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Does Community Support in Moderating Roles Mitigate Short Comings in Rural Tourism Development?

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Abstract

Background: *Rural tourism offers unique experiences and the potential to revitalize local economies.* **Objectives:** *This study explores the connection between tourism destination competitiveness, hard services (e.g., infrastructure), soft services (e.g., hospitality), and the moderating role of community support within the Sundarbans National Park, rural destination in West Bengal, India.* **Methodology:** *A quantitative approach was used to measure and analyse numerical data, identifying relationships and drawing conclusions. This study employed this approach to examine how community support influences rural tourism development. The primary data for this study was gathered through a survey conducted among domestic tourists who had visited the Sundarbans. This survey offered direct insights into the experiences and opinions of these tourists. SEM is used as it handles complex relationships between variables, i.e., community support and rural tourism development. Path analysis was conducted using PLS-4 to examine how various forms of community support, such as hospitality, cooperations, etc. influence the development of tourism in Sundarbans.* **Results:** *Results underscores the importance of hard and soft services combined key drivers of rural tourism destination competitiveness setting. Moreover, strong community support significantly amplifies the positive effect of these services on the competitiveness of the destination.* **Conclusion:** *The study offers valuable insights for rural tourism development, emphasizing the significance of community connection in enhancing destination attractiveness and competitiveness.*

Keywords: Sundarbans, hard and soft services, destination, SEM, domestic tourists

Introduction

Inadequate tourism infrastructure, limited financial resources, appropriate marketing strategies for rural tourism development is prominent. Community-based rural tourism with direct participation in rural tourism is backbone for rural tourism development. This literature review tries to examine rural tourism development through direct participation local community and highlighting the difficulties in relation of rural tourism of direct participation of communities (local).

Emami and Yasouri's (2023) study explores the factors influencing rural tourism growth in Gilan Province, highlighting the importance of community involvement. They argued that community support not only enhance the tourism experience but also helps preserve local culture and reduce rural-urban migration. The study highlighted that active community participation can mitigate issues related to resource management and infrastructure development. Rural tourism development has hindered due to limited tourism infrastructure and services (Kaptan et al., 2020). Socio-cultural challenges, i.e., balancing tourism with cultural preservation through traditional lifestyles can be difficult (Getz, 2008). Tourism and environment are correlated, unsustainable practices of tourism can hamper fragile ecosystems (Liu et al., 2023).

Community support as in moderating roles can address numerous shortcomings. For developing the infrastructure and services development, community help is essential, so community involvement and managing tourism projects can ensure facilities cater to tourist needs while respecting the local environment (UNWTO, 2020). To preserve culture, community-based tourism models can empower locals to showcase their culture authentically while ensuring its sustainability (Liu et al., 2023). For sustainable practices, locals invested in their environment are more likely to advocate for responsible tourism practices (UNWTO, n.d.).

Tourism is major economic driver of economic growth of any country in the globe (Polo & Frias, 2010; Ramjit, 2015). At the same way, the significance of rural tourism cannot be ignored as it elevates poverty of rural residents (Stetic, 2012). The development of improved infrastructure and amenities (Lo et al., 2017) can create new opportunities (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004). The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2016) reported a 4.4% increase in international tourist arrivals in 2016 compared to 2014, providing empirical evidence of the tourism industry's significance for global economic contribution.

Competitiveness theory is essential for understanding rural tourism development. Mihalic's (2000) theory is rooted in the concepts of both comparative and competitive advantage. It emphasizes that a destination's competitiveness stems from a combination of its natural assets and the resources and infrastructure developed by humans.

Brehm et al. (2004) define a community as individuals residing in the same geographic location and sharing a common work environment (Abas & Hanafiah, 2014). The active participation of local communities is essential for successful development of rural tourism destinations Caliskan (2014). They often provide essential tourism services, including transportation, information, accommodation, facilities, and activities (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011).

Spencer and Nsiah (2013) offer a comprehensive definition of community support, highlighting its integral role in tourism offerings and hospitality. Their definition underscores the pivotal role of community support in influencing visitor satisfaction, spending patterns, repeat business, and positive word-of-mouth. Goulding et al. (2014) and Jaafar et al. (2013) found that community support is a key determinant of rural tourism success or failure. Involving local communities in rural tourism services can give a destination a unique advantage. The competitiveness of tourism destinations has become a focal point in academic research, with scholars examining it from various angles (Angelkova et al., 2012; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Kozak, 2001; Mathew, 2009). While a destination is traditionally defined as a place offering tourism product and services (Buhalis, 2000), recent discussions on sustainability have prompted researchers to examine competitiveness not only in terms of short-term financial gains but also long-term viability (Cavender- Bares et al., 2013; Hassan, 2000; Logar, 2010; Vengesayi, 2003). This research suggests that competitive destination must fulfil several criteria such as attracting visitors, generating economic benefits (Hassan, 2000) fostering local economic growth (Buhalis, 2000; Warren, 2013) preserving its core resources, and continuously enhancing its attractions (Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Wilde & Cox, 2008; Yoon, 2002).

Literature review highlights the importance of community support in addressing the challenges of rural tourism. Community involvement not only enhance the sustainability and resilience of tourism initiatives but also ensure that tourism benefits are equitably distributed among residents (local). To foster sustainable tourism development, future research should investigate creative approaches to engage communities, address existing obstacle, and harness the unique advantages of rural areas.

Research Gaps

Community Support: Though recognized as important, we lack a clear understanding of how different levels of community support impact competitiveness in rural tourism markets. Existing research needs to explore the various aspects of community support and its unique effects on success.

Context-Specific Analysis: While the connection between accommodation quality, community support, and competitiveness is known, studies rarely examine these factors within specific locations like the Sundarbans National Park, hindering a deeper understanding of their interaction and influence in unique settings.

Integrated Services: While the importance of both physical (hard) and intangible (soft) services is acknowledged, research often analyzes them separately, neglecting their

combined impact on competitiveness. Additionally, the way this integration varies across different contexts, like the Sundarbans, remains unexplored.

Research Questions

1. In what ways does the amount of community support affect triumph of rural tourist attractions in a competitive market?
2. How do the quality of accommodations and local community support influence the competitiveness of a rural tourism destinations? Specifically, how do these factors relate to each other in the Sundarbans National Park in West Bengal, India?
3. In what ways does the integration of hard and soft services impact rural tourism's market position destinations, and how does this integration vary across different geographical and cultural contexts, such as Sundarbans, West Bengal?

Hypothesis

1. H1: Community assistance directly leads to increased tourism competitiveness.
2. H2: Hard services are directly related to tourism competitiveness.
3. H3: Soft services are related to tourism competitiveness.

Objectives

- To investigate the relationship between community participation and the development of rural tourism areas in a competitive market.
- To examine the interaction of hard service, soft services, community support, and destination competitiveness in the Sundarbans National Park, West Bengal, India.
- To build competitive rural destinations: the role of hard and soft services

Methodology

Research Design: The study used a quantitative approach to collect numerical data and analyze complex interactions.

Locale: The study was conducted in the Sundarbans National Park and its surrounding regions in West Bengal, India.

Sampling Design: The study population included tourists (domestic and international), service providers, residents, and stakeholders interested in tourism development. The primary focus was on domestic tourists visiting the Sundarbans National Park. A sample of 50 domestic tourists was used.

Tools and Techniques: A structured questionnaire with a Likert scale was used to measure variables related to community participation, accommodation quality, comprehensive perception, and others. Secondary data was collected from government agencies and tourism organizations. Primary data were collected through surveys, and interviews from respondents.

Data Analysis and Statistical Analysis: Frequency distribution, Mean, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze the relationships between variables and Regression Analysis (Path Analysis) was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses about the relationships between community support, accommodation quality, and destination competitiveness. PLS-4 was used due to its flexibility and ability to handle smaller sample sizes without strict normality assumptions

Rationale: The quantitative approach facilitates objective measurement, and SEM with path analysis provides a powerful tool to model complex relationships (Leong et al., 2020)

PLS-4 Assessment: PLS-4 was used due to its flexibility and ability to handle smaller sample sizes without strict normality assumptions (Hair et al., 2018).

Results and Discussion

Table 1: *Demographic Profile of Participants*

Age	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
18-25 years	10	20.0	20.0	20.0
26-33 years	13	26.0	26.0	46.0
34-41 years	9	18.0	18.0	64.0
42-49 years	7	14.0	14.0	78.0
50-57 years	5	10.0	10.0	88.0
58 years and above	6	12.0	12.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	
Gender				
Male	30	60.0	60.0	60.0

Age	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Female	20	40.0	40.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	
Education				
Upto 10th Standard	8	16.0	16.0	16.0
12th Standard	10	20.0	20.0	36.0
Graduation	19	38.0	38.0	74.0
Postgraduate and Above	13	26.0	26.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	
Income				
0-Rs. 20,000	8	16.0	16.0	16.0
Rs.20,001 to Rs. 40,000	14	28.0	28.0	44.0
Rs. 40,001 to 60,000	16	32.0	32.0	76.0
Rs. 60,000 and above	12	24.0	24.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

The table 1 contains the respondents' age, gender, education, and income. The age of the respondents ranges from 18 to 58 years and above. The largest age groups were 26-33 years old, with 13 respondents (26%). There were 30 males (60%) and 20 females (40%) in the sample. The highest level of education for 19 respondents (38%) is graduation. There were 8 respondents (16%) who have an education up to 10th standard, 10 respondents (20%) have a 12th standard education, and 13 respondents (26%) have a postgraduate and above education. The income of the respondents ranges from Rs. 0-20,000/- to Rs. 60,000/- and above. The largest income group was Rs. 40,001 to Rs. 60,000/- with 16 respondents (32%).

Table 2: *Descriptive Statistics of Respondent*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	50	1	6	3.04	1.653
Education	50	1	4	2.74	1.026
Income	50	1	4	2.64	1.025

[Age group- 18-25- 1, 26-33-2, 34-41-3, 42-49-4, 50-57-5, 58 and above- 6, Education- 10th -1, 12th-2, Graduation-3, Post graduate and above-4, Income- 0 to2000- 1, 20,001to 40,000-2, 40,001 to 60,000-3, 60,001 and above- 4]

The table 2 summarizes the descriptive statistics of 50 respondents. It included the following measures for each variable: age, education, and income. The average age of the respondents was 3.04, 3 indicates the age group of 34- 41 and 4 indicates age group 42-49 years old, with a standard deviation of 1.653, 1 indicates 18-25 age group. The minimum age is 18 years old and the maximum age was 58 and above years old. The average level of education of the respondents is 2.74, with a standard deviation of 1.026. The minimum level of education was 1, which indicated up to 10th standard and the maximum level of education was 4 indicated post graduate and above. The average income of the respondents was 2.64, with a standard deviation of 1.025. The minimum income was 1 indicated 0 to 20,000/ and the maximum income was 4 indicates 60,000 and above.

Table 3: *Cross Tabulation- Age and Gender of Respondents*

	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
18- 25 years	4	6	10
	40.0%	60.0%	100%
26- 33 years	8	5	13
	61.5%	38.5%	100.0%
34- 41 years	5	4	9
	55.6%	44.4%	100.0%
42- 49 years	5	2	7
	71.4%	28.6%	100.0%
50- 57 years	4	1	5
	80.0%	20.0%	100.0%
58 years and above	4	2	6
	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
Total	30	20	50
	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%

Table 4: *Cross Tabulation- Education and Gender of Respondents*

		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Upto 10th Standard	Count	3	5	8
	% within Education of Respondent	37.5%	62.5%	100.0%
12th Standard	Count	7	3	10
	% within Education of Respondent	70.0%	30.0%	100.0%
Graduation	Count	10	9	19
	% within Education of Respondent	52.6%	47.4%	100.0%
Postgraduate and Above	Count	10	3	13

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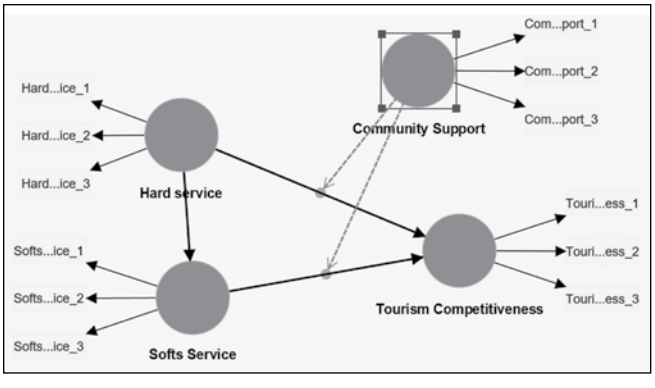
		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
	% within Education of Respondent	76.9%	23.1%	100.0%
Total	Count	30	20	50
	% within Education of Respondent	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%

Table 5: *Cross Tabulation- Income and Gender of Respondents*

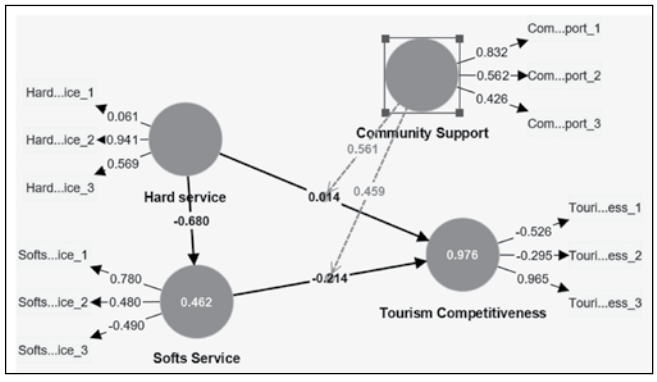
		Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
0-Rs. 20,000	Count	6	2	8
	% within Income of Respondent	75.0%	25.0%	100.0%
Rs.20,001 to Rs. 40,000	Count	9	5	14
	% within Income of Respondent	64.3%	35.7%	100.0%
Rs. 40,001 to 60,000	Count	7	9	16
	% within Income of Respondent	43.8%	56.3%	100.0%
Rs. 60,000 and above	Count	8	4	12
	% within Income of Respondent	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
Total	Count	30	20	50
	% within Income of Respondent	60.0%	40.0%	100.0%

Figure 1: *Conceptual Model of Tourism Competitiveness*



[Hard Services-1, Hard Services-2, Hard serives-3], [Soft Services-1, Soft Service-2, Soft services-3], [Tourism Competitiveness-1, Tourism Competitveness-2, Tourism Competitiveness-3], [Community support-1, Community Support-2, Community Support-3]

Figure 2: *Path Analysis of Factors Influencing Tourism Competitiveness*



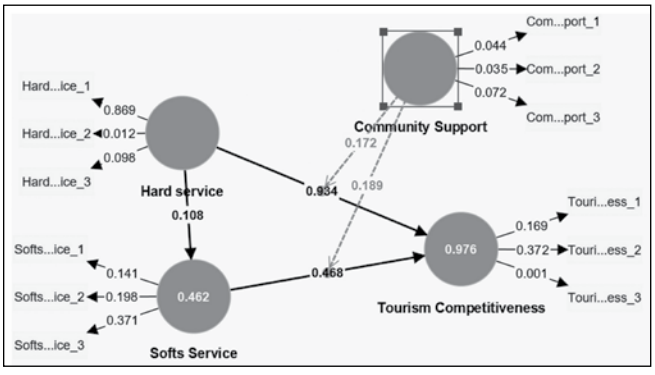
[Hard Services-1, Hard Services-2, Hard serives-3], [Soft Services-1, Soft Service-2, Soft services-3], [Tourism Competitiveness-1, Tourism Competitveness-2, Tourism Competitiveness-3], [Community support-1, Community Support-2, Community Support-3]

Table 6: *Path Coefficient of Tourism Competitiveness*

	Path Coefficients
Community Support ⟶ Tourism Competitiveness	0.831
Hard services ⟶ Soft services	-0.680
Hard services ⟶ Tourism competitiveness	0.014
Soft Services ⟶ Tourism Competitiveness	-0.214
Community support x Soft services ⟶ Tourism Competitiveness	0.459
Community support x hard services ⟶ Tourism Competitiveness	0.56

Table 6 summarizes the results of a path analysis, a statistical technique used to examine cause-and-effect relationships between variables. It focused on tourism competitiveness and the factor influencing it. Each value shows the direct relationship between two variables, accounting for the effects of other factors in the model. Positive values indicate a positive relationship. There exists a positive correlation between value and the strength of the direct effect. Negative values indicate a negative relationship. The absolute value reflects the strength of the negative effect.

Figure 3: *Path Coefficient for Tourism Competitiveness: Sample Mean, Standard Deviation, t-value and p-value*



[Hard Services-1, Hard Services-2, Hard serives-3], [Soft Services-1, Soft Service-2, Soft services-3], [Tourism Competitiveness-1, Tourism Competitveness-2, Tourism Competitiveness-3], [Community support-1, Community Support-2, Community Support-3]

Table 7: *Path Coefficients for Tourism Competitiveness: Sample Mean, Standard Deviation, t-value, and p-value*

	Sample mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T statistics	P values
Community support → Tourism Competitiveness	0.668	0.351	2.368	0.018
Hard services → Soft services	-0.501	0.422	1.609	0.108
Hard services → Tourism competitiveness	-0.030	0.165	0.083	0.934
Soft Services → Tourism Competitiveness	-0.219	0.294	0.726	0.468
Community support x Soft Services → Tourism Competitiveness	0.224	0.350	1.314	0.189
Community support x hard services → Tourism Competitiveness	0.338	0.411	1.366	0.172

Independent variables are factors that are manipulated or changed in an experiment to observe their effect on dependent variables. Dependent variables are the outcomes or responses that are measured to determine the impact of the independent variables. The sample mean (M) provides the average value of the path coefficient quantifies the linear relationship between two variables, including its strength and direction.

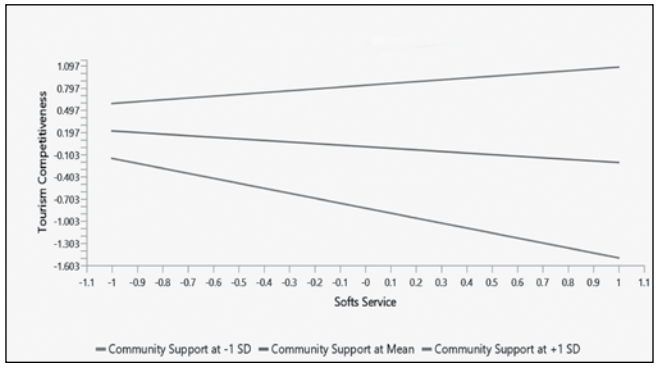
The result shows that positive values represent a positive association, where both variables increase together. Negative values, conversely, indicate a negative association, where one variable increase while other decreases.

Standard Deviation (STDEV): This column indicates the statistical variability of the path coefficient. In simpler terms, it measures how much the individual path coefficient deviate from the average (mean) value. A higher STDEV suggests that the path coefficients are more spread out, while a lower STDEV indicates they are clustered closed together.

T-Statistic: A numerical value that measures the strength of the relationship between a dependent variable and an independent variable. A higher absolute value indicates a stronger relationship.

P -value**:** The p-value represents the probability of encountering a t-statistic as extreme as the one calculated, under the assumption of no correlation between the variables. Generally, a p-value below 0.05 is deemed statistically significant. This indicates that we can dismiss the null hypothesis of no relationship and assert that the observed relationship is unlikely to be attributed to chance.

Figure 4: *Sample Slope Analysis- Community Support and Soft Service*



The image is a graph titled “Simple slope analysis - Community Support x Softs Service”. The graph depicts the outcomes of a linear regression analysis, a statistical technique that examines the connection between two variables. In this instance, the two variables being analyzed are:

Community Support: This variable is likely measured on a scale, with higher values indicating greater levels of community support. Softs Service: This variable is also likely

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measured on a scale, but the specific meaning of the variable is not provided in the image.

The x-axis of the graph represents the "Softs Service" variable, and the y-axis represents the "Community Support" variable. The graph also includes three vertical lines, which appear to represent different levels of "Community Support": Community Support at -1 SD: This line indicates one standard deviation below the mean community support. Community Support at Mean: This line represents the mean level of community support. Community Support at +1 SD: This line represents the mean plus one standard deviation of community support. The graph shows three lines, each corresponding to a different level of community support. The upward-sloping lines suggest a positive correlation between 'soft Services' and 'Community Support'. This implies that higher levels of 'Soft Services' are associated with higher levels of 'Community Support. Communities with steeper slopes tend to have higher level support. The inclination of the slope appears to be a factor in the amount of community support received. The slope is steepest for the line representing community support at +1 SD, and it is shallowest for the line representing community support at -1 SD. This suggests that the relationship between the two variables may be stronger for communities with higher levels of support. It is concluded that there is no moderation effect found as there are three parallel lines and they are not meeting any points.

Community Support: A strong positive direct effect on Tourism Competitiveness (0.831). This suggests that stronger community support directly leads to increased tourism competitiveness. Hard vs. Soft Services: Hard services (e.g., infrastructure, transportation) have a weak direct effect on Tourism Competitiveness (0.014). This implies that hard services alone might not be a significant driver of competitiveness. Soft services (e.g., hospitality, cultural experiences) have a moderately negative direct effect on Tourism Competitiveness (-0.214). This seems counterintuitive and might require further investigation. However, it is possible that the negative effect could be due to the cost of providing high-quality soft services, which could affect competitiveness in some situations. Local communities play a vital role in fostering a competitive tourism environment, the research conducted by Abas et al. (2014) aligns with our conclusion. While services play a crucial role in competitiveness, the nature of the relationship is multifaceted and requires additional research.

Community support and tourism competitiveness: The analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship (p-value=0.018) between community support and tourism competitiveness, with a mean score of 0.668. This suggests that communities that are more supportive of tourism tend to have higher levels of tourism competitiveness. Hard and soft services: While a negative association between hard and soft services is suggested, the evidence is marginal (p-value=0.108). This means that an increase in hard services is associated with a decrease in soft services, but the significance level is borderline. Hard services and tourism competitiveness: There is a very weak and statistically non-significant relationship (p-value=0.934) between hard services and tourism competitiveness. The data reveals a minimal or non-existent linear relationship between the two variables. Soft services and tourism competitiveness: There is a negative and statistically non-significant relationship (p-value=0.468) between soft services and tourism competitiveness. The negative coefficient suggests that stronger soft services might be associated with lower tourism competitiveness, but the result is not statistically significant. Interaction: Community support and hard services on tourism competitiveness: The combined effects of community support and hard services on tourism competitiveness were marginally statistically significant (p-value=0.172). The connection between hard services and tourism competitiveness might be contingent upon the degree of community backing. However, like the previous finding, the significance level is borderline. Community support emerges as a key factor in tourism competitiveness, but the data does not provide a clear picture of the individual contributions of hard and soft services.

Conclusion

Community Support: Strong community support significantly increases tourism competitiveness. Hard Services: Limited impact on competitiveness, suggesting infrastructure alone is not enough. Soft Services: No clear relationship with competitiveness. The negative coefficient might be due to cost factors, requiring further investigation. Interaction effects: While inconclusive due to borderline significance, the study suggests: The relationship between hard services and competitiveness might depend on community support (positive, but weakly significant). Higher community support might strengthen the positive relationship between soft services and competitiveness (shown by the graph, but statistically insignificant). Community support emerges as the key driver of tourism competitiveness. The role of services

(hard and soft) needs further exploration due to the complex and potentially context-dependent relationships observed. Limitations: While quantitative methods offer valuable insights, they may not capture the full complexity of the diverse tourist experiences within Sundarbans. The generalizability of the study's results is constrained by the relatively small size.

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