



Influences of Attachment on Perceptions and Reactions to Partner Drinking

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship between alcohol consumption within romantic relationships and the perception of a partner's drinking problem, considering attachment. Attachment theory identifies three primary attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant. It was hypothesized that the number of times a partner got drunk in the last year would be positively associated with the person's perception of a drinking problem and that these perceptions and reactions would vary according to the individual's attachment orientation. Specifically, it was anticipated that those who are more anxiously attached would be more sensitive to their partner's drinking behaviors, perceiving them more negatively and engaging in more punitive actions, whereas avoidantly attached individuals would minimize the significance of their partner's drinking issues. 754 participants were surveyed via Qualtrics to assess frequency of partner drinking, concern about partner drinking, punishment for partner drinking, reward for partner sobriety, and attachment levels. Results showed that frequency of a partner's drinking was related to concern about partner drinking, and that association was stronger for those with more anxious and avoidant orientations. Additionally, partner drinking was associated with more punishment behaviors for those with higher levels of anxious attachment, as well as those with higher levels of avoidant attachment. However, partner drinking was not related to reward for non-drinking based on attachment. Lastly, the perception of a partner's drinking mediated the relationship between perceived partner drinking and punishment, with the indirect effect being stronger for higher levels of insecure attachment. Building upon these findings, future research should explore interventions tailored to different attachment orientations to better address the negative impacts of alcohol consumption within romantic relationships.

Keywords: alcohol consumption, attachment theory, romantic relationships, drinking behavior

Introduction

Attachment Theory and Romantic Relationships

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby in the 1950s, explains the impact early interactions between children and their primary caregiver can have on emotional development and future relationship behaviors (Bowlby, 1969). These initial findings were expanded upon by Mary Ainsworth in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly with her "Strange Situation" assessment that identified three primary attachment styles: secure, insecure ambivalent/resistant (better known today as anxious attachment), and insecure avoidant (Ainsworth, 1978).

Securely attached individuals typically feel confident in their relationships, are comfortable with intimacy and independence, and effectively communicate and respond to their partner's needs (Obegi & Berant, 2010). This style develops in children whose caregivers are consistently responsive and sensitive to the child's needs (Ainsworth, 1978). Research shows that securely attached individuals generally have healthier coping mechanisms, better emotional regulation, and a more positive outlook on relationships (Brennan & Shaver, 1995). Conversely, individuals with anxious attachment often experience feelings of insecurity within their relationships and frequently seek reassurance and attention (Obegi & Berant, 2010). This attachment develops from inconsistent interactions during childhood. Receiving unpredictable emotional support early in life leads to a fear of abandonment in future relationships and a heightened need for reassurance (Ainsworth, 1978). Avoidantly attached individuals tend to maintain emotional distance in relationships, prioritize independence, and may struggle with deep connections (Obegi & Berant, 2010). This attachment style results from a caregiver who is emotionally distant, dismissive, or unresponsive. Children learn to rely on themselves from an early age as a protective mechanism (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Attachment has been more recently measured as levels of anxiety and avoidance with secure attachment being low in both. For example, Shi (2003) showed that lower anxiety and avoidance in attachment styles led to better conflict resolution and higher relationship satisfaction.

Alcohol Consumption in Romantic Relationships

The negative association between drinking and relationship satisfaction is well-researched. Studies have shown that alcohol can significantly impact marriages, leading to dissatisfaction, negative interactions, and violence (Marshall, 2003; Rodriguez et al., 2014). Furthermore, a partner's perception of one's drinking affects the relationship, with impacts varying based on actual alcohol intake (Rodriguez, Øverup, & Neighbors, 2013).

A multitude of factors can influence drinking behavior and a partner's level of concern. For instance, a study in New Zealand found that couples with differing drinking habits spent less time drinking together and reported lower relationship satisfaction (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Another study showed that men who based their self-worth on relationships were often less satisfied and drank more to cope (Rodriguez, Knee, & Neighbors, 2013). These findings demonstrated the influence personality factors and relationship dynamics can have on drinking

behavior and relationship satisfaction. The present study examined attachment orientation as a factor that may influence perceptions and reactions to partner drinking in romantic relationships.

Research Aims

Several studies have explored the link between attachment and alcohol consumption (Levitt & Cooper, 2010; Reis et al., 2012; van der Vorst et al., 2006), but research on how attachment influences perceptions of and reactions to partner drinking is limited. This study aimed to explain how attachment orientations moderate the relationships between the frequency of partner drinking, concern about partner drinking, and punishing and rewarding behaviors, by asking the following questions: (1) How is partner drinking related to perceiving a problem and is it different by attachment? (2) How is partner drinking related to punishing and rewarding the partner and is it different by attachment? (3) How does the perception of a partner’s drinking mediate the relationship between partner drinking and punishing or rewarding behavior, and how does this vary across attachment?

The study’s conceptual framework, as displayed in Figure 1, illustrates the relationship between frequency of partner drinking, concern about partner drinking, and punishment and reward, with attachment acting as a moderator.

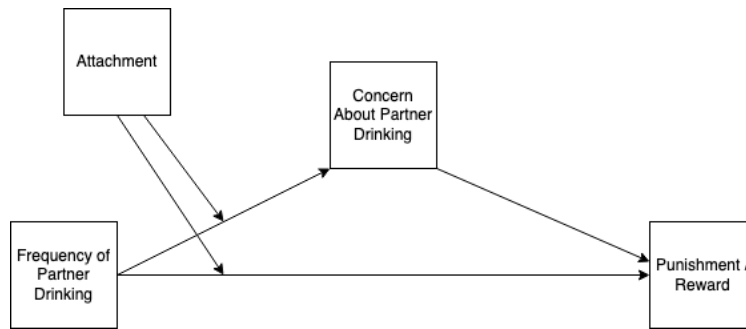


Figure 1. Conceptual Model

The study predicted a positive association between partner drinking and the perception of the partner’s drinking problem, which was expected to vary by attachment orientation. Partners who were more anxiously attached were expected to be the most sensitive and more likely to exaggerate the problem, while more avoidantly attached partners minimize it.

Partner drinking was expected to be positively related to punishment, with the effect stronger among those more anxiously attached and weaker among those more avoidantly attached. Conversely, partner drinking was expected to be negatively related to rewarding for non-

drinking, and that was expected to be stronger with those more anxiously attached and weaker among those more avoidantly attached.

Concern about partner drinking was expected to mediate the relationship between actual partner drinking and punishing behaviors across all attachment orientations. However, the mediation effect was anticipated to be stronger among those more anxiously attached and weaker for those more avoidantly attached.

Method

Participant Demographics

Participants included 754 individuals from the United States. 50% of participants ($n = 377$) identified as male and 50% ($n = 377$) identified as female. The sample was predominantly white (84.2%), followed by Black (6.1%), Asian (4.2%), and smaller percentages of Native American/American Indian (1.3%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (0.5%), multiracial (1.3%), and other (2.4%). 10.21% of participants reported Hispanic/Latino ethnicity. A vast majority (91.8%) of participants identified as heterosexual or straight. 5.0% identified as bisexual, 2.4% Lesbian or Gay, and 0.8% pansexual/other. 85.7% of participants were married, 4.3% were engaged, and 10.0% were in an exclusive relationship at the time they took the survey.

Procedure

Qualtrics Panels, a survey management service, was utilized. Respondents were screened for eligibility based on five criteria: (a) at least 18 years old; (b) consumed at least 12 alcoholic drinks in the last year; (c) worked at least 20 hours per week; (d) romantically involved with their current partner for at least six months; (e) living with that romantic partner. The panel was split by gender with 50% men and 50% women. Participants who met the eligibility criteria ($n = 4,335$) took the survey between April 17 and April 23, 2020. Participants were asked questions about their demographics, partner alcohol habits, thoughts about partner drinking, and relationship behaviors. Two filter questions, asking participants to select a specific answer, were included to ensure participants were paying attention. Additionally, there was one speeder check performed by Qualtrics. Participants who failed either the filter questions or speeder check ($n = 3,581$) were not included in the analyses, leaving a sample of 754 individuals. Participants were compensated between \$3 and \$4 USD via Qualtrics.

Measures

Frequency of Partner Drinking

Participants were asked one question about how many times their partner got drunk in the last year (PD3). This question was part of a larger measure called the Thinking about your Partner's Drinking (TPD) scale that assessed the perception that one's partner has a drinking problem (Rodriguez, DiBello, & Neighbors, 2013).

Concern about Partner Drinking

Participants completed a three-item measure (TPD-3) assessing thoughts and concerns about partner drinking. This was a shortened version of a 26-item measure developed by Rodriguez, DiBello, & Neighbors (2013) called Thinking about your Partner's Drinking (TPD) that assessed concern about partner drinking. A Graded Response Model (GRM) was applied to the original TPD scale to select three optimal items, based on their discrimination and difficulty parameters. The chosen items improved information efficiency by 31% (Rodriguez & Webster, 2019). Participants indicated their agreement to the three items on a seven-point scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*).

Punishment and Reward Reactions

The Significant-other Behavior Questionnaire (SBQ) measured responses to partner drinking behavior (Love et al., 1993). The original questionnaire had two forms: one for the patient and one for the significant other. Each of these forms had 24 items, separated into four factors: punishes drinking (PD; five items), support of sobriety (SS; eight items), support of drinking (SD; six items), withdraws from patient while drinking (WFP; five items). A modified version of the SBQ was used for this study. This revised version only had one form with 13 items, five of which were PD and eight were SS. Participants were asked how many times in the past three months they had done each behavior on a four-point scale (1 = *Never or only once*, 4 = *Always or almost always*).

Attachment: Anxious and Avoidant

Attachment was measured with a 12-item measure called Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form (ERC-S) in which participants were asked to reflect on their general responses

in romantic relationships. This was a shortened version of the original, 36-item Experiences in Close Relationship Scale (ERC). A seven-point scale was used to measure agreement (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 7 = *Strongly Agree*). The items were separated into two categories: anxiety (six items) and avoidance (six items). Higher scores on these subscales indicated higher levels of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance respectively (Wei et al., 2007).

Results

Correlation coefficients of the study variables (see Table 1) indicated a strong positive correlation between the frequency of partner drinking and concern about their drinking ($r = .55$, $p < .001$). Moreover, both anxious attachment and avoidant attachment were positively associated with increased concern (anxious: $r = .37$, $p < .001$; avoidant: $r = .38$, $p < .001$). A regression analysis (see Table 2) revealed that partner drinking was not related to perceiving a problem ($b = 0.013$, $p = .838$) when interactions were included in the model. Moderation analyses showed that this association was different as a function of attachment anxiety ($b = 0.037$, $p = .017$) and avoidance ($b = 0.057$, $p = .004$). Simple slopes (see Figure 2) showed that partner drinking was more strongly related to perceiving a problem among individuals higher in anxious attachment, $b = 0.37$, $p < .001$, compared to those lower in anxious attachment, $b = 0.22$, $p < .001$. Avoidant attachment followed the same pattern (see Figure 3), with partner drinking more strongly related to perceiving a problem among individuals higher in avoidant attachment, $b = 0.38$, $p < .001$, compared to those lower in avoidant attachment, $b = 0.20$, $p < .001$.

Table 1. Correlations Among Study Variables

	Anxious Attachment	Avoidant Attachment	Frequency of Partner Drinking	Concern About Partner Drinking	Punishment	Reward
Anxious Attachment	–	.45***	.26***	.37***	.42***	.04
Avoidant Attachment	.45***	–	.21***	.38***	.40***	-.19***
Frequency of Partner Drinking	.26***	.21***	–	.55***	.58***	.13***
Concern About Partner Drinking	.37***	.38***	.55***	–	.77***	.09**
Punishment	.42***	.40***	.58***	.77***	–	.16***
Reward	.04	-.19***	.13***	.09**	.16***	–

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Perception of Partner Drinking

Parameter	<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Drinking Quantity	0.008	0.004	1.93	.054

Anxious Attachment	0.093	0.057	1.64	.101
Frequency of Partner Drinking	0.013	0.064	0.20	.838
Anxious Attachment x Frequency of Partner Drinking	0.037	0.016	2.39	.017
Avoidant Attachment	0.221	0.062	3.57	< .001
Frequency of Partner Drinking x Avoidant Attachment	0.057	0.020	2.87	.004

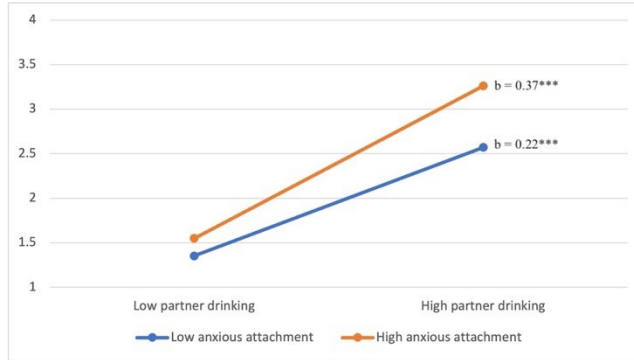


Figure 2. Interactive Effect of Partner Drinking and Anxious Attachment on Concern About Partner Drinking

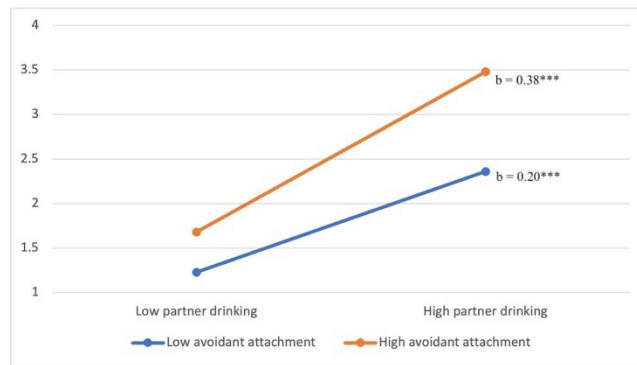


Figure 3. Interactive Effect of Partner Drinking and Avoidant Attachment on Concern About Partner Drinking

As seen in Table 1, results indicated a positive association between partner drinking and punitive behaviors ($r = .58, p < .001$), as well as positive associations between punishment and both attachment anxiety ($r = .42, p < .001$) and attachment avoidance ($r = .40, p < .001$). An examination of these variables through regression analysis (see Table 3) revealed that partner drinking was related to more punitive responses ($b = 0.050, p < .001$) towards partners. Further analysis showed that this association was different as a function of attachment anxiety ($b = 0.030, p < .001$) and avoidance ($b = 0.038, p < .001$). Moreover, partner drinking was more strongly related to punitive behaviors among individuals higher in anxious attachment, $b = 0.090, p < .001$, compared to those lower in anxious attachment, $b = 0.010, p = .273$ (see Figure 4). Similarly, partner drinking was more strongly related to punitive behaviors among individuals higher in avoidant attachment, $b = 0.092, p < .001$, compared to those lower in avoidant attachment, $b = 0.004, p = .670$ (see Figure 5). However, partner drinking was not related to

reward for non-drinking ($b = 0.032$ and $p = .057$), as seen in Table 4, and this was not different as a function of attachment anxiety or avoidance.

Table 3. Punishment

		<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
Anxious Moderator	(Constant)	0.687	0.076	9.06	< .001	0.538	0.836
	Concern About Partner Drinking	0.214	0.011	19.70	< .001	0.192	0.235
	Frequency of Partner Drinking	0.050	0.007	6.97	< .001	0.036	0.064
	Anxious Attachment	0.046	0.013	3.44	< .001	0.020	0.073
	Frequency of Partner Drinking x Anxious Attachment	0.030	0.004	7.33	< .001	0.022	0.038
	Male	0.051	0.031	1.66	.096	-0.009	0.111
	Relationship Length (Months)	-0.001	0.000	-2.29	.023	-0.001	-0.000
	Age	0.001	0.002	0.71	.481	-0.002	0.005
	Drinking Quantity	0.002	0.001	1.72	.085	-0.000	0.005
	Avoidant Attachment	0.051	0.015	3.42	< .001	0.022	0.080
Avoidant Moderator	(Constant)	0.652	0.088	7.45	< .001	0.480	0.824
	Concern About Partner Drinking	0.213	0.011	19.58	< .001	0.192	0.235
	Frequency of Partner Drinking	0.048	0.007	6.68	< .001	0.034	0.062
	Avoidant Attachment	0.057	0.015	3.78	< .001	0.027	0.086
	Frequency of Partner Drinking x Avoidant Attachment	0.038	0.005	7.15	< .001	0.028	0.049
	Male	0.035	0.031	1.14	.254	-0.025	0.096
	Relationship Length (Months)	-0.001	0.000	-2.34	.019	-0.001	-0.000
	Age	0.001	0.002	0.70	.482	-0.002	0.005
	Drinking Quantity	0.003	0.001	2.12	.034	0.000	0.005
	Anxious Attachment	0.049	0.013	3.65	< .001	0.023	0.076

Note. Gender was scored 0 = female, 1 = male.

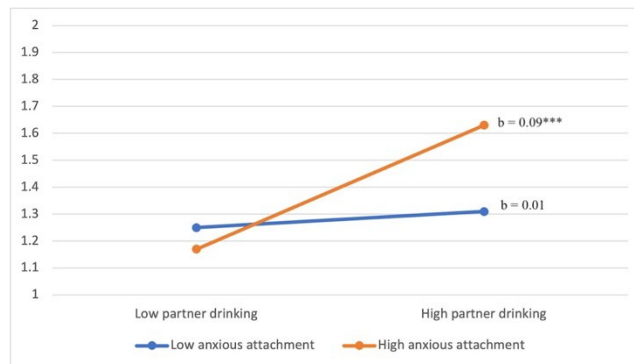


Figure 4. Interactive Effect of Partner Drinking and Anxious Attachment on Punishment

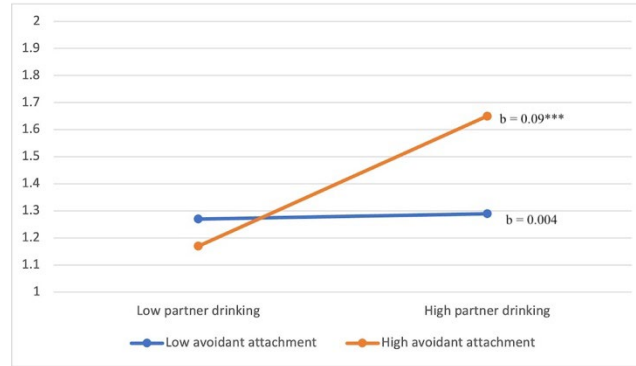


Figure 5. Interactive Effect of Partner Drinking and Avoidant Attachment on Punishment

Table 4. Reward

		<i>b</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	LLCI	ULCI
Anxious Moderator	(Constant)	3.188	0.180	17.76	< .001	2.836	3.541
	Concern About Partner Drinking	0.058	0.026	2.24	.025	.007	0.108
	Frequency of Partner Drinking	0.032	0.017	1.91	.057	-0.001	0.066
	Anxious Attachment	0.071	0.032	2.22	.027	0.008	0.133
	Frequency of Partner Drinking x Anxious Attachment	0.014	0.010	1.41	.159	-0.005	0.033
	Male	0.015	0.073	0.20	.840	-0.128	0.157
	Relationship Length (Months)	-0.000	0.001	-0.79	.430	-0.001	0.001
	Age	-0.000	0.004	-0.03	.979	-0.008	0.008
	Drinking Quantity	0.002	0.003	0.74	.463	-0.004	0.008
	Avoidant Attachment	-0.266	0.035	-7.53	< .001	-0.335	-0.020
Avoidant Moderator	(Constant)	1.139	0.292	3.90	< .001	0.566	1.712
	Frequency of Partner Drinking	0.293	0.022	13.43	< .001	0.250	0.336
	Avoidant Attachment	0.342	0.049	6.99	< .001	0.246	0.438
	Frequency of Partner Drinking x Avoidant Attachment	0.079	0.018	4.48	< .001	0.045	0.114
	Male	0.146	0.103	1.41	.159	-0.057	0.349
	Relationship Length (Months)	-0.001	0.001	-1.33	.185	-0.002	0.001
	Age	0.009	0.006	1.61	.108	-0.002	0.021
	Drinking Quantity	0.009	0.004	2.05	.041	0.000	0.017
	Anxious Attachment	0.176	0.045	3.92	< .001	0.088	0.264

Note. Gender was scored 0 = female, 1 = male.

The final research aim explored mediation. The results showed that the perception of a partner’s drinking mediates the relationship between actual partner drinking and punishment across all attachment types, with the effect being stronger for higher levels of both anxious attachment ($ab = 0.050$, 95% CI [0.034, 0.069] for those lower in anxious attachment, $ab = 0.083$, 95% CI [0.064, 0.103] for those higher in anxious attachment) and avoidant attachment ($ab = 0.046$, 95% CI [0.029, 0.065] for those lower in avoidant attachment, $ab = 0.088$, 95% CI [0.067, 0.111] for those higher in avoidant attachment).

Discussion

The findings from the study revealed that there is a connection between the frequency of a partner's drinking and the concern for their drinking issues for individuals higher in anxious attachment as well as those higher in avoidant attachment. Additionally, the results showed that individuals with higher levels of these attachment styles were more likely to exhibit punitive behaviors towards their partners who drink. On the other hand, offering rewards for abstaining did not show any significant influence, regardless of the level of anxious or avoidant attachment. These findings supported the hypothesis that those with higher anxious attachment would perceive a greater drinking problem and exhibit more punitive behaviors. However, the prediction that those with higher avoidant attachment would show the least concern and less punitive behavior for partner drinking was not supported. Instead, the findings concluded that individuals who were more insecurely attached were more likely to perceive a drinking problem and exhibit punitive behaviors towards their partners who drink regardless of whether their insecure attachment is anxious or avoidant. The final aim of the study revealed that the way a partner's drinking is perceived played a mediating role in the link between the partner's drinking and subsequent punishing behavior, a relationship that was more pronounced among those with higher levels of insecure attachment.

Limitations

This study, while providing insightful data on the links between attachment and perceptions and reactions to partner drinking in romantic relationships, had limitations that must be acknowledged.

The use of self-reported data introduced biases that could have impacted the accuracy of participants' responses. There was a risk that participants may have underreported their punitive reactions or minimized their partner's drinking habits, in order to conform to social norms. Additionally, the demographic makeup of the sample limited the generalizability of the findings. With a predominantly white and heterosexual sample, the findings may not reflect more diverse populations or other types of relationships.

Future Directions

Building upon these findings, future research could explore the long-term impact of partner drinking within the context of different attachment orientations with longitudinal studies. This

could uncover how perceptions and reactions to partner drinking evolve over time and how this differs with anxious and avoidant attachment levels. Additionally, research investigating the role of communication in relationships, considering attachment orientations, would be beneficial. It may highlight the need for effective communication strategies to mitigate negative perceptions and reaction to partner drinking in those with higher insecure attachment. The interplay between both partners' levels of attachment presents another area for future exploration and could further refine potential interventions. Lastly, expanding the research to include more non-traditional relationships, including those in the LGBTQ+ community, is critical for a comprehensive understanding of how levels of insecure attachment and alcohol consumption interact in different types of relationships.

Conclusion

Alcohol consumption is a major concern in many romantic relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore the dynamics between alcohol consumption in romantic relationships and the perception of a partner's drinking problem through the lens of attachment theory. The results showed that higher anxious and avoidant attachment levels predicted an increased perception of a partner's drinking problem and subsequent punishing behavior. This challenged parts of the initial hypothesis, predicting that partners who are more avoidantly attached would minimize the significance of a partner's drinking issues and engage in less punitive behaviors.

The study demonstrated that perceptions of a partner's drinking played a role in relationship dynamics, acting as a mediator between actual drinking habits and subsequent punishing behavior. This mediating relationship was stronger for greater levels of insecure attachment.

Understanding how alcohol consumption plays a role in romantic relationships and how perceptions differ across attachment orientations is critical for addressing potential conflicts, improving relationship satisfaction, and developing personalized interventions. The findings highlight the need for nuanced approaches to addressing drinking issues in romantic relationships, considering attachment.

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