engage with their surrounding world, it caused various forms of harms to vulnerable users, especially females. Social media harms were associated with increasing phenomena of rising numbers of various cybercrimes in Egypt, which lead to the enactment of Anti-cybercrime laws and policies to regulate social media. This exploratory study aimed at discovering the perception of Egyptian female university students of social media harms and their opinion regarding social media regulation solutions. The results indicated that although all 188 participants were exposed to harmful content on social media, they held a neutral mindset regarding social media and most participants believed that all forms of social media regulation will be effective in reducing social media harms.

**Keywords:** social media, harm, regulation, Egypt

## 1. Introduction

Social media affects the lives of many people around the globe in an elusive, ubiquitous, and intrusive manner that attracts scholarly attention. Egypt shares with the world the global positive and negative effects of social media in addition to specific features that are unique to the Egyptian society and cultural environment. With a population of over 111 million Egyptians and over 80 million internet users in Egypt, social media has become a very crucial variable in Egyptians' daily lives. The social media users reached 46.25 million users in the first quarter of 2023, which equals 41.4% of Egypt's total population [1].

SM exposure, consumption, uses and gratification patterns are unique in every country according to a complex system of variables and is considered both an input and an output in that system. The power and benefits of SM in Egypt were evident on various political, social, educational, and economic levels in the past twenty years. Since the proven role of social media in mobilizing public opinion of millions of Egyptian protestors in the Arab spring events in 2011 that toppled the former Mubarak regime, increasing numbers of Egyptians have become profoundly dependent on social media [2]. Social media is the Egyptians' free channel for opinion expression, social and political advocacy [2], source of updated news, main media of entertainment, education and even commercial operations and economic empowerment [3]. However, just as there were abundant advantages of SM use in Egypt, it also caused several harmful phenomena to the Egyptian individuals and society at large.

Social media harm can be defined as 'any negative outcome associated with social media use, including psychological, social, physical, and financial harms' [4]. Psychological harm includes increased anxiety and depression, fear of missing out (FOMO), addiction, and self-harm. Social harms like cyberbullying, social isolation, hate-speech, defamation, and damage to relationships. Financial harm associated to social media includes identity theft, frauds, cyber extortion,

or impulsive purchases [4]. Some of these harms are punishable by laws as cybercrimes. INTERPOL defines cybercrime as "criminal activity where computers or network-connected devices are used as the tool or the target of the crime" [5].

According to the Egyptian Ministry of Interior's annual report, cybercrime<sup>1</sup> incidents in Egypt have been on the rise in recent years. In 2021, there were 85,155 reported cybercrime cases, representing a 33% increase from 2020 [6]. El-Molla (2022) stated that cybercrime in Egypt increased by 190% from 2012 until 2017, which caused Egypt to enact the Anti-Cybercrime law in 2018, data protection law and the Cyber security national strategy [7].

This chapter aims at exploring the perception of female Egyptian university students of social media harms and regulation solutions through a quantitative survey on a sample of fourth year private university students in Egypt. The review of literature will survey the studies and cases that display the forms and nature of social media harm in Egypt. The theoretical framework of this study will apply the notions of the Social Media Mindset Theory (SMMT) to the questionnaire directed to the research sample to answer the main research questions, which are: How do the Egyptian university female students perceive social media harm? How do they perceive regulation of social media? The review of literature has two axes; the studies in Egypt highlighting social media harms and the legal environment that governs social media regulation in Egypt.

<sup>1</sup> Financial fraud: This includes online scams, phishing attacks, and identity theft. Cyberbullying: This includes harassment, threats, and intimidation through electronic means. Cyber extortion: This involves threatening to release sensitive information or damage a victim's reputation unless a ransom is paid. Cyber espionage: This involves stealing sensitive information for political or economic gain.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1. Social media harm in Egypt

A range of Egyptian studies discussed social media harm on Egyptian students from various aspects. Psychological harms were evident in higher levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and lower levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction were associated with increasing social media use among university students in Egypt [8]. A study on 2,000 upper-Egyptian university students revealed that social media use caused the predominance of delusions over reality, encouragement of sinful behavior and increase of crime rates, promotion of Western lifestyle and devious behavior as well as destruction of private life leading to tarnished reputation of people, libel, and slander cases [9]. A study on Egyptian high school students indicated that females were more vulnerable to cyberbullying, and public-school students were more likely to be harassed than international and private school students [10].

Studies about social media harms in Arab countries concluded that for the youth of these conservative, unfree societies, social media facilitates free communication between special virtual communities with similar interests and opinions. Nevertheless, detected social media addiction led to many complications, like increasing isolation and depression, decreasing actual communication and engagement with the family members and the real friends, disruption of the traditional social patterns and values of Arab Islamic societies, adoption of aberrant behavior, increasing infidelity and divorce cases [11] as well as increasing number of suicide cases in the past few years, in which social media played a significant role.

Egypt has been ranked the first Arab country in the number of suicide cases in the past two decades. According to world statistics, 7881 people committed suicide in Egypt last year. Scholars declare social and economic pressures to be the first cause of suicide of males in Egypt, while cyberbullying and online defamation is acknowledged to be the prime cause of suicide of females in Egypt as cyberbullying and slander can expose victims to psychological pressures and loss of self-confidence, causing them to commit suicide to relieve such psychological fatigue [12]. Among the nationally covered cases was the case of Passant K., 17, who committed suicide after three men and two minors in her village used an application to place her face on a nude body and published those pictures online after they failed to blackmail her [13]. The disgrace for her and her family could not be undone, so she committed suicide, leaving a note that she was innocent while her family and society wronged her. Tanta Criminal court sentenced the five defendants to fifteen years in prison for three defendants and the other two to five years in prison. According to [13] the judge adapted the case of cyber extortion to other crimes to sentence the defendants to a deterrent punishment. Haidy S., 18, killed herself when her ex-fiancé published private pictures of her online to slander her reputation to force her to marry him [14].

Mostafa (2016) [15] confirms a relationship between social media addiction and destruction of the social values

of society, like religious values, honoring marriage relationships, chivalry, faithfulness, and honesty. Sociologists revealed that a sizable percentage of Egyptian male users frequently access sexual and porn sites, use social media to have out-of-marriage relationships and cheat on their partners, leading to increasing infidelity and growing percentage of divorce cases.

Criminology experts in Egypt declare social media to be a prime cause of increasing violence and crimes in Egypt in the past few years, replacing films and television drama that were seen to cause increasing number of crimes in the Egyptian society in the twenty-first century [16]. Social media in Egypt allowed the viral broadcasting of videos of actual murder crimes that were committed in Egypt's crowded streets. Trending murder crimes' videos on social media in Egypt caused a very alarming phenomenon of a wave of snowballing increase of street crimes and killings that gave tremendous attention and fame to the main suspects. A video on YouTube of a man slaughtering another in the street in 2021 started this wave, which was followed by a series of four love crimes in 2022, of which video footage circulated on social media, showing Egyptian men killing women in public areas [16].

Discussions on social media in Egypt reflect little tolerance of the others, stereotyping of certain minorities and cyber bullying, which have many psychological and social effects and frequently extended to offline violent conflicts and fatal incidents. A study compared the prevalence of cyberbullying among Egyptian adolescents from urban and rural areas and concluded that cyberbullying was prevalent among both urban and rural adolescents, with higher rates among females and those who spent more time on social media [17].

Examples of social media harm and role of hate speech in igniting offline violent conflicts in Egypt are manifest in the following cases that received national news coverage. In 2011 in a popular district in Cairo, thirteen Muslims and Christians were killed and seventy-five injured in bloody conflicts because of social media posts claiming that a Christian woman converted to Islam and was held captive in one of the churches [18]. The sports cyber hate speech of fanatic fans of rival football teams in Egypt caused offline stadium clashes that led to the killing of seventy-two fans in a football match in 2012, compelling the government to prohibit fans from attending local matches for six years [19]. In 2015 a Christian man from a village in Upper Egypt published on social media sarcastic posts about Prophet Mohammed, which caused the Muslim villagers to attack his family's house and it escalated into a major sectarian strife incident between Muslims and Christians [20]. In May 2022 in Aswan city in Upper Egypt, a street quarrel between Egyptians and Sudanese turned into a wide-spread online hate campaign against all Sudanese refugees in Egypt (#Sudanese\_out\_of\_Aswan) [21]. A vicious circle existed where increasing insulting social media comments from Egyptians against refugees led to violent offline quarrels and attacks on Black refugees.

The growing risks and harms of social media intensified the calls for the governmental interference to control, regulate and censor social media to curb its negative impact on individuals and society. Although cybercrimes are only one small piece of the bigger puzzle of social media harm, it is the only quantifiable, measurable fragment of the phenomena of social media harm. The Egyptian government adopted several measures to combat cybercrime like establishing specialized cybercrime units associated with Public Prosecution Office and within the Ministry of Interior, namely 'the General Department of Information Technology'. In 2014 the cabinet formed the Higher Council for Cyber Security that developed the Cyber security national strategy [22]. In addition to that the parliament enacted Egypt's first Anti-cybercrime law in 2018 (No. 175/2018) [7]. The author will provide a survey of the regulation environment of social media in Egypt.

## 2.2 Social media regulation and control in Egypt

**The legal framework of SM regulation** has evolved in Egypt in the past few years to address the growing use of Internet, the correlated accumulative cybercrime rates, the increasing risks of the free digital sphere on individual users, the Egyptian society and even the legitimacy of the regime. The formal methods of regulating the Internet and social media in Egypt are government regulation of the telecommunication industry, legislations, and general laws, while the informal methods of control are the state-imposed restrictions on the freedom of the Internet through use of troll armies, surveillance on users' data and content and shutting down Internet services and news sites [23].

The government controls the Internet infrastructure in Egypt through the National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA) and the Supreme Council for Media Regulation (SCMR) [24]. The state domination of this sector facilitated the development of Internet infrastructure on a national level, especially in schools and universities during COVID-19 pandemic, increased the penetration of the Internet to reach 72% in 2023 [1], and eased the process of presence of global networks and telecommunication companies in Egypt, but this monopoly had its negative effects on the freedom of the Internet in Egypt based on obstacles to access, limits on content and violation of user rights.

The oldest Internet and social media regulating laws in Egypt is the Communication Regulation Law No. 10, 2003, which included articles related to the use of the Internet and creation of accounts and websites [22]. **The Counter Terrorism Law No. 94, 2015**, provides punishments for publishing false information about terrorist attacks, as well as five-year imprisonment for posting content that may encourage or promote for terrorist activities. The act gives the authorities the power to block any website and close any account that contains a threat to the 'national security' [22]. Reports indicate that Egyptian authorities blocked sixteen websites that belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, after it was declared a terrorist movement [25].

Article 7 of the Anti-Cybercrimes Law No 175, 2018 [26], permits the government to order service providing

companies to block websites according to court decision or NTRA notification with the claim of including content that is 'threatening the national security, social peace or national economy'. Service providers are also obliged to store users' data and provide it to the authorities upon request, otherwise these companies may be punished by imprisonment and fines ranging from LE200 thousand and one million pounds. As for the users, there are twenty-three cybercrimes punishable under this law and the punishments are detentions [26]. Disruptions to Facebook Messenger, Twitter, Skype, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and other news sites were reported during 2019 as the articles of the law were manipulated to tighten the government control over online journalism as it authorized the SCMR to order blocking of news sites believed to be harmful to national security [23]. The same law granted SCMR the licensing of new digital news sites through a set of complex procedures that present more obstacles than facilitations to the existence of diverse news sites in Egypt. Criminal penalties, harassment, and surveillance have created high levels of self-censorship among Egyptian Internet users, independent media channels and government critics [23].

A harsh informal method of controlling the Internet and social media in Egypt was the practice of the former Mubarak regime to completely shutdown of the Internet during the Arab spring events in 2011 to block the only free means of communication among the protestors [27].

The Troll armies and bots are forms of informal control practiced by the Egyptian intelligence authorities over internet users' activities. Troll armies and AI bots continuously monitor all posts on SM platforms through expensive French spying software to detect opposing material and report it to the platform administration to be removed or the account closed [28].

The review of literature highlighted the Egyptian studies that focused on social media harm and the psychological and social negative consequences of social media use, which called for nation-wide demands for a stricter regulation of social media in Egypt. The survey of the political and legal environment of the Internet and social media regulatory policies and laws in Egypt shed light on the purpose of this research, which is to explore how the female university students in Egypt perceive social media harm and their opinion regarding the social media regulation options.

## 3. Methodology and Conceptual Framework

This study aims at exploring the perception of Egyptian female students of social media harm and means of regulation by employing the social media mindset theory (SMMT) through a primary survey to find out how a segment of Egyptian university students perceive social media harm and regulation scenarios. SMMT segments users of social media to agentic and passive. People with an agentic social media mindset believe that they have control over how they use social media and value its benefits for their engaging activities, while passive social media mindset people focus on the substantial risk and harms of using

social media because of the algorithms [29]. SMMT was used in studies about the relationship between users' mindset and their psychological well-being [29] and the effect of mindset on social comparison [30].

This primary study aimed to assess the female students' perception of social media harm and regulation methods to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the Egyptian university female students perceive social media harm?

RQ2: How do the Egyptian university female students perceive regulation of social media?

The researcher prepared an online survey containing closed-ended questions plus one open-ended question (Do you think social media should be more regulated? Why or why not?). The researcher used this question to allow participants to express their perceptions of harm and regulation in a free manner. The survey was disseminated among mass communication fourth-year female students at a private university that hosts students from high socio-economic classes in Egypt. This available sample was targeted because of the fourth-year female students' age (above 20) and accumulated knowledge that qualified them to have a more critical view of social media effects than younger students. The population to which the survey was disseminated was 256 male and female students, but the researcher disqualified the male students' answers, as the survey was intended for females. The complete received responses were  $n=188$ . The data was collected during October 2023 and was analyzed using google sheets, except for the open-ended question that was coded and analyzed by three research assistants. Emergent coding was used by one researcher grouping the answers into categories of data with common elements. Then the coding was assessed by the two other research assistants before the team members' agreement on the final codes. Quotes from participants were selected and reported to reflect the respondents' different perceptions of social media regulation in Egypt.

#### 4. Results.

RQ1: How do the Egyptian university female students perceive social media harm?

Students' perception of social media harm was evaluated on a 5-point linear scale. Most respondents (63.6%) were neutral in their assessment of social media harm, while (15.2%) perceived social media as harmful, and (12.1%) perceived it as beneficial. Only four respondents perceived social media as extremely beneficial, and four respondents named it extremely harmful. With application to the SMMT, most responses (63.6%) reflect a neutral mindset regarding the perception of social media, neither agentic (beneficial) nor harmful (passive). A small percentage (15%) showed a positive perception of social media, while (18%) of the sample had a determined passive perception of social media. In response to a question regarding the frequency of exposure to harmful content on social media, ( $n=80$ , 42%) of respondents chose sometimes, while ( $n=76$ , 40%) said often, and (18%) stated always. When the respondents were asked to identify types of harmful content they are mostly exposed to, 72.3% named hate speech, both cyberbullying and

violence were selected by 68% of respondents, and 59% mentioned harassment and misinformation. Cyber blackmail was selected by forty respondents ( $n=40$ , 21%) as one of the common types of social media harm they are exposed to. (Figure 1).

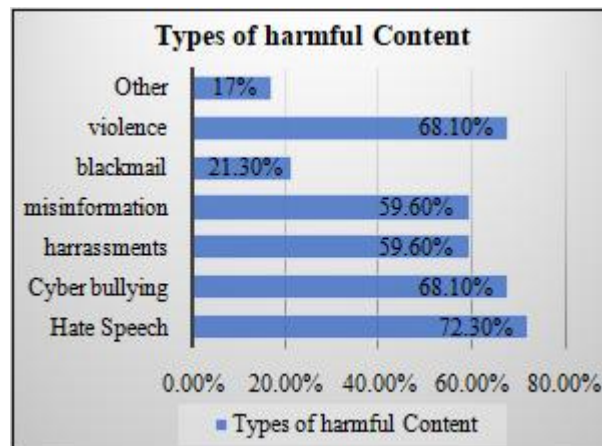


Figure 1: Types of Harmful content on social media

RQ2: How do the Egyptian university female students perceive regulation of social media?

The respondents were asked about their preferred type of social media regulation, and they were provided with five options of regulation with a brief explanation of each. Most respondents ( $n=96$ , 51%) chose 'All of the above' option that combines self-regulation, government regulation, industry collaboration and user-education. While ( $n=36$ , 19.1%) respondents preferred self-regulation that will be imposed by users' reports to social media platforms and the latter's act accordingly, ( $n=28$ , 14.9%) respondents preferred governmental regulation through laws and policies. The user-education proposal, which attributes the regulation of social media to users only, received ( $n=16$ , 8.5%) responses. The responses to the question regarding the effectiveness of social media regulation in reducing the spread of harmful content, ( $n=96$ , 51.1%) confirmed the notion of regulation efficiency to reduce the spread of harmful content on social media. Only twenty-four students ( $n=24$ , 12.8%) rejected the statement, while sixty-eight students were neutral.

A follow-up question evaluating their belief about the relationship between regulation and restricting users' freedom of speech, results showed that ( $n = 88$ , 46.8%) respondents confirmed that regulation will impose restriction on freedom of speech, while 76 respondents said 'Maybe', and ( $n=24$ , 12.8%) respondents rejected the correlation between social media regulation and restriction on freedom of speech.

The coding of the students' responses to the open-ended question provided nine categories of reasons supporting the regulation of social media and three categories only for their reasons to reject social media regulation. Most frequently, students named cyber harassment and bullying ( $n=48$ ); bias of social media platforms ( $n=37$ ); misinformation ( $n=26$ ); harmful content and teaching immoral habits ( $n=18$ ); privacy violation and online violence ( $n=16$ ); hate speech and mental illnesses ( $n=10$ ) as the main reasons for supporting social media regulation (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Reasons for regulation/no regulation of social media\*

A) Reasons for regulation	Mentions
Harassment and cyberbullying	48
Bias of social media platforms	37
Misinformation	26
Harmful/indecent content	18
Teaching immoral habits	18
Privacy violation	16
Online violence	16
Hate speech	10
Depression and mental illnesses	10

Reasons for no regulation	Mentions
Threat to freedom of speech	52
Private opinions and beliefs	21
Misuse of regulation by authorities	18

\*The total number of respondents in this table is greater than the number of the sample because eighty-two participants provided an answer that justified both reasons for regulation and reasons for no regulation as well as providing multiple reasons for both options in one single answer.

Most fourth-year students, who responded to the survey supported the notion of social media regulation and listed numerous harms of social media to individuals and society to defend their stance. The open-ended question permitted them to elaborate on the issue with their own version of pros and cons of social media regulation, as eighty-two respondents (43.6%) did not specify a definite attitude and highlighted the reasons for and against regulating social media, therefore they were counted towards both sections of table 1. One participant illustrated the harms of social media:

It has become a place where people show their worst parts that they tend to hide in real life. Unfortunately, social media has become the house for psychopaths, abusers, harassers, bullies, racists, child groomers, human traffickers, sexist people, those who misinform others intentionally, and a place where people enjoy spreading hate, violence, and prejudice. It has become a horrifying place, and all platforms share this unfortunately, and the algorithm only helps any user see more awful content whether you want to see it or not. Even adult content has become normalized and shared on there.

Many students supported the regulation of social media because they called it biased, polarized and responsible for misinformation. A student said:

Social media (such as what is happening now)<sup>2</sup> can be a medium for very biased and polarizing online discourse... It is evident that Twitter (X) right now is the only place for fair social media representation now since

<sup>2</sup> The time of the survey, October 2023, coincided with the Israeli and Palestinian violent conflicts. The Egyptian students are highly engaged on social media to express their support for the suffering people in Gaza and expose the Israeli military acts against civilian Palestinians. Algorithms of social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram blocked, removed, and censored user-generated content supporting the Palestinian issue.

it has no regulations to block pro-Palestinian content, unlike Instagram and Facebook.

The social media harms to vulnerable users are described by a participant:

Sadly, those who are immersed in there will end up upset with their lifestyle, their self-image shatters, and they end up being people-pleasers who fake their identity and life, become depressed once they delve deeper into this fake reality, or end up being another virtual monster who partakes in harming others... All platforms are becoming scarier and more vulgar every single day. Social media has unfortunately become a place that supports and praises all sorts of awful things, even killing.

Twelve students suggested self-regulation by social media platforms as their preferred type of regulation of social media, while four proposed social media literacy programs to educate the users to combat the harms of social media and only one named governmental regulation as the right form of social media regulation. The rest of the respondents did not specify a form of regulation of social media.

The coding of responses of the participants, who refused the notion of social media regulation, fit into three reasons only for their position. The majority (n=52) of students perceived regulation as a direct threat to freedom of speech, restriction on private opinions and beliefs (n=21) and may be misused by authorities (n=18). One participant stated:

Regulating social media would be a threat to free speech as it is the only way for individuals to express their opinions and ideas freely.

Another student highlighted the limited freedom of speech that they are already experiencing:

... nowadays there is almost no way to regulate social media properly without putting the so little freedom of speech we have left at stake, there is no guarantee that third parties will not take advantage of regulation and authorities to restrict access to certain info or push a certain narrative.

## 5. Discussion

This study conducted an exploratory survey of the perception of 188 Egyptian female university students of social media harm and the sample's perception of the type and efficiency of regulatory solutions. On the SMMT scale, which evaluates the respondents' mindset regarding social media, most respondents (over 60%) showed a neutral perception of social media, meaning that they neither hold an agentic stance about social media, nor a passive perception of its harms. The results indicated that the respondents who named social media as harmful (18%) exceeded those who believed in the benefits of social media (15%). Nevertheless, all participants identified harmful forms of social media content that they are exposed to with varying frequencies. The participants listed hate speech as the most type of harmful content. Then comes cyberbullying and violence in the second place, followed by harassment

and misinformation, and last came cyber blackmail as the form of harmful social media content. The results of this study confirm results of [31] who studied how young adults perceived social media harm, she concluded that cyberbullying and harassment were the most frequently depicted harmful types. Then comes violence, speech against marginalized groups and misinformation.

Half of the respondents in this study both believed in the efficiency of regulation in reducing harmful content and in the need to apply all forms of governmental, platforms and self-regulation options to achieve this purpose. Those participants listed reasons for regulation to be the alarming content of cyber harassment and bullying, bias of social media platforms, misinformation, harmful content and teaching immoral habits, privacy violation and online violence, hate speech and mental illnesses.

The other participants, who perceived the regulation of social media as inefficient in combating harmful content argued that regulation will impose restriction on freedom of expression, their private opinions and opens the door for manipulation by the authorities. A similar study of governance of social media harmful communication indicated that most participants preferred self-regulation of users through educational programs rather than prosecution and official regulation by the government, as it would require increased surveillance over users' content and would impose restrictions on the freedom of speech [32].

Applying the elements of SMMT, results showed that although most respondents had a neutral position regarding social media harms, most of them identified numerous forms of harm like violence, cyberbullying and hate speech and most respondents supported the regulation of social media and confirmed its effectiveness in reducing harm. Respondents with a positive perception towards social media rejected its regulation for the reason of limiting freedom of expression. Respondents with a passive perception of social media called for its regulation but chose self-regulatory forms and user-education solutions to combat social media harms in Egypt.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the type and size of the sample are not adequate to provide generalizations about the perception of social media harm and regulation options in Egypt. This convenient, small sample of 188 female B socioeconomic-class, mass communication students from one private university in Egypt, does not represent the Egyptian society at large. Second, the same sample excluded the male student community of the same private university, which is also a limitation, and the male community will presumably have a different mindset regarding social media harmful content and regulation options. Finally, the online survey method with the open-ended question facilitated the collection of significant participants' opinions, but it did not allow for follow-up questions or observation of deeper emotions. The researcher recommends conducting future qualitative research on Egyptian females from different socio-economic classes and educational levels to get more insights about their intimate experiences with social media

harms and how they dealt with them. Future research can also include various socio-economic classes, all genders, and from different urban and rural regions in Egypt. Research can also be conducted on the perception of regulation or no regulation of social media from different perspectives to push the theme to be discussed in formal circles and on social media agenda in the public sphere of Egyptian citizens.

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