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Internalized Beauty Ideals and Sociocultural Pressures Shape How Young Women and Men Perceive Body Attractiveness

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Abstract

This study explored how sociocultural pressures and internalized beauty ideals play a role in how women and men perceive the attractiveness of different body types of the same and opposite gender. Results showed that when judging the attractiveness of bodies of the same gender, internalized beauty ideals have different effects on women and men. Women's judgments of the attractiveness of female bodies are predicted by the pressure exerted by a thin beauty ideal, while men's judgments of the attractiveness of male bodies are predicted instead by a muscular beauty ideal. Attractiveness judgments for bodies of the opposite gender are influenced by the pressure to be thin and the perceived influence of significant others. Sociocultural pressures also have a stronger effect on women than men. These findings offer an initial window into the distinct factors that shape body image construction for the digital generation of women and men.

Keywords: Beauty Ideals; Sociocultural Pressures; Perceived Attractiveness; Body Image.

Introduction

Body image refers to the constellation of perceptions, feelings, and thoughts people have about their own body. Amongst other components, it includes how we estimate the size of our body, evaluate its attractiveness, and the positive and negative emotions we associate with its shape and size (Grogan, 2010). The body image is not a fixed construct but, rather, one that is constantly updated and changing throughout life (Cruz et al., 2007) and, as such, it is permeable to external sociocultural influences or pressures that channel and reinforce the internalization of beauty ideals (Torres Sornosa, 2018). Beauty ideals are understood as a set

of characteristics that a society considers attractive depending on the era (Konstan, 2012). In today's western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) cultures, societal standards such as "thin female" and "strong male" are common and can heavily affect one's body image formation and perception (Anderson-Fye, 2012; Benton & Karazsia, 2015; Grogan, 2016).

Traditionally, a gynocentric bias has skewed the research in this area to investigate almost exclusively young women's body image concerns (e.g., Cafri et al., 2005; Jones & Morgan, 2010). In recent years, the emphasis has shifted towards a more comprehensive and diversity minded understanding of body image (Cohen, Irwin, et al., 2019). The body ideal put forward to women exhorts a slim figure and, recently, a slightly more athletic and toned body than in previous decades (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018). The athletic ideal is predominant for men and, due to its pervasiveness, it is considered 'the new thinness' on social media (Uhlmann et al., 2020). For men the ideal body is a slim, muscular, and V-shaped body (i.e., greater concentration of muscles in the shoulders and upper torso) (Voges et al., 2019); for women, the external ideal plays up muscle definition and minimum body fat instead of muscle mass (Campos et al., 2021). The masculine body ideal reproduced in advertisements and commercials focuses on the torso and having strong abs and narrow hips (Tiggemann et al., 2020).

Beauty ideal messages and standards are maintained by high visibility social agents such as influencers, celebrities, athletes, and models (Koyuncu et al., 2010). Along this lines, work by Fernandez & Pritchard, 2012 showed that 'seeking thinness' in young women and men is directly related to

awareness and internalization of media models and the tendency to compare their own body image with those portrayed in the media. Unlike traditional media that exposes consumers to body ideals, social media users are both passive consumers and active creators of these idealized versions (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015). Social media users are for the most part members of the Y (26-39 years old) and Z (18-25 years old) generations. Social media content is largely based on sharing images. These images are often manipulated using filters offered by the platforms to approximate beauty ideals also promoted within the platforms. In this sense, social media provides the perfect environment for body image concerns to fester and propagate (Rodgers et al., 2020). The influence of social media on body image construction is complex; it propagates positive content (e.g., the *body positivity* movement based on body appreciation and acceptance) and negative content (e.g., the *thinspiration* movement intended to inspire weight loss) (Cohen, Fardouly, et al., 2019).

The impact of the internalization of beauty ideals on behavior and self-perception is also influenced by other sociocultural pressures. As social partners, we are overly monitoring what our family, partners, and peers see, think, or do (Eskenazi et al., 2016). Parents are the first source of socialization, so external pressures coming from family have a significant impact on the internalization of body ideals. For teenage girls, mothers work as potential role models, sources of information, and guidance about their bodies (Ata et al., 2007). Peers and friends influence body image through a process of social comparison (Festinger, 1954), whereas individuals obtain information about themselves through personal comparisons with those they perceive as similar. Lastly, significant others may have a direct influence on how people perceive themselves and their own body image (Goldsmith & Byers, 2016). A recent study shows that male partners exert greater pressure on female partners to have an ideal thin body, which generally increases concerns about body image in the heterosexual female population (e.g., Huxley et al., 2015).

There is notable little and solid research in recent years investigating how women and men perceive the attractiveness of bodies of their own and the opposite gender and whether the same factors influence both types of attractiveness judgments. Although studies using Figure Rating Scales are commonly used in body image research, as quantitative measures of body dissatisfaction, few studies do so for males and females. In general, previous findings on how people perceive bodies of the opposite gender support evolutionary notions (Bergstrom et al., 2004). According to this proposal, women have a preference for strong male bodies and associate them with the ability to obtain resources and provide protection against physical threats (Sell et al., 2017). Men, in turn, value slim female bodies and are attracted to physical characteristics that indicate fertility such as wide hips (Lei & Perrett, 2021). This suggests that the beauty ideals might be universal and men and women have internalized similar beauty ideals for a male and female

bodies. If so, it would be expected that when judging the attractiveness of bodies of both genders, attractiveness judgements provided by women should mirror those provided by men (i.e., women and men would judge as most attractive a thin female body and a muscular male body).

The current study investigated this hypothesis by asking women and men to judge the attractiveness of different body types (thin, average, overweight, athletic, and muscular) of the same and opposite gender. Participants also completed the Sociocultural Attitudes Towards Appearance Questionnaire 4 R (SATAQ). The SATAQ-4R assesses how women and men—it has gender tailored versions—perceive the influence of sociocultural pressures (family, peers, significant other, media, and social media) and internalized beauty ideals (thin, muscular, and general attractiveness). For the purposes of this study, we modified the questionnaire to obtain a separate measure of the influence of social media pressure. Statistical models were developed to map out the factors that shape attractiveness perception for bodies of the same and opposite gender.

Methods

Participants

203 Argentine participants (123 females; $M=21.05$ years old, $SD=1.79$ years) answered an online survey that included an initial set of demographic questions, a task of evaluating images of different body types of the same and opposite gender, and a modified version of the SATAQ-4R. Participants were recruited through online ads and posts on Facebook and Instagram, and through WhatsApp groups of college students. Before the beginning of the study participants gave their informed consent. Informed consents followed the norms of the declaration of Helsinki and were adapted to be administered online. Inclusion criteria for the final sample were age (i.e., 18 to 25 years), no current diagnosis of chronic disease or eating disorders, and having responded all required questions.

Instruments

First, participants completed a sociodemographic questionnaire that asked about age, gender, weight, height, and current diagnosis of chronic disease and eating disorders. Following these questions, images of 5 female body types and 5 male body types (stimuli from Voges et al., 2019. See Figure 1) were presented in random order. Body types are classified as thin, average, overweight, athletic, and muscular. Participants had to indicate how attractive they found the image presented on a Likert scale from 0 to 10 with 0 meaning *It is not attractive at all* and 10 meaning *It is very attractive*. Lastly, participants completed an online modified version of the SATAQ-4R (Schaefer, 2017). The SATAQ-4R was translated into Spanish, based on the Argentine (Murawski et al., 2015) and Spanish validation of the SATAQ-3 (Llorente et al., 2015). Two focus groups of 10 participants of both genders provided an initial validation of the translation to ensure the accurate translation of relevant terms and that participants understood the instructions and

the intent behind each question. The female version consists of 31 items, while the male version consists of 28 items. Both with responses ranging from 1 to 5, meaning 1=totally disagree and 5=totally agree. This questionnaire is divided into seven factors: (1) Internalization–Thin/Low Body Fat, (2) Internalization–Muscular, (3) Internalization–General Attractiveness, (4) Pressures–Family, (5) Pressures–Peers, (6) Pressures–Media, and (7) Pressures–Significant Others. Per one goal of this study, we added an eighth factor: (8) Pressures- Social Media. The items added were based on the items from the Pressures-Media factor; questions were identical for both factors but for replacing the wording ‘media’ for ‘social media’. These items were added at the end of the female and male scale so as not to bias the expected responses to the SATAQ-4R.

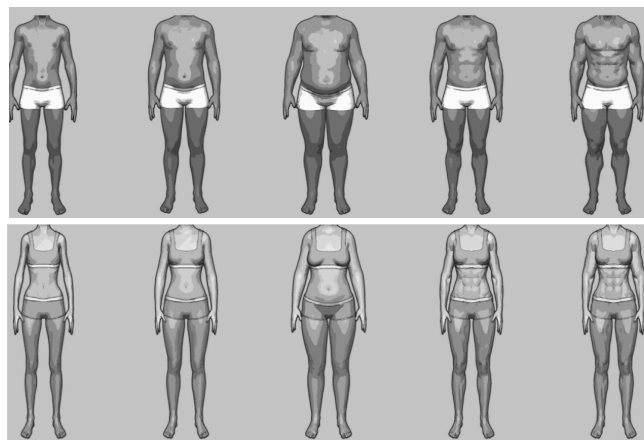


Figure 1: Images of females and males body types.

Analyses

To obtain a single measurement of participant’s attractiveness judgments we calculated a dispersion measure by subtracting the minimum and maximum score given, regardless of which body type each value came from. This measure was calculated separately for the evaluation of bodies of the same and opposite gender. One-Way ANOVA with gender as factor was also performed. Separate stepwise regressions were performed for the dispersion scores obtained for the same and opposite gender judgments with age, gender, body mass index (BMI), and the SATAQ-4R ideals and sociocultural pressures as predictors. Further analyses were carried out to investigate the relationship between body type (thin, average, overweight, athletic, and muscular), condition (same and opposite gender) and gender (male and female). Lastly, we carried out a two-way repeated measures ANOVA between internalized ideals (Thin/Low Body Fat, Muscular, and General Attractiveness obtained from SATAQ-4R) and gender, and a two-way repeated measures ANOVA between sociocultural pressures (Family, Peers, Media, Significant Other, and Social Media; obtained from SATAQ-4R) and gender.

Results

Dispersion Scores

Multiple regression was performed on data from both genders with dispersion score as the dependent variable, and age, BMI, Thin/Low Body Fat, Muscular and General attractiveness internalized ideals, and Family, Peers, Media, Significant Other, and Social Media pressures as predictors. One-way ANOVA with gender as a factor had shown no gender differences in dispersion scores. The model was significant (see Table 1) and included Thin/Low Body Fat ideal as a predictor [$F(1,202)=7.478$, $R^2=.036$, Table 1].

Table 1: Model of dispersion measure of body image of the same gender. Thin-ideal=Thin/Low Body Fat ideal.

Model	Variable	R^2	F	Beta	t	p
1	Regression	.036	7.478			
	(Constant)				7.75	.000
	Thin-ideal			1.89	2.74	.007

For judgments of attractiveness of the opposite gender, one-way ANOVA showed no significant gender effect. Multiple regression was performed with the same predictors as the analyses of data for bodies of the same gender. The model was significant (see Table 2): it included Thin/Low Body Fat ideal and Significant Other pressure [$F(1,202)=8.74$, $R^2=.080$, Table 2].

Table 2: Model of dispersion measure of body image of the opposite gender. Thin-ideal=Thin/Low Body Fat ideal; P_SO=Pressure Significant Other.

Model	Variables	R^2	F	Beta	t	p
1	Regression	.057	12.05			
	(Constant)				7.26	.000
	Thin-ideal			.238	3.47	.001
2	Regression	.080	8.739			
	(Constant)				7.68	.000
	Thin-ideal			.252	3.69	.000
	P SO			-.15	-2.2	.024

Perception of Attractiveness

A significant three-way interaction was found between body type (thin, average, overweight, athletic, and muscular), condition (same and opposite gender), and gender (male and female), $F(4,804)=39.77$, $p=.000$, $\eta_p^2=.165$. Follow-up test comparing women’s and men’s responses to bodies of the same gender showed that men gave higher attractiveness judgments than women to the athletic body type [men: $M=6.76$, $SD=2.43$, women: $M=5.64$, $SD=2.78$; $t(201)=-2.94$, $p=0.04$], while women gave higher attractiveness judgments than men to the thin [women: $M=6.24$, $SD=2.55$, men: $M=5.29$, $SD=2.50$; $t(201)= 2.60$, $p=0.10$], average [women:

$M=7.71$, $SD=1.83$, men: $M=5.09$, $SD=2.43$; $t(201)=8.73$, $p<0.000$], and overweight [women: $M=5.20$, $SD=2.52$, men: $M=2.60$, $SD=2.14$; $t(201)=7.59$, $p<0.000$] bodies. Follow-up test comparing women's and men's responses to bodies of the opposite gender showed that women gave higher attractiveness judgments than men to the thin [women: $M=6.80$, $SD=2.23$, men: $M=5.13$, $SD=2.35$; $t(201)=5.11$, $p=0.00$] and athletic [women: $M=8.07$, $SD=1.61$, men: $M=5.54$, $SD=2.62$; $t(201)=8.53$, $p=0.00$] male bodies. Comparisons for the other body types were not significant.

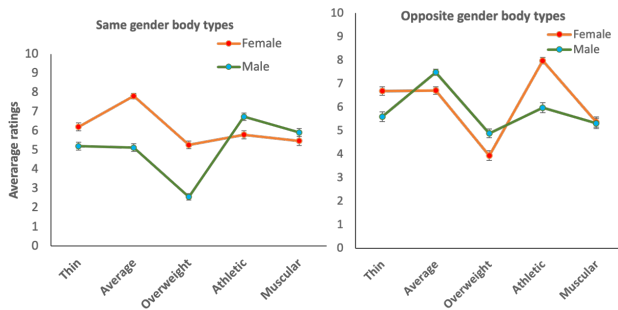


Figure 2: Descriptive analysis of the responses of the images presented

Internalized Beauty Ideals

A significant two-way interaction was found between internalized ideals (Thin/Low Body Fat, Muscular, and General Attractiveness) and gender, $F(2,402)=57.35$, $p=.000$, $\eta_p^2=.222$. Follow-up test showed that women perceived a significantly larger impact of the internalized Thin/Low Body Fat (female: $M=3.04$, $SD=1.02$, male: $M=2.54$, $SD=.965$) [$t(201)=3.45$, $p=0.01$] and General Attractiveness (females: $M=3.44$, $SD=.315$, males: $M=2.40$, $SD=1.02$) [$t(201)=10.50$, $p=0.00$] ideals than men. In contrast, men perceived a significantly larger impact of the internalized Muscular ideal (males: $M=3.17$, $SD=.848$, females: $M=2.46$, $SD=.625$) [$t(201)=-6.77$, $p=0.00$] than females.

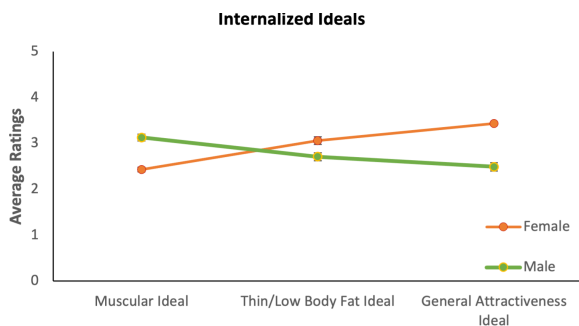


Figure 3: Gender differences on Internalized ideals.

Sociocultural Pressures

A significant two-way interaction effect was found between sociocultural pressures (Family, Peers, Media, Significant Other, and Social Media) and gender, $F(4,804)=19.90$, $p=.000$, $\eta_p^2=.09$. Follow-up test showed that females perceived significantly more pressure coming from family

(female: $M=2.35$, $SD=1.21$, male: $M=2.03$, $SD=.858$) [$t(201)=2.03$, $p=.044$], media (female: $M=3.72$, $SD=1.17$, male: $M=2.49$, $SD=1.17$) [$t(201)=7.33$, $p=0.00$] and social media (females: $M=3.89$, $SD=1.07$, males: $M=2.80$, $SD=1.22$) [$t(201)=6.65$, $p=0.00$] than men.

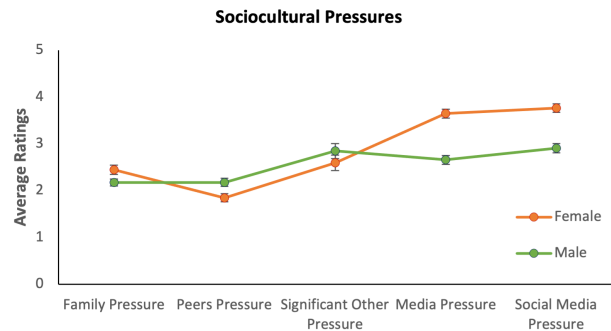


Figure 4: Gender differences on experimented Sociocultural Pressures.

Discussion

The aim of this project was to assess how internalized beauty ideals and sociocultural pressures affect the perceived attractiveness of different body types of the same and opposite gender in young adults. A set of body images as stimuli was used to obtain attractiveness judgements and the SATAQ-4R was used to evaluate the perceived impact of body ideals and sociocultural pressure. Overall, the results of this study showed that internalized body ideals have distinctive effects on the perceived attractiveness of different body types of the same gender. In line with our hypothesis, the most valued body type of their own and the opposite gender was mirrored in men and women. Altogether, women preferred thin and average female bodies and men average female bodies, and women preferred thin and athletic male bodies and men athletic male bodies. The pressure to be thin exerts a strong influence on women, while the pressure to be muscular exerts a strong influence on men. However, the attractiveness of bodies of the opposite gender is influenced by the pressure to be thin and the sociocultural pressure exerted by significant others. Separate analyses also showed that women perceive more pressure than men on their body image coming from their family media and social media.

Regression analyses carried out on the dispersion score yield by each participant for attractiveness judgments of different body types showed different outcomes when the bodies were of the same or opposite gender as the participant. Judgments of bodies of the same gender showed that the internalization of a thin ideal positively predicted the dispersion measure; meaning that greater perceived internalization of the thin ideal in women and men leads to higher sensitivity in how attractiveness of different body types of the same gender is judged. Though results showed that the participant's BMI did not play a role in how they judge the attractiveness of different body types. This effect appears to contradict previous research (Dittmar et al., 2000)

that found that adolescents' own body mass is linked to body image preferences. However, the effect of own body weight is filtered through the internalized representation of an "ideal woman"; heavier adolescents of both genders (higher BMI) appear to distance themselves from conventional notions of female beauty. Darlow & Lobel (2010) found that overweight women experienced an adverse effect of appearance comparison regardless of whom they expected to evaluate; a photograph of themselves or others. These research shows that at least for women there is a complex and nonlinear relationship between body weight and the influence exerted by thin ideals. Overweight women in particular seem to distance themselves from thin ideals when asked through questionnaires and verbal measures. It is nevertheless possible that, as our data indicates, actual weight does not play an important role, but rather the internalization of thin beauty ideals and external pressures which might have a different impact on overweight participants. Targeted studies that compare groups of overweight, normal, and below average women and men are needed to disentangle this issue.

Analyses of attractiveness judgments provided for bodies of the opposite gender showed that Thin/Low Body Fat and Pressure coming from their Significant Other were significant predictors. Thin/Low Body Fat ideal positively predicted higher discrimination in how the attractiveness of different body types of the same gender is judged. In turn, significant other pressure had a negative effect; weaker pressure predicts higher discrimination in attractiveness judgments. There is evidence that partners can be a source of pressure on appearance: in WEIRD societies, it has been observed that, during adolescence and young adulthood, romantic partners emerge as an important source of information that influences oneself, including one's own body (Goldsmith & Byers, 2016). In a study carried out in 2014, a comparison was made between the pressures of the romantic partner on heterosexual and LGBT women. Both groups expressed that they perceived greater pressure to achieve a beauty ideal of thinness from their male partners. More than half of LGBT women reported feeling pressure on their appearance when they had a male partner. This study concludes that men have a significant influence on the concerns about their body image experienced by women (Huxley et al., 2015). Our data extends these findings to encompass both genders; both men and women indistinctly are influenced on how they perceive the attractiveness of bodies of the opposite gender by their significant other. Further studies that extend our paradigm to compare women and men of different sexual orientations are needed to tease out whether the gender of the partner has a distinct effect on how attractiveness is judged.

An additional finding of our study is that females do not rate female athletic/muscular bodies higher than other type of bodies. These results support the notion that young women may be showing more body acceptance than in previous generations, due to growing influence of feminist movements (Murnen & Smolak, 2009) that reject cultural standards of beauty and criticize the practices of objectification and hyper-concentration on women's bodies. Cultural changes that

highlight these beliefs can strengthen the ability of women to reject such cultural standards, experiences of sexual objectification, and focus on their own body satisfaction as opposed to how others expect them to look physically (Andrew et al., 2016).

Males, however, did value the athletic body over other masculine body types. As discussed in the introduction, males are presented with a muscular ideal in magazines, social networks, movies, and action toys (Voges et al., 2019). Because of the gynocentric bias in the study of body image and what was observed in previous studies (e.g., Bergstrom et al., 2004; Grossbard et al., 2011), it was expected that those males who experience body image concerns would reject an overweight or obese body. However, in the last two decades, it has been recognized that men's body image problems can present differently than women's: body image concerns in the male population often refer to lack of the musculature and fitness (Tatangelo et al., 2015). Recent findings (Dawson & Hammer, 2020) suggest that this concern is related to the social portrait of men as muscular which our findings seem to confirm.

In line with the internalization of an ideal of thinness, females valued more athletic and thin male bodies. This result is consistent with a previous study that found that women focus on the men's upper body, specifically the torso and biceps (Voges et al., 2019). One possible explanation for this result is that women associate physically strong male bodies with obtaining and producing resources, and greater capabilities to defend them against external threats (Sell et al., 2017). The same rationale does not follow, however, when exploring male judgments of female bodies, which showed no particular preference for a particular body type. This result is contrary with previous studies that have found a male preference for thin female bodies (Cazzato et al., 2021)(Musolino et al., 2021).

Concerning the impact of internalized beauty ideals, women experience more intensely than men the influence of Thin/Low Body Fat and General Attractiveness ideals. Men, in turn, experience with greater intensity than women the influence of the Muscular ideal. The differences between the type of body ideals that exert influence on women and men are consistent with the sociocultural enterotypes promoted within WEIRD societies and the singularity with which body image disorders might express itself for each gender. For men, the ideal body promoted in the media, usually, is perceived as difficult or impossible to achieve since it emphasizes the volume of the muscles generating a discrepancy between the ideal and real body (Piatkowski, 2021). For women, the internalization of both ideals leads them to mold themselves in terms of fashion trends and body modification, and when it is not achieved, body dissatisfaction may appear (Manchiraju & Damhorst, 2020).

In line with recent findings from our group (Abrevaya et al., 2021), women perceived higher pressure on their body image from their family, traditional media, and social media compared to males. These findings are also in line with previous work that shows that the mother's body

dissatisfaction and dietary behaviors can lead to their child's body dissatisfaction (Tatangelo et al., 2015). As expected, the media and social media are the largest contributors to perceived pressure on the body image. Results shown that the passive use of social media (i.e., observing photos) is related to higher levels of internalization in terms of appearance, weight, body, and ideal attractiveness on young women (Strubel et al., 2018). Social media forces us to constantly look at ourselves; this exacerbates self-awareness and pressure because there is the possibility of interacting with profiles offline either by viewing the content, liking, commenting, and sharing the profile with other people (Boursier et al., 2020).

Because this study was carried out during a pandemic, it is important to consider the effects of social isolation and confinement on appearance concerns (Abrevaya et al., 2021). During the period when the data was collected all interactions occurred through social media, contact with others was physically reduced, and individuals spent more time thinking about how to present their "social media self". Follow-up post-pandemic studies should be conducted to qualified our findings. Furthermore, future research should evaluate how physical activity and exercise habits impact on the perceived level of pressure of having a muscular body for men and a thin body for women.

Conclusions

Overall, results suggest that men and women have different ways of perceiving attractiveness of their own and other people's bodies. The degree of internalization of beauty ideals and sociocultural pressures has distinct influences on women and men. Moreover, how much we experience sociocultural pressures and internalized beauty ideals, affects how we appreciate other people's bodies. These findings bring into focus the role of social media on how individuals relate to their own body image and perceive that of others they often compare themselves with. Future studies should explore whether body acceptance movements promoted via social networks can have a similarly distinct impact on young women and men, and whether more gender targeted interventions are needed to prevent the spread of body image disorders.

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