

Exploring the Synergy Between Cultural Awareness and Co-culturing: Understanding Subjectivity, Relativity & Objectivity in Culture

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Abstract

Culture serves as a foundational instrument for societal advancement and development. In today's interconnected world, global collaborations have become increasingly prevalent, with professionals from different cultural backgrounds working together to drive innovation and achieve collective goals. The IT sector, in particular, thrives on diverse teams that bring together unique perspectives and skills. However, successful collaboration in a multicultural environment requires navigating the complexities of cultural differences and fostering effective co-culturing. This research paper aims to delve into the realm of co-culturing between Indian and Dutch IT professionals, recognizing the significance of cultural awareness as a foundation for fostering collaboration in terms of cultural subjectivity and relativity. This research has adopted a mixed-method approach to gather comprehensive and nuanced data. Qualitative methods, namely interviews and focus groups have been employed to capture the personal experiences, perspectives, and challenges faced by Indian and Dutch professionals in their co-culturing interactions. Further, it seeks to contribute valuable insights and recommendations to enhance co-culturing efforts and promote a harmonious work environment by understanding the cultural dynamics, challenges, and opportunities inherent in these interactions. Through the exploration of cultural awareness training and its impact on intercultural communication, this research aspires to build bridges and unlock the potential for synergy between Indian and Dutch colleagues in the IT sector, ultimately fostering innovation and improved outcomes in the industry.

Keywords: Cultural subjectivity, relativity, co-culturing, IT.

Introduction

When people from different cultural backgrounds come together with different perspectives, gestures and communication patterns are sometimes misread due to a lack of cultural awareness. Furthermore, with the increasingly diverse force in MNCs, cultural awareness is evolving as an imperative tool to communicate with other cultures. Along the same line, in a survey conducted by Holliday and MacDonald (2019) involving 1,154 global executives from various industries, 59% of respondents cited cultural integration issues as the primary reason for failed international joint ventures and mergers. The study emphasized the criticality of cultural alignment in achieving successful business collaborations. In a similar study, Shepherd (2019) examined a sample of 500 international ventures across diverse industries and geographical regions. Their findings indicated that a substantial majority, 70%, encountered significant obstacles and ultimately failed due to cultural disparities among the involved parties. Correspondingly, A study by Tubadji (2020) analysed a dataset comprising 1,000 international coordination projects. Their findings indicated a strong positive correlation between high levels of cultural intelligence among project leaders and the overall success rate of these ventures.



Figure 1: Cultural Awareness is key to Fruitful collaboration

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In a study between Dutch and Indian employees in the Netherlands' IT sector, it was found that the differences in behaviour and perception lead to misinterpretations, which hampers the potential of effective collaboration and cohesion at work.

For instance, there has been a prevailing notion or inference commonly observed that Indians find it tough to say “No” to their managers compared to Dutch folks who prefer straightforward communication. Hence 3 out of 10 Indians prefer to say no comfortably whereas 8 out of 10 Dutch shall say no comfortably in the Netherlands. Similarly, relative to Dutch, Indians are less assertive at occasions and discussions owing to their cultural build, whereas, in a well-set hierarchy, disagreement is considered disrespectful.

Hence, the Indians and the Dutch, who work together physically (in person) or through an onshore-offshore model (Virtually), have reasons to acquire a basic awareness of the cultural differences of the foreign land. This awareness is crucial not only for survival but also to avoid feeling alienated and to facilitate co-culturing harmony for mutual growth. On the same line as cultural awareness, there is a need to build up an objective approach to the decision-making process. Hence, in case of confusion in understanding the response, there should be a feedback session instead of misinterpretation based on stereotypes or preconceived notions. To summarise, for an effective and productive cross-cultural collaboration there is a need for cultural awareness and objectivity towards an approach to avoid the scope of biases and unfairness.

As can be seen, awareness is being conscious and attentive to the environment, events, and people around us. Hence **cultural awareness** is a sense of attentiveness towards others' cultural values, beliefs and thoughts (Barzykowski et al., 2019). However, in the process of attaining conscious thought, to develop cultural awareness, there is a need to harness subjectivity and relativity, to provide an unbiased and impartial view of reality.

Cultural subjectivity refers to the individual's personal perspective, interpretations, and experiences shaped by their cultural background and upbringing (Bellwood et al., 2014). while **Cultural relativity**

is the assumption that cultural beliefs, values and practices should be considered and evaluated within the context of that particular culture rather than applying universal standards or judgments (Holliday & MacDonald, 2019). As in the case of cultural subjectivity, Dutch can understand the gestures of Indians during conversation, by comparing the same with their open hand gestures while signifying a willingness to listen. While in terms of cultural relativity, India's communication pattern could be understood from an Indian cultural perspective considering their collaborative society and old civilisation (Mai, 2021). Therefore, cultural subjectivity will help in deriving commonalities while relativity is about accommodating differences. Collectively they both create a foundation to develop cultural awareness framework which is imperative in co-culturing practices for objective decision making.

Objectivity also serves as a guiding principle in identifying commonalities among diverse cultural practices. It enables researchers and practitioners to extract universal elements from cultural subjectivity, highlighting shared values and norms that transcend cultural boundaries. In the case of India, this could involve recognizing the fundamental importance of community, respect for elders, and the value of interconnectedness in communication. A clearer understanding of cultural subjectivity emerges by focusing on these shared aspects objectively.

Moreover, objectivity acts as a counterbalance to ensure that the exploration of cultural relativity remains sensitive and respectful. While cultural relativity encourages us to appreciate and accommodate differences in communication styles and norms, objectivity prevents us from adopting a relativistic standpoint that dismisses certain practices as inferior or superior. Instead, it promotes an empathetic approach that seeks to comprehend the historical, social, and contextual factors influencing cultural relativity. For instance, when examining variations in communication hierarchy or directness, an objective stance helps avoid overgeneralization and instead prompts an exploration of the reasons behind these differences.

Therefore, Objectivity serves as the foundational underpinning upon which an exhaustive comprehension of both cultural subjectivity and cultural relativity can be systematically constructed. It serves as a guiding principle that enables the discernment of shared fundamental components while concurrently embracing the multifaceted tapestry of cultural distinctions. Within this paradigm of objectivity, the process of co-culturing unfurls naturally, affording the harmonious amalgamation of disparate cultural vantage points.

Co-culturing refers to the process of cultivating a collaborative and inclusive work environment where individuals from different cultural backgrounds actively engage with and learn from one another.

This paper will utilise the above idea for studying the co-culturing between Indian and Dutch IT colleagues. The work will utilise the concept of subjectivity and relativity in culture to argue that cultural awareness is most important while considering co-culturing. There is a prevalence of cultural indifference that can be reduced by adopting different culturing techniques. This research proposes the "handshake model" and the "cultural cell ie., CAFÉ model" for enhancing co-culturing among employees. It also tries to argue that a sense of objectivity is required for administering co-culturing in workspaces. It may not only increase awareness but will require less effort in comprehending cross-cultural practices. It is to be studied whether this research can be used to establish that co-culturing is linked to unbiasedness and a conscious approach.

Hence, the research on this topic will fulfil the following objectives namely:

1. To identify and analyse the cultural challenges encountered by professionals from India and the Netherlands when collaborating in the IT sector.

2. To explore the potential opportunities that arise from the collaboration between Indian and Dutch colleagues in the IT sector.
3. To investigate the strategies and approaches employed by Indian and Dutch professionals in the IT work environment to navigate cultural differences effectively and foster a culture of co-culturing, considering the subjective nature of culture and its relativity in different contexts.

Finally, the research findings will contribute to developing the existing literature on cross-cultural collaboration and co-culturing in the IT sector, with a specific focus on the Indian and Dutch contexts by understanding the underlying subjectivity and relativity, along with its objective demonstration.

Literature Review

Cultural Challenges in Collaboration

Collaboration has become increasingly important in today's interconnected and globalized world. However, working in diverse cultural contexts presents unique challenges that can impact the effectiveness and outcomes of collaborative efforts. According to Hofstede's model cultural differences are based on dimensions of Power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, avoiding ambiguity, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint and so on. Hence, individuals from cultures with a high-power distance may exhibit a defence or minimization response when confronted with cultural differences, as they may feel threatened by the power dynamics or perceive a lack of respect. Conversely, individuals from cultures with a low power distance may be more accepting or adaptive in their approach, as they are accustomed to more egalitarian relationships. individuals' intercultural competence and contribute to more effective collaborative outcomes. Barzykowski et al. (2019) have studied how individuals' levels of intercultural sensitivity and cultural values impact their ability to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and establish trust in diverse teams.

According to the research conducted by Holliday and MacDonald (2019), cross-cultural collaboration is impacted by the lack of cultural awareness, communication and differences in work practices at various levels. Hence it could be construed that the communication barriers, work practices, and cultural misunderstandings due to a lack of cultural awareness are major cultural challenges faced within an organisation. However, according to the intellectual sensitivity model (Holliday & MacDonald, 2019), acceptance, adaptation, and integration of cultures can impact the cognitive and affective processes of individuals to integrate multiple cultural perspectives in the form of co-culturing.

Tracing the Evolution of Indian-Dutch Culture: Unveiling Cultural Subjectivity and Relativity

The evolution of culture occurs on the timeline of historical events, geography and social structure. The Netherlands' culture has been developed on the Calvinism value system, which emphasises total honesty, modesty, simplicity, and rejection of pleasure with a preference for truthfulness above empathy (Barzykowski et al., 2019). The value system has been developed over historical events, where the country has faced two world wars followed by the food and wage revolution. the country also witnessed the second feminist movement which has emphasised the assertion that females sacrificing more is against the law of nature (Thapa, 2019). Finally, in the year 1980-90, the country adopted the Polder model which emphasises consensus-based economy and social policy making. after 1980, the country opted for the patch of liberalism and developed an independent society.

In the case of India (IN), the country has an ancient Indus Valley civilisation which has been the foundation for its culture, region and social structure hierarchy. Thereafter, Medieval and colonial India shaped its art food and culture with lasting impact. Post-independence (Aug 15, 1947), the country has witnessed economic liberalisation post-1991 which paved the path for contemporary technological advancement and developing transitional society (Bellwood et al., 2014). These historical evolutions have created a value system for the country which is based on family, hierarchy, empathy, tolerance, generosity and hospitality.

From the above historical analysis, the Indian and Netherlands cultures can be compared in terms of population, characteristics, societal functioning and management leadership. In terms of population Netherlands' population in contrast less than India, with the former being a developed while later being a developing economy (Smith & Paracka, 2018). Furthermore, the Netherlands (NL) follows a polder model with flat express while India follows a hierarchical top-down impress structure. In the case of societal functioning, the NL population is comparatively relaxed with an individual societal approach while IN has a busy collective society in place.

The evolution of Indian-Dutch culture offers a compelling framework to delve into the realms of cultural subjectivity and relativity. Examining the historical trajectory of these two distinct cultures and their gradual convergence provides valuable insights into how cultural norms, values, and communication patterns have developed over time. By scrutinizing this evolution, one can discern the unique ways in which each culture has subjectively interpreted and responded to external influences, while also uncovering the relativity inherent in their interactions.

The Subjective Nature of Culture and Its Relativity in Fostering Co- Culturing

Culture is a subjective and multifaceted construct that shapes individuals' beliefs, values, behaviours, and interactions. According to Shepherd (2019), culture comprises "webs of significance" that are shared among members of a social group. These shared meanings give structure and orientation to human existence. As stated by Rojas- Barreto (2018), culture is not an objective reality but rather a set of interpretations and understandings that individuals within a group hold. According to Mai (2021), the subjectivity of culture is reinforced by Msuya (2019) who argues that culture is not an inherent attribute but is constructed through social processes and shared practices

This relativity of culture is elaborated by Holliday and MacDonald (2019), who emphasizes the contextual variability of culture and the need for cross-cultural sensitivity and adaptation. In fostering co-culturing, reflexivity becomes crucial, as highlighted by Holliday and MacDonald (2019), who advocate for critical self-reflection and awareness of one's cultural assumptions and biases. By acknowledging the subjective nature of culture and its relativity, individuals and organizations can navigate cultural diversity with empathy, open dialogue, and a commitment to ongoing learning to foster healthy co-culturing.

Research Gap

There has been much research conducted on cultural awareness and communication, however recent research lack on the integration of cultural awareness with its subjectivity, relativity and objectivity for co-culturing. Especially in contact with IT organisations with diverse workforces from Asia and Europe. Specifically, there is a considerable research gap about the unique cultural problems faced by experts from India and the Netherlands while collaborating in this field, despite the increased emphasis

on cultural diversity and the trend of international partnerships in the IT sector. Without diving into the context of the IT industry or the Indian-Dutch partnership, the existing research mostly focuses on general cross-cultural difficulties. To develop effective collaboration and maximise the potential advantages of cultural diversity, research is required that examines the particular cultural barriers that are faced in this particular environment.

Hypothesis

To fulfil the above research, gap the following hypothesis has been developed:

H 1: Cultural challenges impact an effective collaboration between professionals/employees from India (IN) and the Netherlands (NL).

H2: Co-culturing through cultural awareness will foster potential opportunities for collaboration between INE and NLE in the IT sector. Where Curiosity is a Key.

H 3: There is a need for Effective strategies and approaches for navigating cultural differences in the IT work environment, leading to enhanced knowledge exchange, innovative problem-solving, and creativity.

Research Methodology

This study has embraced a mixed-methods strategy to comprehensively gather nuanced insights into the cultural obstacles, co-culturing encounters, and viewpoints of Indian and Dutch professionals engaged in the IT sector within the Netherlands. A purposeful selection process has yielded a sample size of 100 individuals, comprising IT sector employees of Indian and Dutch origin who are presently active in the Netherlands. Qualitative methodologies, encompassing interviews and focus groups, have been harnessed to capture the personal narratives, perspectives, and challenges encountered by these professionals amid their co-culturing engagements. Semi-structured interviews have been conducted to delve deeply into their insights, while focus groups have facilitated collective dialogues to explore communal experiences and potential remedies.

The qualitative data amassed has been transcribed, followed by the development of a questionnaire tailored to the research objectives and hypotheses. This questionnaire employs a Likert scale with a range of 1 to 10 to gauge participants' perceptions. By combining the qualitative and quantitative findings, a comprehensive portrayal of the cultural hurdles and co-culturing journeys of Indian and Dutch IT professionals operating within the Netherlands is anticipated.

In terms of methodology, a bracketing mechanism has been adopted to validate the research process and outcomes. This approach involves temporarily setting aside one's preconceptions, biases, and personal interpretations, thus ensuring that participants' perspectives and research materials remain untainted by the researcher's predispositions or preconceived notions.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

Data Analysis

Erin Meyer's 'The culture map' encompassing eight cultural scales, i.e., communication, evaluating, persuading, leading, deciding, trusting, disputing, and scheduling, was used to analyze the respondent's responses. The communication has been measured for the range of implicit to explicit in low to high context.

It has been observed that the NLE have a low context in communication, which is construed to be straight, concise and clear. Messages are mostly conveyed at actual value with an appreciation for repetition, to clarify the communication.

In the case of INE a sophisticated, nuanced and layered communication with high context on the implicit-explicit scale. Hence the message is both spoken and read between the lines. Additionally, it has been observed that the messages are implied but not plainly expressed. Similarly, in the case of evaluation, NLE prefer direct negative feedback while INE opted for indirect negative feedback in most of the cases.

However, these communication misunderstanding leads to misinterpretation of instructions and ideas, resulting in errors and inefficiencies. Furthermore, body language and gestures, which are non-verbal indicators, may be interpreted differently between cultures, resulting in strained interactions and less cooperation. Additionally, different cultural expectations regarding work habits, deadlines, and priorities can create misalignment and hinder productivity. Hence cultural awareness is an imperative measure for interpretative communication efficiently within the realm of cultural subjectivity and relativity. and the same could be achieved with the co-culturing,

On the same line, for the persuading purpose, the result has been evaluated on the concept first and Application first approach. It has been established that the INE takes a concept-first approach, in which people are instructed to create the theory of a complex issue before providing facts, statements, and opinions. The preference has been to develop a theoretical argument at the outset of a message or report before concluding. Additionally, the intellectual underpinning of each circumstance is valued. However, in the case of NLE, the employees are more fact-oriented and the concept is applied as a backup to support the former. In the case of conveying a report executive summary or bullet point is preferred with a practical approach to discussion, avoiding theory and concepts.

In the case of the Leading role, the results have been, measured on the scale from egalitarian to hierarchical approaches. It has been observed that the NLE opt more for an egalitarian approach, by maintaining a low ideal distance between the boss and subordinates. The one who acts as a facilitator among equals is more popular in a flat organisational structure. In most cases, communication skips the hierarchal lines. However, in the case of INE, a hierarchical approach is adopted with a high ideal distance between the boss and subordinates. Organisation structures are multi-layered and fixed with a flow of communication within the set of hierarchical lines.

Similarly, in the case of a decision, it has been observed that the NLE have a more consensual approach with an effort to consider all team members' preferences. In the case of INE, it has more of a top-down approach where decisions are conveyed over hierarchy. The case of trusting, it's built on business-related activities, where work relationships are built and dropped easily. These bonds are built quickly and with a formal approach. While in the case of INE, trust is built through human activities like informal communication over coffee machines, food, and drinks. These bonds are built gradually over a long period with a deep level of trust.

In the case of disagreeing, the response has been analysed on the scale of confrontational to a non-confrontational approach to a situation. It has been observed that the NLE have a confrontational approach towards the team or organisation. However, these confrontations are more categorised in a positive approach without any negative impact on the relationship. However, in the case of INE, their approach is more non-confrontational where disagreement and debate are considered negative stimuli to break the group harmony.

On a similar note, in the case of scheduling NLE opt for linear time, where one project is completed before beginning the next, without any overlapping. Meanwhile, the main focus remains on deadlines,

with an emphasis on promptness. In contrast, INE approaches tasks fluidly, accepting overlaps, pauses, and hinges at all levels. In the organisation, flexibility and adaptation are more in the spotlight.

Data Interpretation

From the data analysis, it could be interpreted that if the cultural gap between the two different cultural background will not be bridged, it will lead to a stretched situation which will hamper collaboration at a professional level and leads to a stereotypical societal division with could create further political issues in future.

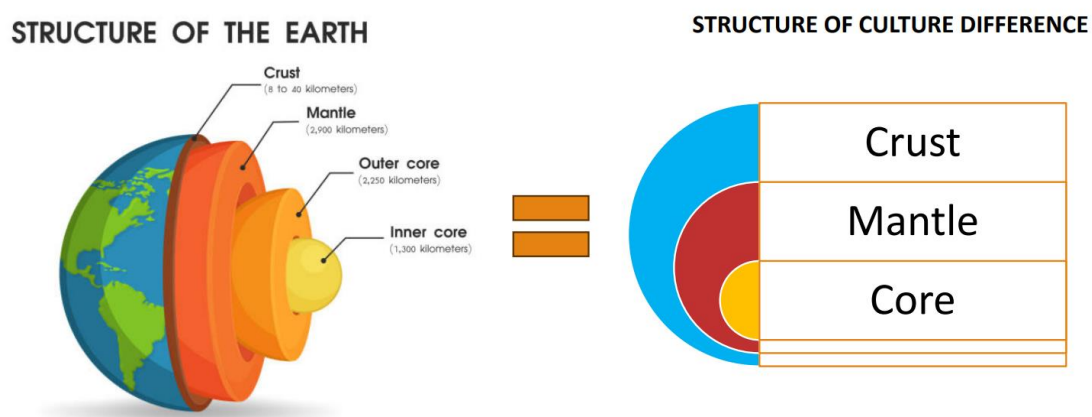


Figure 2 : (Note: For illustration purpose only) Relation between earth structure and culture

Bridging the cultural gap begins with co-culturing which could be practised in a layered form, compared to the Earth's structure, namely at the mantle, crust, and core level. At the core level, there is a need to understand the base of both societies which is the foundation of their respective culture (Holliday & MacDonald, 2019). On a characteristic basis, the Netherlands (NL) is a developed country with a relatively low population while India(IN) is a highly populated developing country. Hence, in the case of the Netherlands, a relaxed society has been developed while it leads to a busy occupied society for India. Thereafter, the Netherlands has a well-managed administrative system at a place which takes care of health, job loss, and other amenities, which is relatively in a very nascent stage in the case of India. These all led to the creation of a less competitive population in the Netherlands(NL) while a more competitive one in the case of India. Therefore, the former speaks to listen while the latter speaks to speak out.

Similarly, on the crust level, the cultural differences between the Dutch (NL) and Indians (IN) are evident in various aspects. For example, In terms of approachability, the Dutch tend to be more rigid, while Indians are relatively fluid in their approach. The Dutch believe in working while working and playing while playing, whereas Indians often integrate work and play simultaneously.

These differences should be understood in relative terms, and it is important to have basic cultural awareness at both the workplace and personal levels. Additionally, consciousness, curiosity, and watchfulness are common traits in both Dutch and Indian cultures, with some variations in approaches to processes and systems. The Dutch often prioritize personal life, while Indians tend to focus more on professional skills in their approach.

Finally, at a core level, the evolution of both societies at a timeline has created their cultural practices and perceptions. The Dutch and Indian value systems reflect distinct cultural perspectives. In the Dutch

value system, there is a strong emphasis on time management, directness, honesty, talent, and prioritizing truthfulness over empathy. This can be attributed to the historic prevalence of Calvinism, which has influenced Dutch society.

On the other hand, the Indian value system places great importance on family, respect for elders and higher-ups, duty sense, empathy, tolerance, hospitality, and generosity. Family is considered the cornerstone of Indian society, with strong bonds and respect for elders. There is a deep sense of duty towards fulfilling responsibilities and obligations. Empathy towards others is valued, along with a high degree of tolerance for different perspectives and beliefs. Hospitality and generosity are seen as virtues, with an emphasis on welcoming and supporting others.

Recommendation & Conclusion

Cultural differences significantly impact global business, particularly in the context of the Netherlands and India. Organizations are advised to develop an awareness of these cultural differences at the country level and within the work and personal spheres. This awareness allows for better understanding, effective communication, and successful collaboration between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This research proposes two models for fostering cultural curiosity to support co-culturing. These models can be viewed as a practical approach to bridging cultural gaps and advancing cultural understanding. Establishing these models within the organization can ensure long-term commitment to cultural integration and create an environment that values diversity. These models are named as “handshake” and “cultural cell ie., CAFE” models.

The primary objective of the "Handshake Model" will be to transcend unilateral cultural adaptation, emphasizing the importance of a reciprocal exchange of cultural assimilation and adjustment. The model may recognize that both parties, rather than just one, should engage in efforts to understand and adapt to each other's cultural nuances. This stands in contrast to the notion that only individuals from one cultural background need to comprehend the intricacies of the other.

For example, the model rejects the idea that only Indians should immerse themselves in comprehending Dutch cultural norms. Instead, it emphasizes the necessity for both parties to make analogous efforts. An illustrative instance involves an Indian individual adjusting their nodding style to align with the Dutch way of indicating agreement or disagreement. This adjustment significantly improved communication. Additionally, understanding Dutch cultural values led to the adoption of direct expressions of disagreement, willingness to learn, and persistent inquiry to achieve clarity. An open and honest expression of viewpoints, in line with Dutch cultural ethos, was also integrated.

Similarly, there are expectations of reciprocal adjustments from Dutch colleagues. These include adopting an inquisitive communication approach, interpreting nuanced cues of agreement from hesitant Indian affirmations, understanding the delicacies of delivering constructive feedback in the Indian context, employing considerate communication instead of direct binary responses, and facilitating the integration of Indian members into the team through acknowledgement of their hospitality-oriented approach.

In conclusion, the model may underscore the necessity for a reciprocal transformation from both parties, akin to a metaphorical handshake, to achieve genuine cultural alignment. To ensure the sustained fusion of cultures within an organization, a structured approach like the CAFÉ (Cultural Awareness, Facilitation, and Exchange) framework or cultural cell is proposed. This framework consists of various phases, including awareness-raising sessions, personalized cultural mentoring, practical workshops to address disparities, conflict resolution mechanisms, and the appointment of

cultural ambassadors. Such a comprehensive approach recognizes that achieving intercultural harmony necessitates collaborative efforts beyond individual capacities.

By embracing cultural differences and implementing strategies to bridge them, organizations can navigate global business challenges more effectively and promote sustainable growth and success. Further research on the suggested model can help enhance the efficacy of co-culturing that can be further implemented sociologically to achieve cultural intelligence.

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