

**An Analysis of What Makes a Photo a Good Rhetorical Artifact**

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## Introduction

My research surrounded visual rhetoric both in theory and application, according to Foss (2004), “Visual rhetoric is the term used to describe the study of visual imagery within the discipline of rhetoric.” Rhetoric itself is a culmination of the laws and nuances that surround human communication, everything from body language to visual artifacts included. Rhetoric is studied in many different realms of human communication not just reading and writing, it can be visual rhetoric, digital rhetoric, queer rhetoric, etc. More specifically, Visual rhetoric is the analysis and use of visuals in conversations, it is the study of how images affect the way we communicate with one another. Visual rhetoric deals with the ways visual artifacts change the way we comprehend and disseminate information.

One heavily studied topic in the field of visual rhetoric is the use of visual rhetoric in news media, this encapsulates the study of infographics and the emotional appeal held in images. The first example of this in my research is Rohit Mehta and Lynette DeAun Guzmán’s article “*Fake or Visual Trickery? Understanding the Quantitative Visual Rhetoric in the News.*” This article discusses the use of “Spatial manipulation” or selectively choosing included events to fit an agenda. The article studied many media outlets with different biases circa the 2016 election to see if their biases were prevalent in their images, they concluded that the biases were in fact prevalent in news media by showing examples of election infographics that showed high percentages for democrats winning the 2016 election with manipulated statistics. Another example is Lisa Skow and George Dionisopoulo’s (1997) article “*A Struggle to Contextualize Photographic Images: American Print Media and the ‘Burning Monk.’*” This article deals with images monk that poured gasoline on himself and lit himself on fire in the Vietnam war. The article takes 6 news sources and compares how each used visual rhetoric to further their own

political and religious agendas. The articles are looked at through the lens of both religion and anti-communism and show how an image can be used to support multiple different arguments.

These two articles both deal with the impact that visuals and images have on public opinion of geopolitical events, in the first article it is a war on communism and in the second article it was a contentious election. In Lisa Skow and George Dionisopoulo's it was shown how the same image can be used to support two completely different argument, this is like Rohit Mehta and Lynette DeAun Guzmán's article in that the news media created visual media to represent the same statistic in two very different likenesses. These articles showed a strong continuity in the importance of visual rhetoric from the 1970's to 2016. It also showcases how news media will reinterpret or manipulate any image to fit their agenda.

Another commonly studied topic in visual rhetoric is the use of visual media to proliferate stereotypes of certain groupings of people. In the article *"Representations in the Illustrations of the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Textbook Used in Greek Elementary School. Advances in Language and Literary Studies"* by Karintzaidis, Christodoulou, Kyridis and Vamvakidou (2016), there is a discussion of the use of visual rhetoric in the proliferation of gender stereotypes in childhood textbooks. The study shows that Men are shown more typically in stereotypically male dominated careers while women are typically shown in more diverse fields. Now when it comes to location boys and men are typically shown to be more outdoorsy, versus women and girls being shown to spend more time indoors. Following, the article by Carissa Massey (2017), *"The Rhetoric of the Real: Stereotypes of Rural Youth in American Reality Television and Stock Photography,"* describes the implication of white rural stereotypes in America; to specify, this article analyzes the portrayal of white rural stereotypes in realty tv and in stock photography. Not only does Massey (2017) discuss the portrayal of white rural stereotypes but also the implication

that these stereotypes have on modern society. There's also a discussion of how rapidly delivered images don't allow you to digest the actual content being thrown your way. These two articles both discuss how stereotypes are delivered and proliferated using visual rhetoric such as "Not educated and vulgar" white rural Americans and women staying inside of their houses cemented in children's minds in educational institutions. They differ in what groupings are being stereotyped, one article looks at these stereotypes through the lens of the race and another is looked at through the lens of gender. They both discuss the form in which stereotypes are portrayed but using a different medium one being in education and the other in televised media.

One of the main research fields is the analysis of what makes up a good visual and how certain elements affect visual rhetoric. Pedwell, Hardy and Rowland (2017) studied this exact topic in their article *"Effective visual design and communication practices for research posters: Exemplars based on the theory and practice of multimedia learning and rhetoric."* This article shows the different elements of effective poster design and how graphics are used in rhetorical appeals. Pedwell (2017) studies different posters surrounding the topic that use effective ineffective and moderately effective poster design tips. This article pairs very well with the aforementioned Rohit Mehta and Lynette DeAun Guzmán's *"Fake or Visual Trickery? Understanding the Quantitative Visual Rhetoric in the News."* These two articles work interestingly with each other because one analyzes effective design of visual rhetoric and the other discusses using those same tactics to manipulate perception of a topic. While both deal with good use of visual rhetoric their goals are divergent, Pedwell, Hardy and Rowland aim to inform in a scientific sphere and the news aims to influence in a sociopolitical setting.

Though all this research effectively summarized the impact of visual rhetoric in their respective areas, there has not been nearly enough research done in analysis of what makes visual artifacts alone effective communicators.

While all the sources explain the impact that each visual artifact had they rarely venture into the blend of lighting and composition that communicate certain emotions and ideas. Since research in visual rhetoric is mostly centered around the use of visuals to represent data or stereotypes in news and print media, I focused on what exactly affects the communicative power of a photo. I will be researching the subsequent questions to narrow down the many aspects that make a photo effective as a visual artifact.

- My research question is whether a photo alone has communicative power if so, what elements result in a photo being an effective artifact of visual rhetoric.
- How does use of these specific design elements affect the size of the rhetorical audience and the scope of the photo.
- Why do these elements influence rhetorical appeal and the strength of the artifact as a communicator?

### **Methodology**

For my four pieces of evidence, I gathered four separate professional photographers post from Instagram and identify what photos generate the most engagement (likes, positive comments, etc.), engagement was referenced among their other photos. Four photographers were chosen, Chris Burkard, Alex Strohl, Pye Jirsa and Oliver Wong. Each photographer was studied and the first ten applicable photos excluding those posted under a week before the writing of this paper were compared against each other for major design elements such as lighting, framing,

subject type, subject distance, vibrancy, and story. All chosen photographers also have a following of over 50 thousand making them respected photographers in their fields. I chose both landscape and portrait photography to make sure that I get a well-rounded view on universal traits for different types of photography. It is also important to note that I am a photographer and have previously done my own research in what components affect photo quality, though not their communicative power. I have my own preferences on what makes photos beautiful, but I will be collecting empirical and statistical data to avoid any bias.

The depth of the data was limited by time, personally I would have liked to have taken my own photos and placed them into a survey in order to have better controlled data. Data with no control in each photo can be difficult to analyze and draw meaningful conclusions from

## Results

While I collected my data, I looked for common traits that garnered a boost in engagement, I identified many of these traits, but the most notable ones were as follows: lighting, framing, subject type, subject distance, vibrancy, and story. These were common trends identifiable throughout all photographers when looking at Average of likes throughout their photos and the comments on their photos. All of the subsequent data will be analyzed using likes as the measure of engagement. The following coding chart highlights how I analyzed most of my data and overarching themes I noticed in each one.

	Chris Burkard	Oliver Wong	Alex Strohl	Pye Jirsa
Framing	For Chris Burkard's page, center framed subject typically perform better than off centered subjects this is	In Oliver Wong's page there is still a high engagement disparity between centered and non-centered photos. Off centered	Once again in Alex Strohl's page the pictures that generally perform the best are the center framed subjects	Pye uses mostly center framing which as per usual performs significantly better than his other posts

	evident throughout both landscape and human subjects. Centering is also not wholly dependent on horizontal skew photos with little to no horizontal or vertical skew typically perform better than subjects who are skewed on either axis or both	subjects overall garner less engagement on average. There are few exceptions but one notable one is when the subject is looking at a centered landscape element ahead of them		
Lighting	In landscape focused shots dramatic lighting seems to fair better in most cases whereas in portrait shots there is an engagement boost with less dramatic smoother light on the subject.	Most of Oliver's subjects are backlit by a warm temperature light. Though this seems to be an overall negative on his page his photos with overall more evenly warmly lit subjects tend to fare better for his page. The heavy lens flare caused by the sun in most of his photos tends to distract from the subject itself	Harshly backlit photos seem to perform the worst out of all his photos and photos in which he evenly lights his subjects tend to perform the best	Pye uses dramatic lighting surprisingly in less of his photos even though they perform wildly better.

Subject Type	Human Subjects seem to be the best performing subjects compared to landscape subject even on landscape focused accounts such as this one. Anywhere there is a human or living subject there is an average engagement of seventy thousand likes whereas landscape subjects weigh in at about forty-five thousand likes. Based on comments this disparity seems to be people's ability to better identify with human subject than landscape subjects	Oliver Wong's photos with human subjects perform the best, architectural and city photos perform the second best and landscape alone perform last in terms of likes and overall engagement.	Subjects or scenes that include some kind of man-made element or a human always tend to perform the best with a few outliers in Strohl's page and many comments discuss the human subjects features and perceived emotions, or details on the manmade object	Most of Pye's subjects are in fact human because he is a portrait photographer therefore there is no way to determine which performs better, but portrait photography in general tends to garner a bigger following than landscape photography
Subject distance	Subjects seem to perform best roughly in mid-range, subjects that are too close tend to steal from their surroundings whereas subjects that are too far away fail to become a discernable part of the photo. Mid-range can	Mid-range also tends to be the most effective distance especially with the back lit subjects. Too far away and the subject get almost consumed by the sun and if they are too close the composition becomes too dark.	Mid-range human subjects tend to be the highest performers as well as long distance landscape subjects	Pye shoots a mix between Bust and full body shots where the full body shots garner the most attention



	be defined as nearly a quarter of the way between the maximum FOV and the closest possible shot with an identifiable subject. Mid-range human subjects tend to be the highest performers with far range landscape subject being a close second.			
Reflections		Oliver Wong has the tendency to include reflective element in his composition which is unique to his page so far it tends to lead to a slight increase in engagement on his photos. But not a large enough trend to deduce any definitive conclusions on. They seem to be relatively indifferent to overall engagement.	Reflections do seem to enhance engagement in certain photos across Strohl's account but to an almost negligible amount	No notable reflections
Vibrancy	Vibrant colors in Burkard's shots tend to show a boost in engagement while black and white photos tend to show a	Oliver wongs vibrant photos have a major impact on the audience the photo reaches. More vibrant photos	Vibrancy also plays a huge roll on Alex's account	More vibrant photos on Pye's account typically correlate with a boost in engagement

	decrease in engagement	perform significantly better		
Story	Chris Burkard tells a story in each caption to pair with his photos, he also uses prompts so the viewers can place themselves in the frame of the picture			Typically when Photos are paired with some sort of video or text that shows the story behind the photo they are better received on Pye's account exemplified by the viral nature of his photography process videos. Also, the emotions that are expressed by subjects play a large factor in the audience's response.

The first photographer I studied was Chris Burkard, he is primarily a travel/landscape photographer and has garnered a following of people that are not only attached to his photography but the story of his bike treks through these beautiful landscapes. Burkard showed higher like averages in the categories mentioned above but generated one more meaningful insight the importance of a story with an audience due to most of his comments engaging with the story behind the photo when one is available. The charts for Chris's photographs are as follows.

Table 1.A: Chris Burkard Lighting

	Lighting Chris Burkard	
photo#	Dramtic	Natural
1	59,510	51,284
2	60,813	47,646
3	52,543	48,704
4	49,922	39,861
5	42,849	52,351
6	73,286	46,828
7	83,204	24,303
8	46,630	39,721
9	36,812	91,370
10	91,952	45,454
AVG.	59,752	48,752

Table 1.B: Chris Burkard Framing

	Framing Chris Burkard	
photo#	Centered	Off-Center
1	42,394	33,047
2	59,510	35,282
3	60,813	48,704
4	47,646	46,828
5	52,543	39,721
6	49,922	46,630
7	42,849	36,812
8	73,286	49,613
9	83,204	22,288
10	91,370	55,835
AVG.	60,354	41,476

Table 1.C: Chris Burkard Subject Type

	Subject Type Chris Burkard	
photo#	Human	Landscape
1	33,047	37,536
2	42,394	35,282
3	59,510	51,284
4	42,849	60,813
5	73,286	47,646
6	48,704	53,543
7	52,351	49,922
8	36,812	39,861
9	91,370	46,828
10	91,952	39,721
AVG.	57,228	46,244

Table 1.D: Chis Burkard Subject Distance

	Subject Distance Chris Burkard		
photo#	Close	Mid	Far
1	49,922	33,047	37,536
2	24,303	42,394	51,284
3	91,370	59,510	47,646
4	45,454	60,813	39,861
5	44,788	52,543	65,694
6	22,288	42,849	49,613
7	34,372	73,286	39,714
8	24,000	48,704	60,626
9	36,823	52,351	51,029
10	33,716	46,828	44,471
AVG.	40,704	51,233	48,747

Table 1.E: Chis Burkard Vibrancy

	Vibrancy Chris Burkard	
photo#	Vibrant	Muted
1	59,510	35,282
2	51,284	48,704
3	60,813	39,861
4	47,646	52,351
5	52,543	46,828
6	49,922	24,303
7	42,849	83,204
8	73,286	36,812
9	117,511	91,370
10	65,694	44,788
AVG.	62,106	50,350

In these tables the best performing column is highlighted in green while the worst performing column is highlighted in red, in tables where there are three columns such as table 1.D the previous statement stands with the introduction of yellow as the second-place identifier.

The next photographer is Oliver Wong a travel photographer who takes photos in the desserts of Abu Dhabi. Oliver Wong gained a large following from short video tutorials on photography but since this is an analysis of photography those were excluded from data.

Table 2.A: Oliver Wong Lighting

	Lighting Oliver Wong	
photo#	Dramtic	Natural
1	46,611	16,382
2	22,933	26,649
3	26,169	18,974
4	16,440	22,198
5	35,646	17,993
6	20,941	25,970
7	27,332	24,368
8	30,845	21,705
9	26,017	16,678
10	31,987	19,553
AVG.	28,492	21,047

Table 2.B: Oliver Wong Framing

	Framing Oliver Wong	
photo#	Centered	Off-Center
1	26,649	16,382
2	46,611	18,974
3	22,933	16,440
4	26,169	22,198
5	35,646	17,993
6	20,941	18,789
7	27,332	16,678
8	24,368	19,553
9	30,845	17,844
10	31,987	21,993
AVG.	29,348	18,684

Table 2.C: Oliver Wong Subject Type

	Subject Type Oliver Wong	
photo#	Human	Landscape
1	26,649	16,382
2	22,933	46,611
3	35,646	26,169
4	20,941	18,789
5	25,970	24,368
6	27,332	21,705
7	30,845	16,678
8	26,017	17,844
9	31,987	19,159
10	45,527	21,403
AVG.	29,385	22,911

Table 2.D: Oliver Wong Subject Distance

Subject Distance Oliver Wong			
photo#	Close	Mid	Far
1	18,974	26,649	16,382
2	22,198	46,611	16,440
3	17,993	22,933	18,789
4	17,844	26,169	21,705
5	21,352	35,646	16,678
6	12,243	20,941	19,159
7	35,120	25,970	22,798
8	23,287	27,332	23,088
9	13,605	24,368	24,490
10	22,892	30,845	22,264
AVG.	20,551	28,746	20,179

Table 2.E: Oliver Wong Vibrancy

Vibrancy Oliver Wong		
photo#	Vibrant	Muted
1	46,611	16,382
2	22,933	26,649
3	26,169	18,974
4	35,646	19,080
5	17,993	16,440
6	20,941	22,198
7	27,332	25,970
8	24,368	21,705
9	30,845	16,678
10	26,017	19,553
AVG.	27,886	20,363

The results from Oliver Wong's page nearly mirrored the results nearly mirrored the results from Chris Burkard's page. This of course with the exception of close range performing slightly better than far range which seems to be a relatively arbitrary distinction in landscape photography in the sense of rhetorical appeal.

The next photographer is Alex Strohl which is a landscape photographer who during the time period I analyzed focused on desserts and fjords. This photographer was chosen because he had a large variety of post to analyze in his recent post and had a large following meaning large groups of people could be studied relatively quickly.

Table 3.A: Alex Strohl Lighting

	Lighting Alex Strohl	
photo#	Dramtic	Natural
1	26,605	19,836
2	33,376	20,396
3	16,379	28,094
4	16,000	17,843
5	48,856	15,873
6	19,223	16,065
7	37,392	19,746
8	27,415	28,178
9	42,589	17,006
10	19,992	16,299
AVG.	28,783	19,934

Table 3.B: Alex Strohl Framing

	Framing Alex Strohl	
photo#	Centered	Off-Center
1	26,605	16,379
2	33,376	20,396
3	28,094	17,843
4	48,856	15,873
5	37,392	16,065
6	27,415	19,746
7	28,178	19,992
8	58,664	25,433
9	17,557	19,064
10	33,133	19,922
AVG.	33,927	19,071

Table 3.C: Alex Strohl Subject Type

	Subject Type Alex Strohl	
photo#	Human	Landscape
1	33,376	26,605
2	20,396	16,379
3	16,065	17,843
4	48,856	16,000
5	19,064	15,873
6	17,557	19,746
7	26,413	19,223
8	19,402	25,564
9	27,230	27,415
10	22,424	25,433
AVG.	25,078	21,008

Table 3.D: Alex Strohl Subject Distance

	Subject Distance Alex Strohl		
photo#	Close	Mid	Far
1	19,836	26,605	16,000
2	20,396	33,376	15,873
3	28,094	16,379	19,223
4	17,843	16,065	25,433
5	19,992	48,856	24,841
6	28,178	19,746	19,064
7	16,460	37,392	19,922
8	17,557	27,415	12,132
9	33,133	42,589	17,706
10	11,824	58,664	15,436
AVG.	21,331	32,709	18,563

Table 3.E: Alex Strohl Vibrancy

	Vibrancy Alex Strohl	
photo#	Vibrant	Muted
1	26,605	16,379
2	33,376	19,836
3	20,396	17,843
4	28,094	16,000
5	25,564	15,873
6	37,392	16,065
7	27,415	19,223
8	42,589	19,746
9	28,178	19,992
10	58,664	25,433
AVG.	32,827	18,639

Last we have Pye Jirsa a portrait photographer who focuses on wedding family and lifestyle shots, for this photographer since portraits are typically close ranged the subject distance metric had to be modified. The modification switches from the distinction of middle close and far to the separation of bust versus full body shots. Subject type also had to be excluded since subjects were for the most part exclusively human.

Table 4.A: Pye Jirsa Lighting

	Lighting Pye Jirsa	
photo#	Dramtic	Natural
1	1,750	1,607
2	3,313	1,504
3	2,715	1,627
4	4,546	2,789
5	4,032	1,961
6	6,733	1,666
7	5,574	4,921
8	7,118	2,593
9	3,810	2,929
10	4,297	2,513
AVG.	4,389	2,411

Table 4.B: Pye Jirsa Framing

	Framing Pye Jirsa	
photo#	Centered	Off-Center
1	4,921	2,715
2	5,574	6,733
3	7,118	5,399
4	2,593	2,313
5	2,513	3,389
6	3,650	1,605
7	4,883	4,698
8	4,297	1,037
9	4,305	1,137
10	17,000	2,450
AVG.	5,685	3,148



Table 4.D: Pye Jirsa Subject Distance

photo#	Subject Distance Pye Jirsa	
	Bust	Full-body
1	4,032	4,921
2	6,733	4,546
3	2,513	5,574
4	5,602	7,118
5	7,993	2,758
6	5,684	2,593
7	6,353	5,399
8	3,437	2,929
9	4,570	2,313
10	1,173	3,650
AVG.	4,809	4,180

Table 4.E: Pye Jirsa Vibrancy

photo#	Vibrancy Pye Jirsa	
	Vibrant	Muted
1	5,568	1,490
2	2,715	1,961
3	4,032	4,921
4	4,546	6,733
5	7,118	2,593
6	5,574	5,399
7	4,833	2,929
8	4,297	2,513
9	4,305	2,313
10	6,457	3,997
AVG.	4,945	3,485

## Discussion

My research question is whether a photo alone has communicative power if so, what elements what elements result in a photo being an effective artifact of visual rhetoric and how does use of these specific design elements affect the size of the rhetorical audience and the scope of the photo? Lastly, why do these elements influence rhetorical appeal and the strength of the artifact as a communicator? A photo does single handedly have communicative power but when attached to a story or caption the strength of the visual artifact is enhanced. The major design choices in photography that make photos great communicators are as follows: Dramatic lighting, Center framed or very slightly off centered subjects, human subjects even in landscape photography (a person in the distance), Mid-range shots that are in the 1/3 range between max

range and undiscernibly close relative to scenario. Vibrant colors seem to dramatically enhance the scope and receiving of the specific visual rhetoric. A large part of communication is the words that are tied to the photos, although most of these photos could stand alone as effective communicators of emotions, feelings and experiences, text helps shed light on the more minor details and moments not captured in the photos themselves. The answer to the last question is that humans are motivated by connection to the photo if they feel as though they could've been a part of this grand landscape or felt the emotions felt in dramatic portraits, they're more likely to identify and engage with the photo.

When talking about Lighting the results show a clear disparity in most photographer when looking at the X.A tables. Harsher more dramatic lighting tends to garner more engagement on each photographer, and this is due to dramatic lighting controlling the weight of the subject in the photo. In portraits it can be used to emphasized expressions emotions or feelings, in landscape it can be used to silhouette the subject make the subject stand out against the harsh back light. Or it can be used to emphasize certain landscape features. This tends to be effective in showing your audience exactly what you want them to see.

In the analysis of Framing, it's important to look at the X.B tables of each photographer. This could be due to a multitude of factors such as the sightliness of symmetry to the eye. This seems to be one of the main factors and commonalities throughout every photographer and is very pronounced in Chris Burkard's statistics where there is nearly a 20 thousand like difference between averages.

When I analyzed subject type I noticed a constant trend of photos with human subjects or human altered landscapes there's typically higher levels of engagement. This is because of the ability to identify more with a subject that also experiences emotions or feelings or was the

product of passionate emotions or feelings. If someone feels as though they are part of a story or can put themselves in the shoes of the person experiencing the photo itself communicates with them better. This ties in well with the idea that written stories embedded in captions. The interactions in the comments with the photos when there are captions involved mostly relate to the story described in the caption. Subjects play a large role in the use of photographs as artifacts of visual rhetoric because they in fact are what the photo is about and inherently both simultaneously the communicators and the message.

Range also played a factor when discussing how a rhetorical artifact is received, though its generally only important in two aspects, Bust or mid-range subjects. Bust is a photo taken from the shoulders up and tends to be most effective in portrait photography which was surprising considering compromising body language. However, the difference is understandable when thinking about the sacrifice of body language for more detailed emotive facial features, which is exemplified by the following screenshot from Alex's profile



This bust portrait of the captain sacrificed body language for the highlight of the furrowed brows and showed the emotions behind the portrait which allows for people to more strongly identify with the photograph. The comments even make note to the intensity behind the captain's expression. Another way in which range plays a part is the importance of keeping the actual subject somewhere mid-range between the farthest point of the backdrop and the closest the subject can get while remaining discernible in landscape photography.

Story plays a large part in the viewers engagement with photos I did not thoroughly analyze short form videos thoroughly because they did not relate to photography. Short form videos where the story behind the photo was explained did typically perform better than their sole photo counterparts. However, captioned photos effectively had a similar boost in engagement this was particularly notable in Chris Burkard's page. His photos that were captioned with the story behind the photo and emotions behind his trips not only garnered more engagement in terms of likes but also engagement in terms of comments specifically targeted at the story with respect to the photo.

This topic is vastly important to the field of visual rhetoric because in combination with other research such as Pedwell's (2017) article on effective poster design, can become a game changer in creating powerful graphics that at the very least foundationally appeal to most people. This foundational appeal allows for specific artifacts of visual rhetoric to communicate messages to even those who lack literacy. Not only can photos be used to persuade in combination with explanatory text an appealing photo can be used to command attention and keep readers engaged.

## **Conclusion**

This project centered itself mostly around what made photos good artifacts of visual rhetoric. This is vastly important to the field of visual rhetoric because it allows scholars to identify photos that will be well received by the masses. There is also researched to be done on how descriptions modify views on photos, this in combination with good artifacts can be used to shift an argument or conversations tone and impact as well as its scope. Anyone looking to continue my research should investigate the possibility of running surveys with more controlled differences and sorting through interviews with respected photographers. There's also the possibility of including machine learning and artificial intelligence in conjunction with the Instagram API to eliminate all chance of selection bias. Not only would this eliminate bias, but it would expedite data collection allowing for more unique data points strengthening the research. There should also be more in-depth research about how these elements can be identified in historically significant pieces of propaganda in order to understand the negative aspects of the use of good visual artifacts.

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