Child sexual abuse in sport: Safeguarding child athletes in the age of digital media

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Child sexual abuse (CSA) is a pervasive problem that occurs in a variety of contexts, including sport. While previous researchers have examined this topic, few have explored the role that technology plays. This chapter addresses this gap by examining the intersection of CSA in sport through digital and social technology. We discuss sexual abuse in sport, with a particular focus on the coach-athlete relationship. Then we examine the growing use of technology by children and look at the intersection of sport and technology, which creates problematic opportunities for CSA to occur. We conclude with directions for future research, along with programming and policy recommendations that organizations who work with children can consider in efforts to safeguard children amidst the challenges presented by digital and social technologies.
Keywords: child sexual abuse, youth sports, digital technologies, social media, coach-athlete relationships

Sexual abuse is a behavior that encompasses diverse forms (e.g., violent, pseudo-intimate) and involves a variety of perpetrators (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, bi-sexual) and victims, including children (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Erooga et al., 2020). Children are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, and child sexual abuse (CSA) is a global problem that impacts most cultures and societies (Morrison et al., 2018). Accordingly, CSA is a pervasive social problem (Hall & Hirschman, 1992; Morrison et al., 2018), which is often ignored as cultural and institutional forces compound to silence victims (Greeson et al., 2016). Consequently, many child victims believe their reports will be met with skepticism and disbelief, which contributes to habitual under-reporting of this behavior (Hartill & Lang, 2018; Sanderson & Weathers, 2019).

CSA occurs in a variety of contexts; however, in this chapter, we focus on the intersection of CSA in sport through digital and social technology. Similar to society, CSA is a persistent problem in sport (Bjørnseth & Szabo, 2018; Tschan, 2013) Scholars have reported that sexual abuse of minors in sport varies between 2 % and 22 % (Alexander et al., 2011; Mountjoy, 2018; Parent et al., 2015) and that CSA occurs at all competitive levels (Mountjoy, 2018). Scholars also suggest that actual incident rates of CSA in sport are above reported statistics (Kirby & Greaves, 1997; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001), for reasons such as institutional silence (Cooky, 2012), or-

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ganizational structures (Nite & Nauright, 2020), and societal disbelief that CSA could occur within a trusted community institution such as sport (Wolfe et al., 2003). Additionally, media framing of sexual abuse in sport organizations tends to focus on individual actors while ignoring systemic factors that could be addressed to enhance prevention efforts (Smith & Pegoraro, 2020).

Children also are often early adopters of technology, such as social media, and many children now possess their own cell phones. Indeed, it is estimated that 95 % of teens have access to a smartphone and 45 % report that they are online "constantly" (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Thus, children can be contacted and groomed by perpetrators in very convenient ways that may escape detection by parents, teachers, and other trusted adult figures who could intervene. Indeed, many parents often do not know that their child has been exposed to CSA until notified by law enforcement. For example, in a recent case involving a high school coach that occurred in the United States in the state of Oregon, the perpetrator had been contacting and grooming the victim through Snapchat. According to a news report of the coach's arrest, "The parents of the young girl had no idea this was going on until police notified them" (Furuichi, 2020, para. 9).

With the increasing and arguably constant use of social media and smartphones by children, digital technology has become a fertile domain for perpetrators and offenders to contact, locate, and groom victims for CSA in sport contexts. As such, parents and those who oversee adults who work with children in youth sports (e.g., high school, club sports, training) must address the potential for CSA to occur in these spaces and to safeguard children. In this chapter we discuss sexual abuse in sport, with a particular focus on the coach-athlete relationship. We then examine the growing use of technology by children. Thereafter we look at the intersection of sport and technology, which creates problematic opportunities for CSA to occur. We then conclude with some directions for future research, along with programming and policy recommendations that organizations who work with children can consider in efforts to safeguard children amidst the challenges presented by digital and social technologies.

CSA and sport

Multiple variables within sport may enhance CSA, as sport organizations often fail to address underlying structural and cultural issues that contribute to it (Hartill, 2018; Nite & Nauright, 2020). First, sport is considered an ideal environment for sexual abuse as it is perceived to be a

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"sacred" culture; thus, behavior that is normally socially unacceptable is permitted and unquestioned (Bjørnseth & Szabo, 2018; Tschan, 2013). Additionally, when sexual abuse allegations are made, the sport community often attempts to forget victims and positions abusers as deviant outliers (Hartill, 2018). These actions tend to silence victims and perpetuate a culture of inaction towards sexual abuse (Parent, 2011).

Second, the nature of sport, which implies that child athletes spend significant time, often in intimate quarters, with peers and coaches, also facilitates CSA (Johansson, 2018; Parent et al., 2015). These conditions also involve school settings, as young athletes are exposed to perpetrators who are both educators and coaches, which potentially enhances one-on-one time athletes spend with these offenders (Henschel & Grant, 2019).

Third, sport cultural norms also play a prominent role in CSA (Mountjoy, 2018). For instance, some athletes interpret abuse as normalized within athletic settings (Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001), given that abusive behaviors that would be considered inappropriate or unacceptable outside of sport are normalized within it (Brackenridge, 2000).

Fourth, sport organizations often have unclear reporting mechanisms for abuse (Parent, 2011), enable institutional forces that perpetuate abuse (Nite & Nauright, 2020), or provide inadequate responses when CSA is reported (Harper & Perkins, 2018). Brackenridge (2001) posited that sport organizations are composed of "onlookers" or those who are aware of or witness the abuse but do not report it due to the perceived challenges the reports will have on the institution's viability (Cooky, 2012; Hartill, 2018). For example, in her study of CSA, Parent (2011) found that one sport administrator was suspicious of an offending coach's behavior but did not want to expose the coach. As this literature suggests, sport has at times been an ineffective protector of children's welfare (Berg et al., 2016) and been complicit in covering up CSA (Brackenridge, 2001; Hartill, 2018).

Finally, power imbalances also contribute to CSA in sport, as victims often stay silent which ultimately reinforces the perpetrator's power (Hartill, 2014, 2018; Parent & Bannon, 2012). Researchers have further noted that coaches' authority is rarely questioned (Parent, 2011; Parent & Demers, 2011; Parent & Bannon, 2012), which stifles reporting as coach perpetrators often pressure athletes to not report abusive behavior (Stirling & Kerr, 2009), and parents may not ask their children about a coach's behavior due to inherent trust in the coaching position. These power imbalances within coach-athlete relationships become problematic when coach perpetrators began to enact sexual abuse towards victims (Owton & Sparkes, 2017).

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Coach-athlete relationship and CSA

CSA perpetrators in sport can hold many roles (Bjørnseth & Szabo, 2018); however, coaches tend to be a prevalent offender group (Johansson & Lundqvist, 2017; Parent et al., 2015). Athletes spend significant time with coaches and often work with them in close quarters (e.g., locker rooms), isolating conditions which can facilitate CSA (Henschel & Grant, 2019). Additionally, adolescence is a time marked with emotional and sexual growth and uncertainty, and elite athletes often spend these developmental years away from peers and friends as they train (Kirby, 1986). The coach-athlete relationship is further characterized by boundary uncertainty (Parent & Demers, 2011). Parent and Demers (2011) noted that some coaches may not fully understand boundaries for appropriate behavior. Thus, coaches may fail to adopt a strict code of behavior in their interactions with athletes, although some coaches report recognizing the importance of clear boundaries (Fasting et al., 2018). Coaches also have been subjected to false allegations of abuse (Pépin-Gagné & Parent, 2015), and these reports enhance uncertainty around appropriate boundaries in the coach-athlete relationship. Indeed, some athletic administrators have expressed that their inaction around CSA is influenced by fears about false allegations, although researchers have debunked this concern (Parent & Demers, 2011).

Whereas some coaches may perceive ambiguity around boundaries, others may believe that an athlete has consented to the relationship (Johansson, 2018). However, Brackenridge and Kirby (1997) argued that such claims did not fully consider how coaches' abuse of power and breach of trust influenced what might be perceived as consent. Indeed, some coach perpetrators appear to use their power and influence to lure athletes into sexual encounters (Fasting & Sand, 2015; Plummer, 2018). Coaches have historically utilized practice, locker rooms, classrooms, and other intimate spaces to gain victim's trust preparatory to enacting CSA (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2005, Plummer, 2018; Sanderson & Weathers, 2020). While these physical environments are still utilized, the advent of digital and mobile technology, such as social media, has opened up additional pathways for coaches to gain victim's trust and enact CSA (Henschel & Grant, 2019), and the blending of the virtual and physical world has made deviant behavior easier to enact (Kavanagh et al., 2016).

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Digital and social technology and CSA

Digital and mobile technology, such as social media, possesses critical implications for CSA in sport. Technology such as text messaging and social media have become tools for CSA as perpetrators can more easily access victims outside of professional boundaries (Henschel & Grant, 2019; Rhind et al., 2014). Perpetrators can use these technologies to engage in sexually abusive behaviors that are often not enacted publicly, such as taking nude photographs and videos (Henschel & Grant, 2019). Children also are predominant users of social media, which enables perpetrators to scout for victims in a domain that children heavily populate. For example, reports indicate that 85 % of U.S. teens use YouTube, 72 % use Instagram, and 69 % use Snapchat (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

The spread of these technologies in society has opened up avenues for athlete maltreatment and abuse (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017; Kavanagh et al., 2016; Litchfield et al., 2018). Scholars have observed that social media and other digital technologies have become so ensconced in social life that many people are not consciously aware of their effects (Chan, 2014). For some users, technology such as smart phones has become an extension of the self (Kavanagh et al., 2016). These technologies offer allure through perceived anonymity, which can prompt people to behave virtually in ways that they would not act offline (Suler, 2004). The virtual world enables people to express their conscious and unconscious mind, allowing them to create hybrid personas (Kavanagh et al., 2016). Given these conditions, online environments have become safe spaces for athlete abuse and maltreatment (Alexander et al., 2011; Kavanagh et al., 2016; Litchfield et al., 2018).

Given the use of these technologies by young people, including athletes, online abuse can be a persistent experience (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Kavanagh et al. (2016) conceptualized online abuse as virtual maltreatment, which they defined as "direct or non-direct online communication that is stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, threatening, or lewd manner and is designed to elicit fear, emotional, and psychological upset, distress, alarm or feelings of inferiority" (p. 788). In their model of virtual maltreatment, Kavanagh et al. (2016) suggested that virtual sexual maltreatment can include "threats of rape and sexual assault or sexual acts to which the adult would not consent or comments regarding sexual behavior with or of an individual" (p. 789).

Researchers have observed that, although abusive behavior in virtual contexts is increasing, there is still much we do not know about this facet of abuse (Kavanagh et al., 2016; Litchfield et al., 2016). Additionally, little

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empirical work has examined the influence of social media on CSA, particularly in school settings, a context where many coaches have access to victims (Henschel & Grant, 2019). In one study of school employee sexual misconduct cases, Henschel and Grant (2019) found that out of 361 cases 71 % of offenders used technology to communicate with victims, with 18 cases involving Facebook and 10 involving Snapchat. Henschel and Grant analyzed cases occurring in 2014, and it seems plausible that with the growth of platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok as a predominant communication tool for teens (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), these social media sites provide an avenue for coach perpetrators to engage in sexually abusive behaviors with young athletes.

Litchfield et al. (2018) posit that social media "has also afforded the presence of unbridled, unexamined, and often unpunished abuse which can reach individuals not only in real time but can further be re-read, re-posted, and re-visited" (p. 155). While acknowledging that other social media platforms can be tools for sexual abuse, we employ a particular focus in this chapter on Snapchat. Snapchat has several factors that make it a particularly attractive mechanism for coach perpetrators to carry out sexual abuse. For example, Snapchat markets its platform to users with the promise that their messages disappear within 10 seconds after a recipient opens it. Thus, Snapchat's premise of disappearing content aligns with sexual grooming practices that are focused on secrecy (Canter et al., 1998; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). Nevertheless, there are several ways that Snapchat content can be saved, such as taking a screenshot of the message or using an app to store the message (Byrd, 2018), methods which have been employed to document coaches' sexual abuse on the platform (Eriksen, 2018; Hayes-Freeland, 2017).

Additionally, Snapchat has a location sharing feature that many young users do not turn off. Consequently, abusers have used this feature to physically locate victims (Fish, 2018), and law enforcement personnel have warned parents about the danger associated with this feature (Gans, 2017). Snapchat also is a frequently used platform for the transmission of sexual content among teens (e.g., sexting) (Simmons, 2017), and many school administrators are struggling with determining how to address sexting behaviors by students on the platform (Barron, 2018; Herold, 2017). With the prevalence of peer sexting on Snapchat, coach perpetrators may perceive sexting on the platform as normalized behavior. Finally, research indicates that every day 92 % of teens are online (Mountjoy et al., 2016), and Snapchat is the social media platform that teens report that they use most often (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Given these conditions, social media plat-

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forms like Snapchat warrant consideration to ascertain and better understand how perpetrators are carrying out CSA via these platforms.

CSA in sport with technology

Unfortunately, little scholarly work has been conducted which examines the use of technology such as social media in CSA. While there has been work in school settings that has looked at the role of technology in CSA (Henschel & Grant, 2019), this topic remains underexplored in the CSA literature as well as sport literature. Sanderson and Weathers (2020) examined how Snapchat was used in child sexual abuse cases that were reported in the media involving coach perpetrators. They discussed how coach perpetrators moved through various stages of abuse based on Cense and Brackenridge's (2001) *Temporal Model of Sexual Abuse with Children and Young People*. This model consists of four phases that illustrate how perpetrators engage in sexual abuse: (a) motivation to abuse; (b) overcoming internal inhibitions; (c) overcoming external barriers; and (d) overcoming resistance. With respect to motivation to abuse, Sanderson and Weathers (2020) found that coach perpetrators used Snapchat message to victims to inquire about their sexual activity. For example, one coach perpetrator sending a victim an image of two people having sex with the caption "Want this?" (p. 87), while another coach perpetrator initially talked about day-to-day activities with the victim but eventually channeled their conversations to discuss sexual activity. Other Snapchat messages included coach perpetrators inquiring about virginity status or asking if the victim would like to kiss. Coaches also demonstrated motivation to abuse through exposing victims to pornographic images such as coaches masturbating, sending nude pictures, and asking victims to video pornographic acts and send those back to the coach perpetrator. Perhaps most disturbingly, coach perpetrators created fake profiles on Snapchat wherein they posed as a teenage boy or girl and requested nude images from victims, which they promised to then exchange. The victims, believing they were interacting with a peer, would then send the coach perpetrators nude images of themselves.

In the next phase of overcoming internal inhibitions, coach perpetrators used Snapchat to "test the waters" and gauge if victims were willing to engage in sexual messaging or activity (Sanderson & Weathers, 2020). Examples here included a coach perpetrator asking a victim if she liked older men, another coach perpetrator telling a victim he would be honored to be her first kiss, and another coach who sent a male athlete pictures of her partially naked and then eventually fully naked. Thus, some coach perpe-

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trators gradually sent images that increased in sexual content, starting with semi-nude pictures that eventually evolved to full nude pictures. In terms of overcoming external barriers, coach perpetrators employed a number of strategies here as well (Sanderson & Weathers, 2020). For instance, many coach perpetrators encouraged victims to keep their Snapchat messages a secret and to not tell anyone about their relationship. This also included coach perpetrators encouraging victims to move their interactions to Snapchat after they had started on other platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. In the last phase, overcoming resistance, coach perpetrators pressured victims to add them on Snapchat, including one coach perpetrator who took a victim's phone and tried to add himself to the girl's Snapchat account, telling her that he "needed to keep an eye on her" (p. 88). Coach perpetrators also offered incentives in exchange for victims sending them nude pictures, such as free lessons.

Sanderson and Weathers (2020) also discussed how Snapchat enabled coach perpetrators to shift sexual abuse from digital to physical spaces. For example, some coach perpetrators would invite the victim to their classroom where they would engage in sexual activity. Other coach perpetrators invited victims to their home where they engaged in sexual liaisons. In other cases, coach perpetrators used Snapchat's location feature to track victims and approach them. In one example, a coach arrived at a victim's home and walked into her backyard where she was sun tanning beside her pool. When law enforcement was contacted, the coach perpetrator responded that he had only gone to the victim's home to "check on her" (p. 88). Finally, other coach perpetrators engaged in bizarre and brazen behavior such as one coach perpetrator who went to a victim's place of work and had sex with her or a coach perpetrator who went to a victim's home and began kissing her and then having to abruptly run out the back door when the victim's mother came home unexpectedly.

Sanderson and Weathers (2020) noted that social media platforms like Snapchat provide open access for perpetrators to contact children and groom them for CSA. Given the ability to track victims' location and contact them at all times, including through the use of deceptive profiles, the use of digital and social technologies warrants more research attention as well as policy and programming from youth sport organizations, which we now discuss.

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Future research directions

One of the foremost needs for future research is simply the research itself. There is very little work on the role of technology such as social media in child sexual abuse, and we find an even greater dearth in areas such as sport. Some emergent research has looked at the role of social media for CSA victims telling their stories (Alaggia & Wang, 2020), and although this particular study was not solely focused on CSA, it does illustrate how social media platforms may empower victims to tell their stories. Other research (Sanderson & Weathers, 2019) has observed that user comments to stories about sexual abuse also can invite CSA victims to tell their stories, including in ways that protect their identity and which allow them to shape the narratives around their experiences as they are disclosed. Thus, although social media can be a tool for CSA, it also seems to function as a vehicle for victims to share their experiences and find community, and future work can explore how social media, through these disclosures, can bring more awareness to CSA and prevention efforts. Next, there is a crucial need to continue to examine how perpetrators in sport and other contexts are using social media platforms and other forms of technology to carry out CSA. A Google search for terms such as "coaches arrested Snapchat" or "teacher arrested Snapchat" yields an unfortunate number of responses. Analyzing these cases to ascertain how perpetrators use technology can help inform programming and policy initiatives.

Along those lines, it will be important to examine emergent technology such as relatively new and popular social media platforms such as TikTok. In one media report, a teacher was arrested for sending unsolicited nude images of herself to a child victim via TikTok (Keegan, 2020). Given the rate at which technology advances, understanding where children are congregating online can help to identify risk areas and, again, help to inform training and policy for organizations. Next, while we discuss programming and policy separately, it seems important that future research also examines how organizations are utilizing these resources to help protect children. As one example, in 2019, Pittsburgh Pirates player Felipe Vasquez was arrested after it was discovered he had been carrying on a two-year relationship with a female victim beginning when she was 13 (Chiari, 2019). In this particular case, the relationship with the girl began on social media and involved him sending sexual images and video through these platforms. Thus, it would be important to understand how sport organizations are using such instances to educate players to ensure that they are not engaging in CSA and to help them avoid becoming vulnerable to this behavior.

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Finally, it also would be important to investigate parents' understanding of this behavior and to explore to what degree parents are talking about the potential for this behavior with their children. As the news story shared earlier in the chapter illustrates, some parents may not have any idea that their child is being exposed to CSA until the police notify them. Understanding parents' knowledge of what is happening with CSA and technology, including any reticence that might impact them talking about it with their children (e.g., concerns about violating child's privacy), would be useful to help understand how education and other programming can be tailored to assist parents in dealing with this issue. This also may help reduce the number of news articles that frequently cite law enforcement officials requesting that parents be aware of technology platforms that perpetrators are using to contact children (Aldous, 2019).

Although there is much work to be done from a research and scholarship perspective, sport organizations that serve children need to concurrently be taking steps to help mitigate the potential for CSA to occur via technology and actively promote safeguarding of children under their auspices. In the following sections we discuss some policy and programming recommendations that these organizations may wish to consider.

Policy recommendations

First, we suggest that youth sport organizations and school districts determine appropriate boundaries for coaches and child athletes as it pertains to technology. While it may be too restrictive to specially prohibit the use of specific platforms like Snapchat to communicate with child athletes, it seems plausible to at least address the risks associated with technology. For example, coaches might be informed that they should avoid sexually explicit communication with athletes on social media. It would be helpful to provide examples such as telling coaches to avoid asking about virginity, kissing, and other sexually suggestive content. Coaches also should be informed that creating fake social media accounts to lure athletes into sending sexually explicit content is prohibited.

Coaches also should be cautioned that using social media to communicate with student-athletes may begin innocently but can easily evolve into problematic areas. For instance, coaches should be counseled that it is inappropriate to pressure student-athletes to add them on social media platforms. Boundaries also should address the co-mingling of virtual and physical spaces. For instance, coaches should be counseled to avoid meeting student-athletes in isolated and private spaces. Additionally, many

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youth sport organizations use platforms that are more public in nature such as Team App that allow coaches to text out group information and announcements, and it may be worthwhile to encourage coaches to use this kind of messaging rather than a platform such as Snapchat. It may be helpful to stress to coaches that social media content provides documentation to substantiate abuse allegations (Barron, 2018). It also may be useful to show coaches news articles that depict coaches who have engaged in sexually abusive behaviors in prison attire to illustrate the life-altering consequences this behavior can produce. Second, youth sport organizations and school districts should consider social media screening as part of their vetting processes. While legislation varies by geography and is not without ethical concerns (Hedenus & Backman, 2017), such practices may provide some warning indicators, which could prevent these entities from exposing athletes to a potential coach perpetrator.

Programming recommendations

McMahon et al. (2018) observed that parent education can help prevent abuse in youth sports and protect sport participants. Thus, youth sport organizations and school districts may want to consider developing programming for parents and child athletes to educate them on policies relating to acceptable behavior from coaches and athletes via technology such as social media and text messaging. This kind of programming is important, as parents may not question a coach's actions, believing that the coach's behavior is necessary for their child to succeed (McMahon et al., 2018). Parents also may not have a strong understanding of technology; therefore, this kind of programming can help educate parents on the technological trends manifesting with CSA (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). While youth sport organizations and school districts could certainly develop a training curriculum for parents and child athletes, a basic framework might involve at least an annual meeting with parents and child athletes (e.g., beginning of school year/club season) wherein parents are informed of policies governing coach-athlete interaction via technology, so that both parents and athletes understand the expectations and boundaries. Parents and athletes could be given information about acceptable behavior and be encouraged to report violations. Certainly, these approaches will be time-intensive and involve discussion of unpleasant behaviors. However, the safety and integrity of youth sport participants warrant these steps (Kavanagh et al., 2016).

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Conclusion

CSA is a pervasive social problem that has extended into digital and technological spheres. As children are heavy consumers of technology such as social media, it is imperative that youth sport organizations as well as all organizations who work with children are proactive in educating adults, parents, and volunteers about acceptable boundaries and reporting mechanisms that can help with prevention. Smith and Pegoraro (2020) noted that much of the coverage around CSA in sport, such as with the Larry Nassar case, focused on individual level factors, with little discussion of organizational and systemic changes that can be made to help encourage prevention. Developing strong policy and training programs can help youth sport organizations foster a more preventative approach to CSA, including the use of technology to engage in this behavior. Such attention is even more warranted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic as many children are dependent on technology to communicate with coaches and teachers, and children are arguably spending more time consuming technology. Extending safeguarding efforts to digital domains is a critical factor as children are now immersed and socialized in these spaces from very young ages.

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