Employer brand and international employer brand: literature review

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Abstract

Purpose – This review article offers an insight into employer brand and its importance for organizations, as well as an overview of international employer brand based on research on this topic available to date. Design/methodology/approach – An examination and critical evaluation of 37 research articles, two scientific monographs and a chapter was conducted. The selection of articles was based on conducted content analysis. Findings – Having an employer brand has become of utmost importance for many organizations since it was first described in academic literature in mid-1990s. Despite its key role in organizational success, there is a certain lack of recognition of employer brand in academic literature. While employer brand research is somewhat scarce, international employer brand research is almost non-existent. Organizations that operate on different international markets often recruit their employees internationally as well. However, employer brand developed and managed locally differs from the one developed and managed globally.

Research limitations/implications – This review is based on a small number of articles available in the databases. Additionally, only the research papers written in English were included in the review.

Originality/value – This review paper offers a much-needed overview of literature on employer branding within international context. International employer brands and international employer branding have so far been neglected within employer branding literature, despite the obvious need for differentiation. Therefore, this article seeks to provide a systematic overview and identify relevant characteristics of the international employer brand.

Keywords Employer brand, International employer brand, Literature review Paper type Literature review

Introduction

As organizations nowadays invest increasing efforts into attracting and recruiting desirable employees, employer brand development has grown in presence and importance (Sinčić Ćorić and Špoljarić, 2021; Elving *et al.*, 2013). In the development of their brand, employers have two main goals – to promote themselves as the employer of choice to desirable employees and to retain these employees in the organization once recruited (Backhaus, 2016; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). As a key to differentiation among other employers, employer brand has the ability to increase employee loyalty, as well as their satisfaction and affinity towards the organization (Davies, 2008). The employer brand construct has proven to be extremely important for organizational success (Heilmann *et al.*, 2013; Barrow and Mosley, 2005; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Hence, it has aroused great interest in recent years among both researchers and practitioners engaged in internal marketing, public relations and human resource management.

However, while employer brand was first defined and described just over 25 years ago (Ambler and Barrow, 1996), with the entire discipline becoming increasingly attractive and relevant for marketing and human resource management practitioners (Buttenberg, 2012) ever since, there is relatively scarce evidence of employer brand research in academic circles.

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Employer brand

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Attesting to this, there are fewer than 780 research articles to be found on this topic while searching the Web of Science database [1], meaning there are around 30 (relevant) articles devoted to the topic a year.

On the other hand, as globalization and internationalization of business operations grow in presence, they give rise to a challenge of developing an employer brand in an international context (Almaçık *et al.*, 2014; Luchtenveld, 2014). Given that research studies on the international employer brand are relatively few, there is no consensus on how it should be developed or managed. In order to address this, international employer brands should be further explored. For this review article we propose the following research questions:

- RQ1. What are international employer brands?
- RQ2. What issues need to be addressed when managing international employer brands?

Therefore, this review article has been conceived with an idea of providing the readers with an insight into employer brand as a concept through a description of the methodology and results, a narrative overview of analyzed articles and a conclusion, with the emphasis on international employer brand. The first part of the narrative overview sheds light on the employer brand construct – defining what it is and the field it belongs to, while also explaining why it is important for organizations and their success. The second part is aimed at clarifying what an international employer brand stands for through a critical analysis of research studies undertaken and review articles written on the subject to date. Proposals for possible future development in the field of scientific research of international employer brands are outlined in the conclusion.

Method

For the purpose of this paper, the authors examined and critically evaluated 37 research articles, two scientific monographs and a chapter in a compendium written in English, all of which address the issue of employer brand and international employer brand. Research articles covered by this analysis were published in journals of marketing, marketing communication, brand management, public relations, management, human resource management, business and organizational psychology. The selection of articles was based on the content analysis conducted (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Lacy *et al.*, 2015; Weber, 1990). Such research method enables a systematic review for the purpose of reaching objective conclusions through verbal, visual, or written data analysis aimed at describing and explaining the content of the analyzed data. Content analysis as a research method provides insight into and understanding of analyzed phenomena (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Prasad, 2008) and may also facilitate the quantification of qualitative data (Kohlbacher, 2006; Stemler, 2015; Weber, 1990).

The analysis included only articles published in peer-reviewed academic journals, while the selection of the articles was undertaken by searching the databases of Web of Science and Scopus. The Google Scholar search engine was also employed. In order to identify articles relevant for the topic at hand, the following English keywords were used when searching their titles and content: "employer brand", "employer branding", "international employer brand", "international employer branding", "cultural differences in employer branding", "benefits of employer branding". The number of articles found was 1,400 and after removing duplicate instances, a total of 37 were included in the analysis. In addition to the 37 articles, two scientific monographs and a chapter in a compendium were also identified as relevant and subjected to the analysis.

Results

The 37 selected and analyzed articles were published in 31 academic journals, the list of which is provided in Table 1, together with the number of articles published per journal. The analyzed scientific monographs and the compendium including the analyzed chapter

Journal of Publication	No. of articles analyzed	Employer brand
Academy of Management Review	1	brana
Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior	1	
Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov: Series V: Economic Sciences	1	
Career Development International	1	
Communication Management Review	1	
Corporate Communications: An International Journal	1	673
European Journal of Marketing	2	010
European Management Journal	1	
Global Business Review	1	
Human Resource Management	1	
International Journal of Advertising	1	
International Journal of Business Communication	1	
International Journal of Energy Sector Management	1	
International Journal of Management Reviews	1	
Iup Journal of Brand Management	1	
Journal of Applied Social Psychology	1	
Journal of Brand Management	3	
Journal of Business Research	1	
Journal of Communication Management	1	
Journal of Marketing Management	$\frac{1}{2}$	
Journal of Product and Brand Management	1	
Journal of World Business	1	
Management Communication Quarterly	1	
Management Research Review	1	
Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences	1	
Organization Management Journal	2	
Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences	1	
Public Relations Review	1	Table 1.
Strategic HR Review	2	Distribution of
The International Journal of Human Resource Management	1	analyzed articles by
Transformations in Business and Economics	1	journal of publication

were published, respectively, by John Wiley and Sons and Sage Publications, both top-ranked (A) academic publishers according to SENSE (2020).

The majority of the analyzed articles, or 20 out of the 37 in total, employed a quantitative research approach to the topic (Špoljarić and Tkalac Verčič, 2022; Benraiss-Noailles and Viot, 2021; Sarkiunaite and Sciukauske, 2021; Tkalac Verčič, 2021; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021; Grăjdieru and Khechoyan, 2019; Almaçık *et al.*, 2014; Men, 2014; Rampl, 2014; Rampl and Kenning, 2014; Terera and Ngirande, 2014; Baum and Kabst, 2013; Edwards and Edwards, 2013; Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Sivertzen *et al.*, 2013; Davies, 2008; Berthon *et al.*, 2005; Pietersis *et al.*, 2005; Cable and Turban, 2003). In 14 articles, the authors opted for a qualitative research approach (Sandeepanie *et al.*, 2023; Sinčić Ćorić and Špoljarić, 2021; Theurer *et al.*, 2018; Ruchika and Prasad, 2017; Backhaus, 2016; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016; Heilmann *et al.*, 2013; Martin *et al.*, 2000; Ambler and Barrow, 1996). A mixed research method was used in only three articles (Deepa and Baral, 2022; Kunerth and Mosley, 2011; Elving *et al.*, 2013).

Most of the articles based on the quantitative research method used a questionnaire as an instrument applied on a non-random respondent sample. Two different approaches can be discerned among the studies undertaken – researching employer brands of specific organizations (Deepa and Baral, 2022; Špoljarić and Tkalac Verčič, 2022; Sarkiunaite and Sciukauske, 2021; Tkalac Verčič, 2021; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021; Men, 2014; Rampl, 2014; Rampl and Kenning, 2014; Terera and Ngirande, 2014; Baum and Kabst, 2013;

Edwards and Edwards, 2013; Elving *et al.*, 2013; Sivertzen *et al.*, 2013; Davies, 2008; Pietersis *et al.*, 2005; Cable and Turban, 2003) and exploring the significance of various aspects of employer brands for respondents (Benraiss-Noailles and Viot, 2021; Grăjdieru and Khechoyan, 2019; Almaçık *et al.*, 2014; Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Berthon *et al.*, 2005).

When it comes to the studies focusing on employer brands of specific organizations, the internal employer brand research using current employees as the respondents (Deepa and Baral, 2022; Špoljarić and Tkalac Verčič, 2022; Sarkiunaite and Sciukauske, 2021; Tkalac Verčič, 2021; Tkalac Verčič, 2021; Tkalac Verčič, 2021; Men, 2014; Terera and Ngirande, 2014; Edwards and Edwards, 2013; Davies, 2008) and the external employer brand, where respondents were students as potential employees (Rampl, 2014; Rampl and Kenning, 2014; Baum and Kabst, 2013; Sivertzen *et al.*, 2013; Cable and Turban, 2003) was researched in equal measure, as well as were potential employees and the wider public (Elving *et al.*, 2013). In their research, Pietersis *et al.* (2005) focused both on examining internal and external employer brand among current employees and among students as potential employees, respectively.

Where the significance of different aspects of employer brands was scrutinized, students as potential employees were selected as respondents (Grăjdieru and Khechoyan, 2019; Almaçık *et al.*, 2014; Arachchige and Robertson, 2011; Berthon *et al.*, 2005). Current employees were used as the respondents in only one study (Benraiss-Noailles and Viot, 2021).

Data collected through surveys were predominantly processed using structural equation modeling, regression analysis, *T*-test and factor analysis. As to their context, the studies were undertaken in developed countries, with those exploring the employer brands of IT organizations dominating. Two very prolific research periods may be identified: in the last three years, a large number of research studies examined the internal employer brand, while the external employer brand was the focus of studies conducted in 2013 and 2014. The results of article review are presented in the form of a narrative overview focusing on either the concept of employer brand or international employer brand.

Employer brand

Generally speaking, brands are "identifiers" that serve to differentiate; they represent a collection of benefits and values recognized by individuals and associated to certain product or service, or any other object (Kotler, 1997; Levitt, 1980). When the object of such differentiation is an employer, it is referred to as an employer brand (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Although employer brands are often associated with human resource management (Backhaus, 2016), it is actually a concept that consolidates relationship marketing, human resource management (Ambler and Barrow, 1996) and even corporate communication (Ruchika and Prasad, 2017; Martin *et al.*, 2011; Barrow and Mosley, 2005).

Employer brand – a concept which appeared in the marketing literature in mid-1990s – was first described by Ambler and Barrow (1996) as a package of benefits provided by employment in a certain organization. Such benefits may be functional, economic, or psychological. Rampl and Kenning (2014) describe the employer brand as the image of an employer "as perceived by current and potential employees and, to a lesser degree, by the public" (p. 219).

Employer brands are developed with a view to creating an image that will render the organization an employer of choice for current and potential employees (Backhaus, 2016; Rampl, 2014). Based on their orientation either towards the internal public (current employees) or the external public (potential employees), employer brands are classified as internal employer brands or external employer brands, respectively (Kunerth and Mosley, 2011; Melin, 2005). Gioia *et al.* (2000) note that an employer brand is created among the internal public and subsequently communicated to the external public, with such integrated approach also advocated by Kunerth and Mosley (2011). Men (2014) considers current employees to be ambassadors representing their employer to the entire external public, including potential employees. Thus, marketing

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communication should ensure that the employer brand, as perceived by potential employees, corresponds to its perception by current employees (Moroko and Uncles, 2008). Expectations held by employees with respect to their employer are met when the perceptions of the employer brand by the current and potential employees are in harmony (Mosley, 2014).

Different approaches to the employer brand

Throughout the years, the employer brand has been claimed by numerous disciplines. Scientists have examined it from the perspective of relationship marketing (e.g. Ambler and Barrow, 1996), human resource management (e.g. Lievens and Slaughter, 2016), brand management (e.g. Theurer *et al.*, 2018), talent attraction (e.g. Lievens and Slaughter, 2016; Wilden *et al.*, 2010) and marketing communication (e.g. Elving *et al.*, 2013). Recently, scientists have also been studying it from the perspective of internal public relations (e.g. Deepa and Baral, 2022; Špoljarić and Tkalac Verčič, 2022; Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021), highlighting the significance of current employees in the creation and development of the employer brand. Employer branding and its development are positioned similarly within organizations, where they are undertaken, either separately or jointly, by both marketing and human resource management experts. There is no agreement as to who should engage in employer branding, in science or in practice. Nevertheless, the employer brand is rooted in the theories proposed by marketing scholars (Sinčić Čorić and Špoljarić, 2021), with Ambler and Barrow (1996), who first described and defined the employer brand concept, classifying it under relationship marketing.

Significance of the positively perceived employer brand for organizations

Studies dealing with employer brand tend to also address the concept of employer attractiveness. Numerous authors use those two terms synonymously (Tkalac Verčič, 2021). Berthon et al. (2005) defined employer attractiveness as a result of employer brand development activities, relating to the perception of benefits that employment in a specific organization brings to an employee. The more attractive the benefits, the more attractive one's employment in the organization (Berthon et al., 2005; Cable and Turban, 2003). The level of attractiveness attributed to employment in an organization also appears to be crucial to the prospect of attracting potential employees who meet the organization's requirements (Barrow and Mosley, 2005). Once the employees who meet the organization's requirements embark on their employment, if the organization meets their expectations as an employer, they will stay employed more readily over a longer period of time and become its loyal employees (Benraiss-Noailles and Viot, 2021; Heilmann et al., 2013; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Loyalty stems from a strong connection felt by an employee towards their employer and leads to greater satisfaction, both at work and in their private life (Terera and Ngirande, 2014; Logan, 1984). Not only does it strengthen the relationship between the employee and the organization, but that among the employees themselves as well (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Ambler and Barrow, 1996).

In addition to favorable effects of positively perceived employer brand and attractiveness for employees at a personal level, it may also have positive implications for organizations in general. Among those is an enhanced recruitment process, which is more efficient, affordable and flexible (Heilmann *et al.*, 2013). Greater employer attractiveness has also been shown to strengthen corporate brands (Tkalac Verčič and Sinčić Ćorić, 2018). All such consequences of positively perceived employer attractiveness create a competitive advantage for an organization (Heilmann *et al.*, 2013; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Ambler and Barrow, 1996), resulting in its increased profitability (Heilmann *et al.*, 2013; Barrow and Mosley, 2005).

International employer brand

The concept of international employer brand and its definition also fall within the scope of employer branding. The relevance of international employer brand has increased parallel with

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growing globalization of business operations, requiring numerous organizations to recruit their employees internationally (Almaçık *et al.*, 2014; Luchtenveld, 2014; Martin *et al.*, 2005). It can be defined as the employer image of an organization that operates and recruits its employees in international markets with the aim of building the perception of such an organization as a unique employer (Martin and Hetrick, 2009).

Research focusing on international employer branding over the past two decades is extremely heterogeneous. Most researchers addressed the significance of different dimensions of employer branding in different cultures, with studies undertaken by Almaçık *et al.* (2014), Arachchige and Robertson (2011), Gräjdieru and Khechoyan (2019), Roy (2008), as cited in Almaçık *et al.* (2014) and Sivertzen *et al.* (2013) as the most prominent among them. Other studies explored the issues such as the impact of the national context on job seekers' intentions of employment with a specific employer (Baum and Kabst, 2013), the connection between different concepts describing the attractiveness of employer brands and brand strength and the employees' identification with the organization, discretionary efforts and intent to quit (Edwards and Edwards, 2013), or focused on various case studies (Martin and Hetrick, 2009; Pietersis *et al.*, 2005). From a theoretical aspect, international employer branding was studied primarily by human resource management scholars (e.g. Martin *et al.*, 2011; Martin and Hetrick, 2009; Martin *et al.*, 2005), who acknowledged the importance of marketing and marketing communication for this field to a certain extent.

International employer brand and cultural differences

Cultural differences have been the topic and subject of numerous scientific research in various fields for a number of years (e.g. Kawar, 2012; Minkov, 2011; Leege *et al.*, 2009; Cook, 2003; Ger and Belk, 1996; Cox *et al.*, 1991; Hofstede, 1986, as well as many others), with the differences stemming from them being of crucial importance for all those fields. In the marketing context, it is important to be aware of and take account of the specificities of the market in which organizations operate in order to create appropriate brands accordingly (Martin, 2011; Kotler, 1997).

Likewise, it is important to be aware of the specificities of the market for which an employer brand is being developed. Research undertaken by Almaçık *et al.* (2014), Arachchige and Robertson (2011), Grăjdieru and Khechoyan (2019), Roy (2008), as cited in Almaçık *et al.* (2014), Sarkiunaite and Sciukauske (2021), and Sivertzen *et al.* (2013) provides a valuable contribution in this respect. Namely, these studies highlight the differences in the significance of various employer brand aspects for different markets (Armenia, India, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Romania, Sri Lanka and Turkey). While proving that varying degrees of significance are assigned by the cultures concerned to different employer brand aspects, the authors examined the specificities of individual countries that are relevant to the organizations doing their business in those very countries. But the findings of such studies cannot be generalized, they do not provide a general insight into the issues of international employer branding. On the other hand, they are immensely relevant precisely for the markets in where they were conducted and would be worth conducting in as many markets and on as large a sample as possible. However, such studies tend to be oriented towards European (and North American) markets, posing a problem Baum and Kabst (2013) pointed to in their research.

International employer brand and attitudes towards and about work

The performance of a psychological contract is an important determinant of employer attractiveness which partially defines employee attitudes towards and about work (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021; Martin *et al.*, 2005; Pietersis *et al.*, 2005). Psychological contract is an aspect of the relationship between an employee and their employer, defined as the perception of an exchange between employee and employer (Rousseau, 1995). Psychological contract is

perceived as fulfilled if the employer has honored their promises and delivered on the employee's expectations. Martin *et al.* (2005) highlighted the importance of performance of such psychological contract for the perception of employer attractiveness among existing employees. Additionally, Sandeepanie *et al.* (2023) have emphasized the role psychological contracts and their fulfillment have in employer branding by suggesting psychological contracts as one of the key determinants of employer brand perception. In a case study focusing on the development of the Philips employer brand, Pietersis *et al.* (2005) stressed the need for consistency, both with regard to the values represented by the brand itself and to the communication used by the organization in an international (global) business environment. In this case, the greatest emphasis was placed on equalizing what was promised to the employees and then delivered. Specifically, by taking a different approach to the way in which the Philips employer brand is communicated, the practitioners aimed at enhancing the level of psychological contract fulfillment.

Another important factor affecting the attitudes towards and about work, in addition to psychological contracts, is employee engagement (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021) through which positive attitudes towards and about work are reflected in the employees' dedication to work (Harter *et al.*, 2002). In their case study on Coca Cola Hellenic (CCH), Kunerth and Mosley (2011) described how an integrated approach to the respective internal and external employer brand contributes to the levels of employee engagement, highlighting the effect of such approach on employer attractiveness to desirable potential employees. An examination of the aspects of organizational culture within CCH helped identify the key characteristics of the CCH employer brand; those were communicated in the process of attracting potential employees and strengthened through additional activities within the organization, in turn significantly enhancing levels of employee engagement.

Approaches to the international employer brand

Based on various case studies, scholars and practitioners exploring international employer branding provided some guidance on the approach to this field that could be taken by organizations operating in the global market, with a particular focus on multinational ones.

Thus, Martin *et al.* (2005) noted that a globally attractive employer brand may be achieved by improving the recruitment process and the compensations and benefits package, as well as through clearer communication and management of the psychological contract (i.e. expectations arising from it). Four years later, in a chapter co-authored with Martin and Hetrick, 2009, Martin defined the matrix of the approach to the international employer brand by differentiating between a local (where a branch has complete autonomy in employer brand development), global (where employer brand development is fully managed by the headquarters) and a so-called "glocal" approach (where the values represented by the brand are universally attractive and defined by the headquarters, with the local branches managing other brand aspects specific for each market). Subsequently, Martin *et al.* (2011) described the issues arising from a simultaneous need for a local and global human resource approach. A paper authored in 2011 makes it evident that Martin retained the attitude expressed in the chapter dating back to 2009, namely that a glocal approach is the most acceptable long-term solution for the development of employer brands of international companies.

Baum and Kabst (2013) found the opportunities for professional development and work atmosphere to be part of the global employer brand, with workplace support and compensation packages to be adjusted and communicated to the employees at the local level. While their research was based on a case study of a single organization conducted on a sample of engineering students in four countries (China, Germany, Hungary and India), rendering the results non-generalizable in their entirety, these authors nevertheless offered Employer brand

valuable insights into the approach that could be adopted by organizations in order to develop their employer brands "glocally." Similar research should be conducted in a greater number of markets to confirm the results obtained for the purpose of international employer brand development, thus also making a significant contribution to its further application in practice. This would help practitioners engaged in employer brand development expand their comprehension of which employer brand aspects within the glocal approach are global ones and which are to be developed and handled locally.

Conclusion

To summarize, the present review and critical analysis indicate that employer branding and various aspects of the international employer brand are predominantly subject of marketing communication research, as evidenced by seven out of the 37 analyzed research papers published in academic journals in all areas of marketing communication. These are followed by brand management and human resource management journals, with five and six out of the 37 articles analyzed having been published in journals devoted to each of these fields respectively.

The fundamental contribution of this article lies in its attempt to identify and provide a systematic overview of relevant characteristics of the international employer brand through a two-step approach, so to speak. The first step consists in the review and critical analysis of research papers in the broader field of employer branding, which serves to highlight the key characteristics of the concept, followed by an identification and consideration of the specificities resulting from the internationalization of business which, in turn, give rise to a multidimensional and complex concept of the international employer brand.

Limitations of this paper stem from the fact that it is based on a small number of articles available in the databases and covered by it. In addition, only the research papers written in English were included.

Notwithstanding its topicality and relevance, this largely neglected field presents numerous aspects that are yet to be subjected to thorough scrutiny. Taking attractiveness as a starting point, directions for future research that are compelling, necessary and desirable may be identified in the narrower international employer brand context. For example, scholars (e.g. Ruchika and Prasad, 2017; Barrow and Mosley, 2005), including one of the most prolific authors in the field of international employer branding (Martin *et al.*, 2011), on the one hand, highlight the importance of communication for the employer brand. On the other hand, studies focusing on the relationship between communication and employer brands are quite scarce (Spoljarić and Tkalac Verčič, 2022; Tkalac Verčič, 2021; Tkalac Verčič et al., 2021). Furthermore, research exploring this relationship at international level is virtually non-existent. Studies have shown that the perception of employer brands by the internal public depends on whether the employer concerned meets the expectations of its employees (Tkalac Verčič *et al.*, 2021), just like the psychological contract fulfillment was also found to depend to a large extent on internal communication (Tkalac Verčič, 2021). Connecting those three concepts and undertaking research in an international context would contribute considerably to the concept of the international employer brand. The findings of such research would reveal whether applying a strategic approach to the internal communication management at international level could be extended to managing employee expectations, whereby employer attractiveness would increase as well. In addition, further research conducted on current employees in a bid to explore the employer brand would deepen the knowledge of employer branding in general. In view of the fact that the perception of the external employer brand (Men, 2014), as well as employee loyalty and satisfaction (Terera and Ngirande, 2014; Logan, 1984) depend on it, the internal employer brand is of crucial importance to organizations and also contributes to an increase in their profits (Heilmann et al., 2013; Barrow and Mosley, 2005).

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Notes

1. Search results as on March 24, 2022.

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