

A Content Analysis of WhatsApp Status Notifications in Human Communication

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Abstract

*Social media (SM) has become a popular means of communication among people across ages the world over. This case study sought to investigate the significance of status notifications which people attach to their WhatsApp accounts and how inferences could be drawn about the character, emotional states and general view of life of the individuals involved. WhatsApp Messenger is widely viewed as one of the most convenient modes of transmitting information as compared to traditional methods and even contemporary means like voice calls using cellular phones, hence its prevalent use. The application was designed to facilitate communication between individuals or groups in the form of text messages, pictures and audio messages online. Therefore, the researchers considered it vital to investigate the messages people communicate through their status notifications. Such naturally occurring data were collected from the two researchers' personal cell phone contacts. Being qualitative, the study adopted the purposive sampling technique and data, presented in thematic descriptive narrative form were interpreted through content analysis. The data revealed that people sought to communicate a plethora of issues which range from religious, personal or emotional issues, love, totems and popular sayings of a humorous nature, among other pertinent social issues. Such communication was found to be invaluable as it provides important insights into the way human beings in general interact and live in the digital world. The study also revealed that WhatsApp statuses are a very important means of communication and recommends that they should be taken seriously in our endeavour to gain deeper insights into human communication. **Key words:** WhatsApp, social media, communication, status notifications, sociolinguistic value.*

Background

The advent of technology has made it imperative for communicators to embrace digital communication for ease of doing everyday business and in ordinary communication. Blabst and Diefenbach (2017: 1) posit that "Next to the classic face-to-face communication or the good old phone call, instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp become a central communication channel and means to maintain relationships." The use of the cellular phone

has gained significant ground in the past two decades, making information dissemination fast, convenient and cost-effective, among other benefits. Chen (2012:1) observes that “. . . innovations in digital media, or so-called new media, have changed and continue to change the way we think, act, and live.” Of late, social media use, and indeed WhatsApp Messenger (WAM) use have taken centre-stage as people, despite their age; have become almost obsessed with subscribing to and communicating through this application. Due to the prevalent use of such a means of communication, some researchers have realised that communication on such a platform warrants research, ranging from the nature of the actual messages communicated, the impact of short message texting on ‘Standard English’, to the merits and demerits of communicating through social media. Text messaging has been found to have a negative effect on literacy and ‘Standard English’. Bhatt and Arshad (2016: 376) concur that “. . . whatsapp [sic] has also a profound negative impact on youth and adversely affects their education, behaviour and routine lives”. Crystal (2009) and Shankar et al. (2010) also observe that human beings adapt to the technology that they use and such has an impact on the varieties of the language that they use. In addition, Shafie, Osman and Darus (2011), as well as Mapako and Mareva (2017) also make important observations on the prevalence of social media use and that it has both benefits and pitfalls, particularly on the written form of language .

In this study, we focus on WhatsApp status notifications. We believe that these notifications are a crucial means of communication and that deeper insight could be gained into the meanings which are transmitted. Previous studies appear to have focused more on the merits and demerits of using social media in general (Wang, Chen & Liang, 2011) and WAM in particular (Bhatt & Arshad, 2016; Mapako & Mareva, 2017). Apparently, very little has been done in attempting to gain deeper insight into the sociolinguistic value of WAM status notifications. Owing to this, the current study seeks to fill this gap.

Concept of communication

Communication is a complex process in which people share information using codes or different forms of behaviour in an attempt to understand each other and their surroundings. According to Taylor (2001:4), communication can be defined as the process of “. . . giving, receiving or exchanging information, opinions or ideas by writing, speech or visual means, so that the message communicated is completely understood by the recipients. “Wood (2009:3)

also posits that “Communication is a systematic process in which people interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings.” From these observations, it is clear that at the centre of communication is the endeavour, by interlocutors, to understand or decipher the meanings of the common symbols that they use. The symbols are either verbal, non-verbal or any other behaviour perceived to have communicative value. In this study, we argue that status notifications are a means of communication through which people seek to disseminate some information about themselves and others in their societies.

Problem statement

There is, indeed, widespread use of WhatsApp Messenger in Zimbabwe and across the globe. Users tend to deliberately craft messages that they post on their accounts and this observation spurred the researchers to gather such messages for content analysis, in order to find out users’ motives and the sociolinguistic significance of these status notifications in the Zimbabwean context. The diversity of topics that these notifications tended to cover also motivated the researchers, who then saw it was necessary to investigate some of the motives behind and the perceived meanings that can be attached to such posts. The study also sought to fill the gap as advised by Al-Khawaldeh, Bani-Khair, Mashaqba and Huneety (2016: 160), that “Discourses drawn from social media sites are suitable for corpus linguistic studies as they are digital, abundant and natural.” In addition, Stidham (2014) observes that compared to other fields, research on online social networking language usage is still in its infancy. Consequently, the current research sought to complement such studies. While Bhatt and Arshad (2016: 376) studied the impact of WhatsApp on youth and “. . . found that whatsapp [sic] has also a profound negative impact on youth and adversely affects their education, behaviour and routine lives”, there is a yawning gap with regards to studying the motives and meanings of the messages that people post as WhatsApp notifications, which became the purpose of the current study. This research is also a follow-up to an earlier publication by the same authors, Mapako and Mareva (2017), on the impact of social media on teaching and learning at university level whose findings complement other studies in that WAM has had a profound impact on teaching and learning at university level.

Literature review

Digital communication has generated interest in researchers the world over. Shankar, Venkatesh, Hofacker and Naik (2010: 11) posit that “Mobile devices are becoming ubiquitous. There is an explosion worldwide in the use of hand-held electronic communication devices . .

. and Internet access devices.” As a result, societies have embraced and adopted their use in their everyday communication, especially through social networking sites. Salem (2013) observes that social media has significantly influenced the social and cultural textures of our society by revolutionising the way people communicate and socialise. Alassiri et al. (2014: 48) concur that “The social networking sites have flourished and have become part of the internet mainstream allowing users to communicate, interact and develop social sites.” From the corpus of available literature on research into social media use, there seems to be a shift from general to specific platforms and particular aspects of language use. Attempts have been made to demonstrate the influence of such social media use on formal language use (Crystal, 2009; Thurlow, 2006; Baron, 2009; Farina & Lyddy, 2011) and on teaching and learning in general (Mapako & Mareva, 2017). Anglo (2014: 201) also argues that:

The introduction of sophisticated communication services over the Internet, allowing users to exchange textual messages as well as audio, video and image files, has changed the way people interact among them [*sic*]. The use of these services, broadly named *instant messaging* (IM), has undoubtedly exploded in the past years, mainly thanks to the pervasiveness of smartphones that provide quite sophisticated IM applications.

WhatsApp has extended learning beyond the limits imposed by the normal schedules like timetables for lecturer-student interaction, making it possible for students to seek guidance from their teachers or lecturers even when they are physically separated. Thus, Nitza and Roman (2016) observe that the WhatsApp app has some academic benefits evidenced by the availability of the teacher and learning continued beyond class timetables, and afforded students rapid access to relevant study materials. Moreover, Bhatt and Arshad (2016: 384) argue that “.

. . WhatsApp is much quicker and more convenient way to interact with people which enhance [*sic*] the effective flow of messages and ideas among youth.”

From the above observations, it can be noted that increased access to the Internet has made communication easier and more convenient. Authors cited attest to the benefits of WhatsApp to teaching and learning in general.

Now, there is a deliberate attempt to engage in research on more specific social media platforms such as WhatsApp and examine the nature of the language that users employ and attempt to interpret such status notifications. According to Anglano (2014: 6):

WhatsApp provides its users with various forms of communications, namely user-to-user communications, broadcast messages, and group chats. When communicating, users may exchange plain text messages, as well as multimedia files (containing images, audio and video), contact cards and geolocation information.

Alassiri et al. (2014) concur that social networking sites afford users the opportunity to communicate ideas, pictures, posts, activities, events and interests among members in their networks. In addition, Al-Khawaldeh, Bani-Khair, Mashaqba and Huneety (2016: 158) assert that:

People express themselves by writing in WhatsApp's notification status. Through these written texts, users openly share their thoughts, and emotions with their friends, colleagues and acquaintances. It was also found out that notifications-based assessments constitute a valid reflection of the status of its users and their society as a whole

However, Chen (2012) argues that the different forms of media representations which people make inevitably lead to the problem of intercultural communication or conflict in interpersonal, group or national level. It should be noted that, whilst the researchers were cognisant of the attendant demerits of WAM use, it was beyond the scope of the current study. In addition, as far as it could be ascertained, no study had been carried on the subject of status notifications. From the observations made above, it was justifiable that research into the perceived meanings of these notifications be done in order to gain deeper insights into human communication.

Objectives

The study sought to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine the prevalence of WAM usage among the researchers' social networking community.

- To investigate the sociolinguistic implications of status notifications posted by WAM users.
- To make recommendations which may stimulate further research into status notifications in human communication.

Research methodology

The research adopted qualitative methodology, with a case study as its design. According to Kothari and Garg (2014:3), qualitative research is especially important in the behavioural sciences where researchers aim to discover the underlying motives of human behaviour. Through this endeavour, researchers may have the ability to analyse the various factors which motivate people to behave in a particular manner “The case study method is a very popular form of qualitative analysis and involves a careful and complete observation of a social unit, be that unit a person, a family, an institution, a cultural group or even the entire community” (Kothari & Garg, 2014:109). This paper sought to analyse the different feelings and views as communicated through WhatsApp posts, an analysis that could be rare in its nature and scope. A case study can be defined as an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units (Gustafsson, 2017). For the current study, the researchers observed a trend in the way WAM users tended to post potentially interesting status notifications. In line with this view, Silverman (2014:9) observes that “. . . if you are concerned with exploring people’s life-histories, or everyday behaviour, then qualitative methods may be favoured.” Status notifications are people’s everyday behaviour, with some keeping statuses for not later than a day. With such frequency of change, we considered such corpus of data to be significant enough to warrant scrutiny, hence this study. The study adopted the purposive sampling technique, which was considered to be the most appropriate because researchers also used the WhatsApp Messenger and the people with whom they conversed everyday were viewed as an easy and rich source of such information vital to the study. The technique was also justifiable because the researchers would not have to incur additional costs of travelling to ‘the site’ to gather data as it was readily available on the WAM platform.

Data were collected from our contacts’ WAM status notifications and were analysed through content analysis and presented largely in narrative form. For ethical considerations, the identity of the sources used remained anonymous and the information was kept confidential and used

only for the purposes of this study. The interpretations made do not, in any way, reflect the intended meanings of the sources but remain mere inferences made by the researchers for purposes of this study only. Data were collected over a period of three months, from four hundred contacts who were connected to WAM. However, it should be noted that only those posts that were perceived to have communicative value were gathered and used for purposes of this research paper. Broadly defined, content analysis is “any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages” (Holsri, cited in Berg, 2001: 240)

The sample comprised quite a wide spectrum of users cutting across age and gender and from different socio-economic persuasions (as inferred from the contacts). Thus, the sample was varied enough to be considered a wealthy source of information for purposes of the study.

Limitations of the study

The interpretations made through content analysis could be complemented by insights gained through interviewing sources but, knowing the potential deceptive tendencies of human beings in general, of attempting to hide their actual motives and/or meanings, we thought that it was pertinent to make our own interpretations, in the same way others would in ordinary communication. Analyses of notifications with respect to gender and age were beyond the scope of the current study. The study was also limited in that it did not seek to consider other forms of posts like videos and pictures, which could be considered for further studies. The researchers concentrated on notifications which were in narrative form only.

Findings and discussion

The research revealed that more than 80% of the two researchers’ personal contacts were WAM users and were effectively utilising the status notifications facility, indicating that WAM use was quite prevalent. Such communication was found to be invaluable as it provides important insights into the way human beings in general, and Zimbabweans in particular, interact and live in the digital world. The results, like in a study by Al-Khawaldeh, Bani-Khair, Mashaqba and Huneety (2016: 158), showed that notifications “were a revelation of personal, social, religious and political issues [which] the users are concerned about.” Data were thematically presented in tabular and narrative forms and analysed for their sociolinguistic value in the

context of a multicultural data source. While it is the practice in case studies that the researcher should compare the results to facts in published literature (Gustafsson, 2017), it should be noted that research into WhatsApp status notifications is still in its infancy. As a result, most findings are illustrative of a new trend in disseminating information. It should be noted that the researchers did not seek to collect all the status notifications, ranging from long to short term displays, but collected only those that were perceived to have potential communicative value. An attempt was made to consider the sociolinguistic implications of these posts, with the view to gaining deeper insights into human communication. According to Wardhaugh (2010: 14), “Sociolinguistics is that branch of linguistics which studies just those properties of language and languages which require reference to social, including contextual, factors in their explanation.” Our interpretations of the status notifications were in no way considered accurately representing the actual and/or intended meanings of the source but remained as perceived by the researchers just like any other contact would also try to make sense of such. The data revealed that people sought to communicate a plethora of issues which range from religion, emotional states, totems, proverbs and popular sayings of a humorous nature, among many other pertinent issues, thus confirming findings by Al-Kwawaldeh, Bani-Khair, Mashaqba and Huneety (2016).

The study categorised the status notifications thematically thus:

Religious

Status notification	Perceived sociolinguistic value/meaning
1. God is a specialist of impossibilities! /God of impossibilities.	Advice directed to others to pray so as to overcome the seemingly insurmountable challenges.
2. Life without Christ is crisis.	While there is some attempt at rhyme with “CHRIST” and “CRISIS”, it could also be an attempt to encourage others to put all faith of achievement in the Almighty.
3. <i>Mweyawanguunoti</i> “ <i>Tenzindiyemufudziwangu,</i> <i>ndichavimbanaye.</i> ”	My soul says, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I will have faith in Him.”
4. If God says yes, who says no?	The faith in the Lord being supreme.
5. The determinants of every progress are God and time!	Celebrating God as capable.

6. God is love, whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him!	The person is simply preaching the gospel of love among human beings, taking a cue from the Almighty who loves all without discriminating.
7. <i>Inyashadzakedzoga!</i>	It's His grace throughout!
8. <i>NdozvapakunaMwarimupiwazvose.</i> I leave everything in God, the provider of everything!	
9. My boss is a Jewish carpenter.	Jesus perceived as presiding over all business.
10. Things change, people change..... <i>kunaMwarikudenga!</i>	Change is inevitable because there is God in Heaven.
11. Keep holding on; <i>ndorambiraipapo.</i> Evoking a religious song that encourages people not to move away from Christ (<i>Ndorambiraipapo literally means I will not move an inch from Christ where I stand</i>).	
12. Greater is He who is in me than he who is in the world.	The person prides in God (He) than Satan (he) and the latter's worldly benefits.
13. <i>Musikitinotenda.</i>	Almighty we thank you [Trans]

The data in the table above revealed that people sought to communicate issues that show their religious affiliations. The findings confirmed earlier studies carried out elsewhere. For instance, Al-Khawaldeh, Bani-Khair, Mashaqba and Huneety (2016: 162) observe that status updates “provide invaluable data that reflect the collective everyday life, social problems, values, rituals and feelings of the individuals of that particular culture. “Every society has its own culture and set of beliefs that, to a large extent, seek to keep it homogeneous and intact and these are sometimes articulated through WAM status notifications. Christianity is one such unifier and people express such beliefs on their WAM statuses. Blabst and Diefenbach (2017) also found that communication technologies such as WhatsApp provide a channel for meaningful and emotional exchange between people. From the above sample of status notifications, it is evident that Christianity is widely practised in Zimbabwe and people's faith in God manifests itself in the status notifications that they post on the WAM platform. There is evidence of everlasting faith in God's providence, for example, “God of impossibilities” and “The determinants of every progress are God and time!” Faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges, the users continue to derive power to succeed because God is omnipresent and can never abandon his people, hence “God of impossibilities”. According to these posts, the

Zimbabwean society is religious and it derives power from everlasting faith in the Lord. Failure is not an option because the Almighty is ever vigilant. As such, people remain confident that their unwavering belief in the power of the Almighty will set them free from all forms of affliction, regardless of their magnitude. Access to such emotional recesses could only be gained through analysing the status notifications posted by people, which corroborate observations by Blabst and Diefenbach (2017) that these are meaningful exchanges.

The motives of such posts could be traced to the biting socio-economic situation and the prevalence of Christianity in Zimbabwe. The users could be admitting their incapacity to deal with certain challenges and their posts could be a manifestation of their determination to seek Divine intervention in the face of despair.

Some posts sought to celebrate the Kingdom of Heaven as in “Life without Christ is crisis” which could also be an attempt to encourage others to put all faith of achievement in the Almighty. The researchers also felt that the other was a subtle motive to spread Christianity.

Personal

There were also status notifications which were personal and sought to communicate the emotional state of the source, with important implications on personal relations. These included the following:

1. “In 3 words, I can sum up everything I have learnt in life . . . LIFE GOES ON.”
2. “Forward ever, backward never. You can’t change your past but your future.”
3. “No raging storm can ever defy my faith.”
4. “Sweet comes from sweat *Ndirimutadziakaregererwa, naJesundakasunungurwakwazvo*” (I am a sinner whom Jesus has, indeed, freed [Trans]).
5. “Tough times don’t last, tough people do!”
6. “You are special.”
7. “Above the clouds of despair, the sun is always shining.”
8. “*Zvinoitavamwe*” [Emulating the good that others are doing (Trans)]

The notifications in the examples above provide important insights into the faith that the sources have regarding their daily lives. It is evident that people post messages on their status platforms to communicate their resilience even in the face of despair, revealing that some people are prepared to go the extra mile in order to realise their ambitions. For example,

“Forward ever, backward never. You can’t change your past but your future.” This communicates everlasting hope and the post may seek to encourage others to remain hopeful that they have the ability to change their status, just like in “Above the clouds of despair, the sun is always shining.” In another post, “*Zvinoitavamwe*”(What others are doing) is a call for acquaintances to emulate the hard work and progress that others are making in life, a kind of counselling which is a vital aspect of human communication meant to encourage those in despair.

In other posts, the sources may appear to have succumbed to the challenges bedevilling them but there is still some hope for success. Since the person is still alive, he or she still hopes for the better e.g. “In 3 words, I can sum up everything I have learnt in life . . . LIFE GOES ON” and “No raging storm can ever defy my faith.” The implications are that the sources might be seeking to appeal to others that there is no challenge that is insurmountable; hence the need to fight harder each time an individual faces a challenge. These confirm findings by Alassiri et al. (2014) that social networking sites allow users to share ideas.

Love

Love is another crucial aspect of mankind which some posts sought to communicate thereby providing deep insights into their feelings. For example “Love is a powerful cleansing agent, it doesn’t just cover one mistake but a multitude of sins”/ “I *luv* my wife, she is cute”/ “*Ndipopakadamoyowangu*” [This is where my heart is (Trans)]/ “*Luv*ed”/ “Awesome”/ “This is what cute looks like, I *luv* you . . .” (name withheld for confidentiality). These posts seek to celebrate love and the sources seem ecstatic in their various affairs; seek to quench their yearnings by posting on their statuses. Another, very interesting mouthful post was “The wedding ring is the smallest handcuff ever made, so choose your prison mate carefully and sentence yourself wisely to avoid jailbreak.” While it was found to be partly humorous, it was also some useful advice on choosing partners in order to minimise chances of divorcing or regretting one’s choice for the rest of one’s life as such matrimony would be a kind of immurement. Although in real life we know that matters of love are controversial and complicated, in these posts, the notifications have serious ramifications on communication and reveal strong determination to momentarily forget such and simply reflect on the soothing effect of love. Love is indeed celebrated and this has important implications on human communication in general. The results of this study substantiate findings by Al-Khawaldeh,

Bani-Khair, Mashaqba and Huneety (2016) that individuals communicate their feelings through these status updates.

Totems

In addition to the above themes, some contacts posted notifications that reflected their totemic orientations. In the traditional African context in general, and the Zimbabwean context in particular, totems, which are largely drawn from the animal kingdom, are a very important aspect that people brag about, a kind of heritage that people pass on to future generations. Dagba, Saambe and Shomkegh (2013) observe that most African cultures use special names and emblems to refer to the totem and those it sponsors engage in partial identification with the totem or symbolic assimilation to it. Such names have important sociolinguistic value as they imply an individual's ethnic orientations and a strong aspect of an individual's identity. These include posts such as "*Shumbachikara*" (Lion, King of the Jungle)/ "*Boss Shumba*" [*Boss of the Lion totem*]. The source was bragging about themselves as King of the Jungle. This is a totem shared by a relatively big percentage of the Zimbabwean community and they pride in their numbers. Mangena (2013) avers that a person whose totem is *shumba* (lion) refers to him/herself as a lion, one of a few beings on earth who has acts of bravery. "*Chikandamina*" [Of the porcupine totem] an animal believed to be good in self-defence. This also has connotations on their sexual prowess. "*Moyowangu/GonoMatake/Chirandu*" (Of the ubiquitous Moyo totem) was also common on status notifications, implying that sources bragged about their identity and were proud to be associated with such. Another post was "*Save/PakuruVaGurajena*" (A totem deriving from the mighty Save River that empties itself into the Indian Ocean) which also revealed that people cherished their diverse identities as per their tradition, adding on to the important sociolinguistic value of status notifications.

Advertisements

Furthermore, some notifications were in the form of advertisements e.g. "Plumber *wemakoko*" (The best plumber ever), "Master in painting" and "AVON products for sale." These notifications remind us of Zimbabwean people's innovative prowess in the face of high unemployment rate where everyone seems to be a vendor in one way or another. "Beautiful me" was perceived to be a marketing gimmick by, probably, a person who has not been able to grab the attention that they think they so deserve!

Humour

The last collection entails humorous posts, perhaps meant to provide lighter or comic moments to a platform otherwise loaded with serious social issues. “Things are happening here and there . . .” evokes the opening paragraph in Charles Mungoshi’s novel, *Waiting for the Rain*. Whether there were real things happening or not, it was interpreted as an attempt to just entertain. Another notification was “The most beautiful attire: SMILE” was found to be humorous but, at the same time, also informative as it encouraged people to use their natural endowments to make life easier for themselves and others. “*Nyenyaldo*” was a humorous word coinage derived from the “. . . aldos” of Brazilian soccer, implying the source’s strong football following. “*Ndavakuwatsura*” was a derivation/coinage, meaning “I am now on WhatsApp”, which was found to be both humorous and informative. “I am being used by WhatsApp” was a humorous admission to being cyber addictive, a scenario quite prevalent in our societies today. In a way, the post seemed to warn people about the pitfalls of cyber dependency currently threatening all and sundry. “*Unotoshayakutizvirikutofambasei*” (One just wonders in what direction things are moving) was popular humour in late 2017, when many people thought the Zimbabwean society was generally clueless about life. When used then, it had both economic and political connotations. You would meet a person along a street and they would say that, just to lighten the uncertainty shrouding life in general. These were some of the themes that the researchers could come up with, albeit without attempting to be exhaustive. In some instances, the results supported findings from earlier studies as indicated in the observations made above but, in other instances, status notifications were illustrative of emerging themes in the field of digital communication.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study show that WAM use is becoming ubiquitous and people communicate a plethora of pertinent social issues which range from religion, personal or emotional issues to totems and matters of love. The findings also confirm observations made by Al-Khawaldeh, Bani-Khair, Mashaqba and Huneety (2016) who say that users indeed express themselves by writing in WhatsApp’s notification status and openly share their thoughts (Alassiri et al., 2014) and emotions with their friends, colleagues and acquaintances. Such communication was found to be invaluable and significant in human communication as it provides important insights into the way human beings in general, and Zimbabweans in particular, interact and live in the digital world (Chen, 2012) in addition to being an important

tool for information transmission. While some people bragged about life in general, others sought to communicate despair but were still determined to soldier on, despite the attendant challenges. Blabst and Diefenbach (2017) indeed concur that instant messaging platforms like WhatsApp have become a central communication channel and means to maintain relationships.

From the findings of this and other studies, it can be concluded that WhatsApp status notifications are vital means of information dissemination which people deliberately employ for different purposes. As a result, we recommend that they be taken seriously in our endeavour to gain deeper insights into human communication in general and different people's thoughts and feelings. We also encourage other researchers to consider various intricacies of status notifications in future studies. However, the interpretations made herein remain as perceived by the researchers which may not reflect either the intended or actual meanings of the sources. Future studies, where possible, may attempt to use interviews in an attempt to get deeper understanding and views from sources on some of the motives behind such posts.

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