

School Belongingness as a Predictor of Cyber-aggression among Boarding and Day Secondary School Students in Aba South LGA, Abia State

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Abstract

This study examined school belongingness as a predictor of cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area, Abia State. A correlational research design was adopted. The population comprised 4,890 Senior Secondary II (SS II) students in public secondary schools in Aba South LGA, from which a sample of 360 students (180 boarding and 180 day students) was selected using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using the researcher-developed School Belongingness and Cyber-aggression Questionnaire (SBCQ), which yielded a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.78. Mean and standard deviation answered the research questions, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation and independent samples t-test tested the hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed, among others, a moderately strong negative and statistically significant relationship existed between school belongingness and cyber-aggression ($r = -0.612, p < 0.05$), indicating that students with a stronger sense of school belongingness were less likely to engage in cyber-aggressive behaviours. The study concluded that school belongingness significantly predicts cyber-aggression among secondary school students. It was recommended that schools should promote supportive teacher–student relationships and inclusive school environments to strengthen students' sense of belonging and reduce cyber-aggressive behaviours.

Keywords: school belongingness, cyber-aggression, boarding students, day students, secondary school students

Introduction

School belongingness has increasingly been recognized as an important psychological construct in understanding students' behavioural and emotional development within the school environment. In contemporary educational settings, schools are expected not only to provide academic instruction but also to create environments where students feel accepted, valued, and emotionally connected. This sense of belonging plays a critical role

in shaping students' attitudes, motivation, and interpersonal behaviour, as it is strongly associated with students' engagement, emotional well-being, and social adjustment in school settings (Goodenow, 1993; Allen & Arslan, 2021).

School belongingness could represent a system of recognition, respect and acceptance of students within the school community. It reflects the emotional and psychological bond that students develop with their school environment, peers, and teachers. According to Osterman (2000), school belongingness is a fundamental need that affects students' participation, social relationships, and behavioural outcomes within the school setting. Similarly, Allen and Arslan (2021) described school belongingness as a key psychological construct that influences students' emotional adjustment, motivation, and engagement in school activities. This perception of inclusion has been associated with positive academic and behavioural outcomes, as students who feel a strong sense of belonging are more likely to engage positively in school activities and develop healthy peer relationships (Wang & Eccles, 2012a). Such feeling about the school has also been linked to involving in or coping with cyber bullying (Wright & Wachs, 2019). In this study, school belongingness is operationally defined as students' perceived level of acceptance, inclusion, and support within their school as measured by their responses to the School Belongingness Scale.

Bullying has been acknowledged as a major behavioural challenge in the school system (Modecki et al., 2014). This nuisance in the school system has also been taken to the cyber world (Patchin & Hinduja, 2020). The importance of school belongingness therefore becomes more evident when considered in relation to adolescent's behavioural development in an increasingly digitalized world. With the widespread use of social media and mobile technologies, students are exposed to both positive and negative online interactions, which significantly shape their social behaviour and emotional experiences (Zhao et al., 2023). One of the negative outcomes associated with digital engagement is cyber-aggression. Cyber-aggression refers to intentional harmful behaviour carried out through electronic means such as social media platforms, messaging applications, and online forums. In this study, cyber-aggression is operationally defined as students' self-reported engagement in behaviours such as sending insulting messages, spreading rumours online, or posting harmful content intended to embarrass or harm others. According to Kowalski et al. (2014), cyber-aggression represents a modern form of peer aggression that occurs through digital communication channels and can have serious psychological consequences for adolescents.

Cyber-aggression is increasingly becoming a concern among secondary school students due to its accessibility, anonymity, and rapid spread. Unlike traditional forms of aggression, cyber-aggression can occur beyond school boundaries and at any time, making it more difficult to control. Hinduja and Patchin (2020) noted that adolescents involved in cyber-aggressive behaviours often experience emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and poor social adjustment. The school environment may play a significant role in shaping students' involvement in such behaviours. Students who feel a strong sense of belongingness in school are more likely to develop positive social relationships, emotional stability, and self-regulation. Conversely, students with low school belongingness may feel isolated, disconnected, or unsupported, which may increase their likelihood of engaging in maladaptive behaviours, including cyber-aggression (Wang & Eccles, 2012b).

In secondary school education, students are generally categorized into boarding and day school systems. Boarding students reside within the school environment, while day students commute from home daily. These differences in school experience may influence students' sense of belongingness and behavioural patterns. Eccles and Roeser (2020) observed that students who spend more structured time in school environments may develop stronger school attachment due to increased interaction with peers and teachers. However, differences in family support, peer influence, and school exposure may result in varying behavioural outcomes between boarding and day students.

Despite growing research interest in adolescent behaviour and school belongingness, findings remain inconsistent regarding the extent to which school belongingness influences cyber-aggression. Furthermore, most existing studies have been conducted outside the Nigerian context, with limited empirical evidence focusing on secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State. This creates a contextual and empirical gap that necessitates further investigation. It is against this background that this study examines school belongingness as a predictor of cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South LGA of Abia State.

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, secondary school students have increasingly become active users of social media and digital communication platforms. While these technologies provide opportunities for learning and social interaction, they have also contributed to the rise of negative online behaviours such as cyber-aggression. Cyber-aggression among

adolescents is now recognized as a serious behavioural concern because it involves the use of digital tools to insult, harass, threaten, or humiliate others, often leading to emotional distress, psychological instability, and poor peer relationships. Despite efforts by schools to promote positive behaviour, cases of online aggression among students continue to emerge, suggesting that some underlying school-related factors may be influencing students' conduct in digital spaces.

One factor that has been identified as important in students' behavioural adjustment is school belongingness. School belongingness reflects the extent to which students feel accepted, valued, and supported within their school environment. When students experience a strong sense of belonging, they are more likely to develop positive relationships, emotional stability, and self-regulation. However, when students feel disconnected or excluded from the school community, they may experience loneliness, frustration, or disengagement, which can manifest in maladaptive behaviours, including aggression directed at peers online. Despite this understanding, there is limited empirical clarity on how school belongingness specifically influences cyber-aggression among secondary school students, particularly in the Nigerian context.

Furthermore, in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State, secondary school students are exposed to varying school environments, including boarding and day school systems, which may differently shape their sense of belongingness and behavioural outcomes. However, there is a paucity of empirical studies that have examined whether school belongingness can significantly predict cyber-aggression among these categories of students. This gap in literature creates uncertainty for educators and policymakers seeking to design effective behavioural interventions. It is against this background that this study investigates school belongingness as a predictor of cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South LGA of Abia State.

Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the level of school belongingness among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South LGA of Abia State?
2. What is the level of cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South LGA of Abia State?
3. What is the relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South LGA of Abia State?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 level of significance:

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the level of school belongingness between boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South LGA of Abia State.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the level of cyber-aggression between boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South LGA of Abia State.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South LGA of Abia State.

Methodology

This study adopted a correlational research design. A correlational research design is appropriate because it enables the researcher to determine the nature and extent of the relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students without manipulating the variables under investigation. The design is also suitable because it allows the researcher to determine whether school belongingness predicts cyber-aggression, which is consistent with the purpose of the study.

The study was conducted in Aba South Local Government Area (LGA) of Abia State, Nigeria. Aba South is one of the seventeen Local Government Areas in Abia State and is predominantly urban, with a high concentration of public and private educational institutions. The Local Government Area comprises several public secondary schools, including both boarding and day schools, with students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The availability of these categories of schools makes the area suitable for investigating school belongingness and cyber-aggression among secondary school students.

The population of the study comprised 4,890 Senior Secondary II (SS II) students in public secondary schools in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State. The population consisted of both male and female students enrolled during the 2025/2026 academic session. The population figure was obtained from the Secondary Education Management Board (SEMB), Abia State. SS II students were considered appropriate for the study because they have adequate exposure to the school environment and are active users of digital technologies, making them capable of providing reliable information on school belongingness and cyber-aggression.

A sample of 360 students, comprising 180 boarding students and 180 day students, was selected for the study using a multistage sampling technique. At the first stage, all public secondary schools in Aba South Local Government Area were stratified into boarding and day schools. At the second stage, simple random sampling technique was employed to select the required number of schools from each stratum. At the third stage, proportionate sampling technique was used to allocate the sample to the selected schools based on the population of SS II students in each school. Finally, simple random sampling technique was used to select the required number of respondents from each selected school.

Data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "School Belongingness and Cyber-aggression Questionnaire (SBCQ)." The questionnaire consisted of two sections, namely: Sections A and B. Section A elicited information on the respondents' demographic characteristics such as school type and gender. Section B contained items designed to measure the two major variables of the study: school belongingness and cyber-aggression. The questionnaire items were developed to reflect students' perceptions of their sense of belonging within the school environment and their involvement in cyberaggressive behaviours. The instrument was structured on a four-point Likert rating scale as follows: Strongly Agree (SA) – 4 points, Agree (A) – 3 points, Disagree (D) – 2 points and Strongly Disagree (SD) – 1 point.

The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by three experts: one expert in Educational Psychology, one expert in Guidance and Counselling, and one expert in Measurement and Evaluation. The experts examined the instrument with respect to the relevance, clarity, adequacy, and appropriateness of the items in addressing the objectives, research questions, and hypotheses of the study. Their observations and suggestions were carefully incorporated into the final version of the instrument before administration. The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha reliability technique. A pilot study was conducted using 30 SS II students drawn from public secondary schools outside the study area but possessing characteristics similar to those of the target population. Data obtained from the pilot study were analyzed using Cronbach Alpha, which yielded an overall reliability coefficient of 0.78. The coefficient was considered satisfactory, indicating that the instrument possessed adequate internal consistency and was therefore suitable for data collection.

The researcher personally administered the questionnaire with the assistance of three trained research assistants, who were adequately briefed on the objectives and procedures

of the study. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed directly to the respondents during school hours and were retrieved immediately after completion wherever possible. In situations where immediate retrieval was not feasible, arrangements were made for collection within the shortest possible time. This procedure ensured a high return rate and minimized the possibility of loss of the research instrument.

Data collected were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer research questions 1 and 2, while Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to answer research question 3, which examined the relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression. Independent samples *t*-test was used to test hypotheses 1 and 2, which examined the differences in school belongingness and cyber-aggression between boarding and day secondary school students. Hypothesis 3 was tested using the significance of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation coefficient. All hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance. With respect to deciding on the research questions, a mean score of 2.50 was used as the criterion mean score. This implies that mean scores of 2.50 and above implied high level, while mean scores below 2.50 were interpreted as low level.

Presentation of results

Research question 1: What is the level of school belongingness among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State?

Table 1: Mean ratings on the level of school belongingness among boarding and day secondary school students

S/N	School Belongingness Items	Boarding Students (N = 180) $\bar{x}$	SD ₁	Day Students (N = 180) $\bar{x}$	SD ₂	Overall Mean	Overall SD	Decision
1	I feel accepted by other students in my school.	3.24	0.71	3.18	0.74	3.21	0.73	High Level
2	I feel respected by my teachers.	3.08	0.76	3.02	0.78	3.05	0.77	High Level
3	I enjoy participating in school activities.	2.94	0.82	2.88	0.81	2.91	0.82	High Level

4	I feel safe whenever I am in school.	3.11	0.75	3.05	0.77	3.08	0.76	High Level
5	Students in my school support one another.	2.87	0.84	2.80	0.86	2.84	0.85	High Level
6	I am proud to belong to my school.	3.15	0.73	3.09	0.76	3.12	0.75	High Level
7	I have good relationships with my classmates.	3.02	0.79	2.96	0.81	2.99	0.80	High Level
8	I feel like an important member of my school community.	3.06	0.77	2.99	0.80	3.03	0.79	High Level
Cluster Mean		3.06	0.77	3.00	0.79	3.03	0.78	High Level

Table 1 shows that the cluster mean for boarding students was 3.06 with a standard deviation of 0.77, while day students recorded a cluster mean of 3.00 with a standard deviation of 0.79. The overall cluster mean of 3.03 is above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that the level of school belongingness among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State is high. The standard deviation scores, which ranged from 0.71 to 0.86, indicate that the responses of the students were relatively homogeneous, suggesting a reasonable level of agreement among respondents regarding their sense of belonging in school.

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the level of school belongingness between boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State.

Table 2: Independent samples t-test on the level of school belongingness among boarding and day secondary school students

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	p-value	Decision
Boarding students	180	3.06	0.77				
Day students	180	3.00	0.79	358	0.73	0.466	Not significant

Table 2 indicates that boarding students obtained a mean score of 3.06 (SD = 0.77), while day students obtained a mean score of 3.00 (SD = 0.79). The calculated t-value of 0.73 with a corresponding p-value of 0.466 is greater than the 0.05 level of significance. Since the p-value (0.466) is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected. This implies that there is no statistically significant difference in the level of school belongingness between boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State.

Research question 2: What is the level of cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State?

Table 3: Mean ratings on the level of cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students

S/ N	Cyber- aggression Items	Boarding Students (N = 180) $\bar{x}$	SD ₁	Day Students (N = 180) $\bar{x}$	SD ₂	Overall Mean	Overall SD	Decisio n
1	Students use social media to insult or embarrass others.	2.41	0.83	2.47	0.81	2.44	0.82	Low Level
2	Students spread false information about others online.	2.36	0.80	2.44	0.84	2.40	0.82	Low Level
3	Students send threatening or abusive online messages.	2.18	0.79	2.25	0.82	2.22	0.81	Low Level
4	Students intentionally exclude others from online groups.	2.39	0.85	2.43	0.84	2.41	0.85	Low Level

5	Students create fake accounts to ridicule others.	2.11	0.78	2.18	0.80	2.15	0.79	Low Level
6	Students post embarrassing pictures or videos of classmates without permission.	2.30	0.82	2.36	0.85	2.33	0.84	Low Level
7	Students make offensive comments about others online.	2.43	0.80	2.49	0.83	2.46	0.82	Low Level
8	Cyberbullying negatively affects students' relationships in school.	2.51	0.81	2.56	0.82	2.54	0.82	High Level
		2.34	0.81	2.40	0.83	2.37	0.82	Low Level

Table 3 reveals that boarding students recorded a cluster mean of 2.34 with a standard deviation of 0.81, while day students obtained a cluster mean of 2.40 with a standard deviation of 0.83. The overall cluster mean of 2.37 is below the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating that the level of cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State is low. The item mean scores ranged from 2.15 to 2.54. Seven out of the eight items were rated below the criterion mean, suggesting that most forms of cyber-aggressive behaviour were not commonly exhibited among the students. However, item 8, which examined the negative effect of cyberbullying on students' relationships, recorded a mean above the criterion value, indicating that respondents recognized the harmful consequences of cyber-aggression on interpersonal relationships. The relatively small standard deviation scores, ranging from 0.78 to 0.85, indicate that students' responses were fairly consistent.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in the level of cyber-aggression between boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State.

Table 4: Independent samples t-test on the level of cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t-value	p-value	Decision
Boarding students	180	2.34	0.81				
Day students	180	2.40	0.83	358	-0.69	0.491	Not significant

Table 4 indicates that boarding students obtained a mean score of 2.34 (SD = 0.81), while day students recorded a mean score of 2.40 (SD = 0.83). The calculated t-value of -0.69 with a corresponding p-value of 0.491 is greater than the 0.05 level of significance. Since the p-value (0.491) exceeds 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected. This implies that there is no statistically significant difference in the level of cyber-aggression between boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State.

Research question 3: What is the relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State?

Table 5: Pearson Product Moment Correlation showing the relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students

Variables	School Belongingness	Cyber-aggression
School belongingness	1.000	-0.612
Cyber-aggression	-0.612	1.000
Sig. (2-tailed)	—	0.000
N	360	360
Coefficient of Determination (R ²)		0.375

Table 5 presents the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis showing the relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State. The analysis yielded a correlation coefficient ($r = -0.612$), indicating a moderately strong negative relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression. The negative coefficient implies that as students' level of school belongingness increases, their level of cyber-aggression decreases. Conversely, students who experience lower levels of school

belongingness are more likely to exhibit cyber-aggressive behaviours. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.375$) indicates that approximately 37.5% of the variation in cyber-aggression is associated with differences in students' school belongingness, while the remaining 62.5% may be attributed to other factors not investigated in the present study. The probability value ($p = 0.000$) further indicates that the observed relationship is statistically significant.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State.

Table 6: Test of significance of the relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression using Pearson Product Moment Correlation

Variables	N	r	p-value	Decision
School Belongingness and Cyber-aggression	360	-0.612	0.000	Significant

Table 6 shows that the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis produced a correlation coefficient of $r = -0.612$ with a corresponding p-value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.05 level of significance. Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that there is a statistically significant negative relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State. The finding suggests that students who possess a stronger sense of belonging within their school environment are less likely to engage in cyber-aggressive behaviours, whereas students with lower levels of school belongingness are more likely to display such behaviours.

Discussion of the findings

The findings of the study revealed that the level of school belongingness among boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State, was high. The study further established that there was no statistically significant difference in the level of school belongingness between boarding and day students. This suggests that irrespective of school type, students generally perceive themselves as accepted, respected, valued, and emotionally connected to their school community. The high level of school belongingness observed in this study may be attributed to supportive teacher–student relationships, positive peer interactions, and school practices that promote students'

inclusion and participation in school activities. These factors strengthen students' emotional attachment to the school environment and encourage them to identify with the values and goals of their schools. The absence of a significant difference between boarding and day students further suggests that both categories of students experience similar levels of acceptance and support within their respective school environments.

The finding is consistent with Allen and Arslan (2021), who reported that positive school relationships, acceptance, and supportive school environments enhance students' sense of belonging and emotional adjustment regardless of school context. The finding also supports Osterman (2000), who emphasized that students' feelings of acceptance, respect, and inclusion within the school community are fundamental to developing a strong sense of school belonging. However, the finding differs from Eccles and Roeser (2020), who suggested that students who spend more structured time within the school environment, such as boarding students, may develop stronger school attachment than day students because of their increased interactions with teachers and peers. The difference may be attributed to similarities in school climate and support systems available to both boarding and day students in the present study.

The study also found that the level of cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students was low. Furthermore, no statistically significant difference existed between boarding and day students regarding cyber-aggressive behaviour. This finding suggests that cyber-aggression was not widely practised among the respondents irrespective of the type of school attended. The relatively low level of cyber-aggression may reflect increased awareness of responsible social media use, improved school disciplinary measures, parental monitoring, and digital citizenship education. It may also indicate that students are becoming more conscious of the emotional, social, and academic consequences associated with engaging in harmful online behaviours.

This finding agrees with Hinduja and Patchin (2020), who noted that increased awareness, school intervention programmes, and responsible digital behaviour contribute to reducing cyber-aggression among adolescents. Similarly, the finding supports Kowalski et al. (2014), who explained that school policies and preventive programmes can reduce students' involvement in cyber-aggressive behaviours. However, the finding contrasts with the observations of Zhao et al. (2023), who argued that the increasing use of digital technologies and social media among adolescents has created greater opportunities for negative online interactions, including cyber-aggression. The difference may be explained

by variations in students' digital exposure, school monitoring practices, and the effectiveness of internet safety education across different settings.

The study further established a moderately strong negative and statistically significant relationship between school belongingness and cyber-aggression among boarding and day secondary school students. This implies that students with a stronger sense of belonging to their school are less likely to engage in cyber-aggressive behaviours, whereas students with lower levels of school belongingness are more likely to exhibit such behaviours. This finding may be explained by the fact that students who feel accepted, respected, and supported within their school community are more likely to develop positive interpersonal relationships, emotional stability, empathy, and self-regulation. These positive social experiences reduce the likelihood of engaging in harmful online behaviours. Conversely, students who feel disconnected from their school environment may experience frustration, loneliness, or social isolation, thereby increasing their vulnerability to maladaptive behaviours such as cyber-aggression.

The finding differs from Zhao et al. (2023), who argued that cyber-aggressive behaviour may also be influenced by factors such as increased digital engagement, online peer interactions, and exposure to harmful online content, irrespective of students' level of school belongingness. However, the finding is consistent with Wang and Eccles (2012b), who reported that students with stronger school connectedness demonstrate better social adjustment and are less likely to engage in problem behaviours. The present finding also supports the position of Allen and Arslan (2021), who emphasized that school belongingness promotes emotional well-being, positive behavioural adjustment, and healthy interpersonal relationships among students.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that boarding and day secondary school students in Aba South Local Government Area generally possess a high level of school belongingness and a low level of cyber-aggression. The study further established that school type does not significantly influence either students' sense of belonging or their involvement in cyber-aggressive behaviour. Most importantly, the study concluded that school belongingness is a significant predictor of cyber-aggression. Students who perceive themselves as accepted, respected, supported, and emotionally connected within the school community are less likely to engage in cyber-aggressive behaviours. Therefore, fostering a positive, inclusive, and supportive school climate should remain a priority for school

administrators, teachers, counsellors, and policymakers as an effective strategy for preventing cyber-aggression and promoting healthy social behaviour among secondary school students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. School administrators and teachers should strengthen programmes and practices that promote students' sense of belonging by fostering supportive teacher–student relationships, encouraging peer acceptance, and creating an inclusive school climate where every student feels valued and respected.
2. School counsellors and educational authorities should organize regular sensitization programmes, workshops, and guidance services on responsible digital behaviour, cyber ethics, and the consequences of cyber-aggression to sustain the low level of cyber-aggressive behaviour observed among students.
3. Parents, teachers, and school management should work collaboratively to monitor students' online activities while providing emotional support and opportunities for meaningful participation in school life, as this can strengthen school belongingness and reduce the likelihood of cyber-aggressive behaviour.

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