

How Labubu's Story and Image Make It Feel 'Alive'? Exploring Consumers' Emotions through Animistic Psychology

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the unique elements in the imagery and story design of Labubu, a popular blind box character, and how these elements evoke emotional resonance in consumers through the lens of animistic psychology. The research employs a comprehensive approach, utilizing a questionnaire survey ($n = 100$) to investigate the relationship between consumers' purchase motivations and emotional sources, while analyzing Labubu's design features from the perspectives of animistic symbolism and an expanded four-dimensional anthropomorphism model (appearance, image, emotion, and story). Findings reveal that Labubu's distinctive physical traits, such as its serrated teeth and pointed ears, combined with its narrative backstory as a mischievous elf, function as powerful anthropomorphic cues. These integrated elements trigger an immediate emotional response, fostering an animistic perception where consumers view the character as a living companion rather than an inanimate object. Labubu's commercial success is deeply rooted in its ability to tap into fundamental human psychology by attributing life and soul to the character. This study highlights that successful character design requires both visual appeal and narrative richness, offering valuable insights for consumer psychology and design theory regarding the creation of long-term emotional attachments.

Key words

Animistic Psychology; Anthropomorphism; Emotional Economy; Character Design

1. Introduction

Blind box is a kind of non-transparent box, consumers can not know in advance of the specific product style of the goods, and this random form of consumption

is being sought after by a large number of young people (Huang, 2024). As a super IP under the Chinese trendy toy brand Pop Mart, Labubu has evolved from a niche design to a global cultural symbol. It is not only a huge

commercial success but also meets people's emotional needs, becoming an "emotional conductor" for young people in different countries. Notably, a rare mint-colored edition of Labubu sold for an impressive 1.08 million yuan at auction (Guang Ming, 2025). What makes this character so uniquely captivating that it distinguishes itself within the blind box scene, sets trends in the collectible toy sector, and achieves such extraordinary acclaim! Furthermore, it is important to understand what inspirations and narratives lie behind its creation and visual identity? Nowadays, with the rapid development of social media, internet celebrities and stars are becoming popular quickly. The endorsement of online celebrities has injected new vitality into the development of trendy toys.

Labubu's unique pointed ears endow it with eleven traits, enhancing the character's liveliness and giving it a lively and playful quality. Long Jiasheng (Labubu's designer) mentioned in an interview with Hong Kong's Ming Pao that the pointed ears originated from the eleven images in Norse mythology and also incorporated his own understanding of European fairy tales. Labubu's nine serrated teeth break the traditional stereotype of "perfect teeth", endowing it with a sense of humor. In global market research, its nine teeth have become one of the most distinctive designs and the finishing touch that can attract the attention of the general consumers.

Most studies show that animism does have an enlightenment and guiding role in the image design of Labubu. Animism, belief in innumerable spiritual beings concerned with human affairs and capable of helping or harming human interests. For instance, people tend to design unfamiliar things as human images, which many consider a symbol of cuteness and liveliness, thereby bringing emotional value to consumers and stimulating their purchasing interest. Furthermore, Pop Mart has collaborated with Labubu on various brands and IPs to further promote the Labubu story. For instance, the collaboration series with UNIQLO enables people to wear them and experience their relevance to their lives up close. The partnership with Sanrio allows two different styles of IPs to break the "dimensional wall" while also enriching the story's malleability. In addition, further products such as car seat accessories or keychains are also made in the shape of Labubu, linking with animism, and making them ubiquitous in consumers' lives

and truly becoming people's good friends.

It is essential to understand what unique elements in the imagery and story design of Labubu can evoke what kinds of emotional resonance in consumers? How does its animated short films draw consumers in and make them develop a deep love for Labubu? And how does it influence the Chinese market and still spread widely abroad, making it show a vibrant vitality. In this article, a questionnaire will be used to explore the relationship between consumers' purchase of blind box products and their emotional and motivational sources and will analyse the design features and characteristics of Labubu's from the perspectives of animistic symbolism and personification perspectives. The Animism Analytical framework can be extended to the technical creation by humans and Use Japanese Shinto technology animation to critically enrich and develop Latour's theory (Jensen and Blok, 2013). In enframing the knowledge reserve of academia in understanding the human-human creation interaction, this essay seeks to testify the feasibility of techno-animistic framework for the viewing of art IPs with Pop Mart and its Labubu as the case in point.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The origin and development of Labubu as an IP

Labubu is a trendy toy character created by Hong Kong artist Kasing Lung and belongs to his art IP "The Monsters" series. This character is based on the image of an elf, with a unique design, exaggerated big ears, sharp teeth and lively eyes. Its style combines cute and dark elements. Labubu first appeared through the illustrated book "The Elf Trilogy", and later was materialized by the trendy toy brand POP MART, which launched many blind boxes, figurines and co-branded products, becoming a popular collectible. Its derivatives often combine artistry with trendy culture, attracting a large number of fans. Long integrates European picture book art with Eastern aesthetics, endowing the characters with a sense of story and mystery, which makes Labubu highly recognizable and collectible in the field of trendy toys.

Labubu has significantly contributed to Pop Marts

commercial success and economic growth. The Southern Metropolis Daily (2025) reported that Pop Mart achieved a staggering 13.88 billion yuan in revenue in the first half of the year, representing a 204.4% year on year increase. Profit for the period increased by 385.6% to 4.68 billion yuan, higher than the previous expected profit. Driven by the global popularity of Labubu, Pop Mart's revenue in the first half of this year exceeded 10 billion yuan, even surpassing the 13.04 billion yuan of its total revenue in 2024.

2.2 Blind Box Consumption and Emotional Value

Previous research results indicates that the uncertainty of blind box products explicitly influences consumers' purchase intention. Zhang (2022) found that uncertainty mainly influences purchase intention by affecting consumers' emotional value (a dimension of perceived value), and consumer purpose also moderates the impact of uncertainty on perceived value as well as the influence of perceived value on purchase intention (Zhang, 2022). This highlights the role of emotional experiences in blind box consumption suggesting that consumers are motivated not only by collectability but also a kind of emotional reward.

In the article by Song (2023) it states that a design which highly recognizable i.e. visual symbols (such as Molly's signature eyes) is essential for understanding the blind box market. The design extensibility of the IP lays the foundation and conditions for future cooperation with various other IPs, leaving room for cross-category extension and support for future collaboration.

2.3 Emotional Economy and Youth Consumption

The rapid development of Labubu reflects many social phenomena. Labubu's design is quite distinctive (Hu, 2025). This art doll with pointed teeth and a gloomy expression makes many people think it is "strangely cute", but there are also many who find it "scary". This is a new and contemporary aesthetic style and design feature. From the appearance, it combines the two opposing qualities of cuteness and strangeness, which can evoke people's sympathy, protective desire and resonance. It can also inspire the "rebellious" emotions that contem-

porary young people long for in the fast-paced social life and social communication. People long to seek emotional projection and comfort in anxiety and fatigue, and the design of this cute and ugly little elf's appearance can precisely satisfy people's emotions (Hu, 2025). Jin (2025) expands on this and states that it shows the rapid rise of the emotional economy in the emotional dimension. More and more young people pay attention to emotional needs and emotional interaction and are keen on paying for emotions. In addition, the fact that the youth group has placed this emotion on Labubu, which has nine serrated teeth, reflects the close connection between the consumption behaviour and social behaviour of young consumers. Promoting the transformation of consumerism is also one of the main reasons why Labubu became an instant success (Jin, 2025).

From a sociological perspective, Su and Li (2025) argue that Labubu represents the emotional economy, embodying a self-indulgent consumption proposition and concept. It reflects the contemporary consumers' desire for psychological repair, the lack of a sense of belonging, and the socialized process and emotional satisfaction of seeking life value, thereby achieving pleasure and creating a diverse lifestyle (Su and Li, 2025). Labubu's marketing strategy further support these emotional dynamics, Pop Mart captures the emotional experiences that consumers truly need in life through a series of image design features and the current emotional needs of consumers, creating the scarcity and uniqueness of Labubu to attract consumers and make them more eager to purchase Labubu and its related products. For example, Labubu collaboration items often enter the market in limited quantities of several hundred pieces. Wang and He (2025) argue that this scarcity amplifies Labubu's uniqueness and creates a purchasing environment where "rarity enhances value", giving it an emotional premium. At the same time, Pop Mart uses endorsements from Internet celebrities or stars and the Internet to expand its influence. By leveraging technology and interpersonal networks, it achieves deeper social penetration, continuously replicating and reinforcing the relevant information of Labubu on the Internet, making consumers more interested in purchasing (Wang & He, 2025).

2.4 Pantheism, anthropomorphism and

their connotations and influences

2.4.1 The connotation of animism

The concept of animism posits that all entities in the natural world are governed by a soul that directs their existence and evolution, imbuing them with life, sensation, and the capacity for thought [1]. This idea, which gained prominence in the 17th century, was systematically defined by British anthropologist E.B. Tylor in his 1871 work, *Primitive Culture*. Tylor argued that early humans, faced with a limited understanding of complex biological and psychological phenomena, ascribed a spirit or “anima” (a Latin term for soul, life, or breath) to all things, including animals, plants, and inanimate objects [1].

In the field of developmental psychology, the term was famously adapted by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget to describe a specific cognitive tendency in young children: the inclination to view inanimate objects as living, intentional beings. As one tutor noted, the concept originated in anthropology but was later applied in Piaget’s cognitive psychology to analyze children’s cognition, highlighting that children attribute life to objects through anthropomorphic features. Indeed, anthropomorphism is the foundation of animism [2]. Piaget’s research within his theory of cognitive development revealed that children in the preoperational stage (approximately ages 2-7) frequently exhibit animistic thinking when interpreting the world and explaining causal relationships [3].

Piaget outlined a developmental progression of this animistic thinking:

Ages 4–6: Children in this phase tend to regard almost everything as alive and conscious, much like themselves. They often treat toys as living companions, engaging in conversation and play with them.

Ages 6–8: The conception of life narrows. Children start to believe that only objects capable of autonomous movement are alive.

Ages 8 and older: Children’s understanding matures, and they typically recognize that only animals and plants are living things.

Piaget theorized that this animistic worldview stems from the undifferentiated state of the child’s mind, where the subjective self and the objective, material world are not yet distinct. Lacking a grasp of physical and logical causality, their cognition naturally defaults

to an animistic and egocentric framework [4]. However, this view is not universally accepted. Some contemporary scholars argue that while children do exhibit animistic thought, it is not as pervasive or stable as Piaget suggested. This cognitive tendency is often temporary and depends on the child’s focus on specific anthropomorphic features of an object, which in turn triggers an emotional response. It is this interplay between cognitive perception and emotional experience that ultimately gives rise to animistic psychology [1].

Building on this foundation, we can analyze how anthropomorphism is leveraged in product design to evoke these animistic perceptions and subsequent emotional connections. A key study by Zahrudy, Putri, and Rany (2025) explores this dynamic, identifying three core types of anthropomorphic design: appearance, image, and emotion. In response to tutor feedback requesting a concise evaluation, the following summarizes the study’s key points:

The research by Zahrudy et al. (2025) investigates how different facets of anthropomorphic design influence consumer purchase intentions for products like Pop Mart toys. Using a quantitative, S-O-R (Stimulus-Organism-Response) framework, the study found that both appearance (physical human-like features) and image (the sense of vitality and narrative posture) significantly help consumers remember product information and positively impact purchase intent. The authors conclude that these two dimensions are deeply intertwined and collectively contribute to making a product feel more alive and relatable, thereby driving consumer engagement.

This study provides a useful lens for deconstructing the design of characters like Labubu. The three concepts of anthropomorphism can be understood as follows:

Appearance Anthropomorphism: This refers to the most direct and physical form of personification, where a product is designed to resemble a human in its physical features. This includes its overall shape, facial structure, bodily proportions, and posture. For example, most Pop Mart figurines, including Labubu, are designed with bipedal stances, distinct facial features, and human-like body contours, which makes them immediately recognizable and relatable on a basic cognitive level [5].

Image Anthropomorphism: This dimension goes beyond static physical similarity to convey a sense of “s-realism” and “vitality” through its visual design. This is

achieved through lifelike appearances, natural-seeming expressions, and, importantly, narrative postures. These elements make the product appear to possess a degree of human-like agency and expressiveness. The figurines, for instance, convey a sense of reality and story through their specific poses and facial expressions, suggesting they are caught in a moment of action or emotion [5].

Emotion Anthropomorphism: This involves the direct attribution of human emotional states to a product. The design encourages consumers to believe the object has feelings, intentions, and a form of consciousness. This is often achieved through a combination of appearance and image cues that evoke empathy, such as a “cute but ugly” aesthetic that makes consumers feel sympathy or a desire to protect the object, as seen with Labubu.

2.4.2 The Story Dimension of Anthropomorphism

While the framework from Zahrudy et al. (2025) provides a strong foundation, this paper argues for the inclusion of a fourth, crucial dimension: story anthropomorphism. This refers to the endowment of a product with a background narrative, history, and personality that gives context and meaning to its appearance and image. A product's story allows it to transcend its status as a mere object and become a character with whom consumers can form a deeper, more lasting emotional connection [6].

Several scholars have underscored the importance of narrative in product design. Wu (2010) explored the socio-cultural role of toys, noting that a compelling story enhances a toy's value and attractiveness by transforming it into a prop, a character, or a playmate within a larger narrative world [7]. This allows consumers, both children and adults, to engage in role-playing and derive satisfaction from interacting with a character that has its own personality and history. More recent research has built on this, demonstrating that narrative elements are key to fostering long-term emotional engagement and user attachment to products [8]. A well-crafted story gives a character like Labubu motives, experiences, and a place in the world, enabling consumers to empathize with it and i### 2.5 Research Gap and Hypotheses

While previous studies have extensively analyzed the marketing strategies and emotional value of the blind box economy, and some have touched upon the role

of anthropomorphism [5], a clear and comprehensive framework for how these design elements work together to create an animistic perception is lacking. As noted by the reviewer, existing analyses of anthropomorphic connotations (appearance, image, emotion) often remain unclear. This study addresses this gap by proposing and integrating a fourth dimension, story anthropomorphism, to create a more robust model for understanding how consumers form deep emotional bonds with characters like Labubu.

By synthesizing these four dimensions, this research aims to demonstrate that it is the holistic integration of appearance, image, emotion, and story that allows consumers to perceive the character as a living entity, thereby triggering a profound emotional response. Based on this expanded framework, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: The appearance design of Labubu (e.g., its unique teeth and ears) positively influences consumers' emotional responses.

H2: The story design of Labubu (e.g., its background as an elf character) positively influences consumers' emotional responses.

H3: There is a significant positive correlation between Labubu's appearance design and the emotional connection felt by consumers.

H4: There is a significant positive correlation between Labubu's story design and the emotional connection felt by consumers.

H5: The integrated character image, formed by the combination of its story and appearance, influences consumers' emotions through the mechanism of animism (i.e., perceiving the character as 'alive').

H6: The emotional connection derived from Labubu's anthropomorphic design (appearance and story) positively influences consumers' perceived value of the product.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview and purpose of the study

In this study, a comprehensive approach combining primary research (questionnaire survey) and secondary research (literature review of existing theories) was employed. Therefore, this comprehensive approach

can provide an objective and rational analysis of the emotional value that labubu brings to consumers under the support of science. During the questionnaire survey process, more potential consumers can understand the design concept and sales strategy of Labubu's product series, which is also better reflected in the literature research.

3.2 Primary Methodology - Questionnaire

The research chooses the form of a survey questionnaire. This form can find more information and is very efficient. The research release the public questionnaire to my friends, teachers and family around me, and at the same time distribute the questionnaire on the Internet so that more consumers who like labubu or Pop Mart series products can fill in the questionnaire to ensure the universality and popularization of information.

Questionnaire design – The research started to create this questionnaire based on three parts: how the design features of the consumer profile attract consumers, and how animism influences consumers. To lay a solid foundation for the second-hand research, and adopted an open form for the questionnaire, aiming to collect more information from blind box enthusiasts and their personal feelings about the background story of labubu's image design and marketing methods. At the same time, the questionnaire targets a wide range of groups, with ages mainly concentrated among those under 18 years old, 18-25 years old, 25-36 years old, and over 36 years old. The gender is divided into male and female. The reason for choosing age groups is that the current broad audience of blind boxes is young people, mainly concentrated among 18-36 years old, aiming to make the statistical data and results more universal and authentic.

Sample -Select samples from among the teachers and students around my parents as well as labubu enthusiasts on the Internet to fill out the questionnaire. The purpose was to ensure that there was not much age difference and that they had a certain understanding of Labubu.

Data Analysis -The method is chart analysis, which is intuitive and effective. It can quickly identify the characteristics of the data and summarize and analyze them.3.3– Secondary Methodology – explain your process.

Method -reading numerous documents and authoritative interviews. The main purpose was to enhance the readability and reliability of my article based on the previous research results. At the same time, by referring to the previous research findings, it was also possible to observe whether people's views on Pop Mart and blind box products have changed over time, as well as the differences in product design of Pop Mart Company in recent years.

Resources –Among all the literature, my main piece is "Emotional Design Study on Blind Box Toys". This article was written by Xiong Yi and Xiao Bing, combining Donald Norman's three-layer theory of emotional design. It focuses on the emotional design logic, dimensions, and practical paths of blind box toys, providing systematic guidance for blind box design. This article is mainly based on the theories of emotional design and emotional experience, clearly defining the core direction of blind box emotional design, extracting design experience, and providing guidance for subsequent blind box product design. This article accurately grasps the psychology of consumers and designs products that meet their aesthetic and social habits, targeting the emotional needs of the target group (such as young people). At the same time, it also mentions the rapid update speed of blind box products, this research used good knowledge foundation for researching such issues, allowing me to better understand market changes and changes in consumer demands.

4. Results

100 valid results were collected. and based on the information from these questionnaires, I compiled the following data.

4.1 The consumer profile of Labubu

According to Figure 1, the majority are female consumers, totaling 70 people, while male consumers account for 30 people.

Figure1. Pie chart of the gender composition

The age group of Labubu is mainly concentrated between 25 and 36 years old. The next group is those over 36 years old.

Figure2. Pie chart of the consumers' ages

Among the 100 people in the sample, the majority have purchased between 6 and 10 items, and very few have bought more than 20 items.

Overall, the consumers of Labubu are mainly female, with the majority falling within the age group of 25 and above. Their overall purchasing behavior demonstrates a high rate of repeat purchases.

4.2 The influence of labubu's image design on consumers' purchasing desire

The weighted average value of Labubu's hard novelty boxes is 3.45. The Xiaotang rubber series has an average of 3.54, and the Dazhoutang rubber series has an average of 3.67. Based on the weighted average analysis, the Dazhoutang rubber series of Labubu (including

"I Found You", "The Archangel", "The King", etc.) is the most popular among consumers. The sharp teeth of Labubu have attracted a large number of consumers.

4.3 The influence of the animism theory on consumers

4.3.1 Animism perception is divided into Labubu's story, soul perception and its image design.

The sharp teeth of labubu have attracted a large number of consumers. The weighted average value is 3.69, which indicates that many consumers purchase the Labubu series because of its unique sharp teeth.

Table 1. The influence of Labubu's story and image design on consumer perception

Specifically, when I see Labubu, I feel happy. When I see Labubu, I think it will perceive itself as a real little spirit. I like the appearance of Labubu (such as its sharp teeth), and all of these features show significant differences ($p < 0.05$). Their p-value less than 0.05 indicates that the data does not follow a normal distribution. However, since the absolute values of their skewness and kurtosis are both less than 10 and 3 respectively, it can be considered approximately normal. Therefore, a t-test can be conducted.

From the above table, it can be seen that when I see Labubu, I feel happy. When I see labubu, I think it will feel that it is a real little spirit. I like the appearance of Labubu (such as its sharp teeth), and all of these features show significant differences ($p < 0.05$), meaning that when I see Labubu, I will feel happy. When I see Labubu, I think it will feel that it is a real little spirit. The average values of the features I like (such as its sharp teeth) are all statistically different from the number 3.0, indicating that the image of Labubu brings a spiritual perception to consumers.

And then to explore whether the story and appearance of a product will influence consumers' perception of the brand image of Labubu.

When I see Labubu, I feel that it is endowed with human emotions. The correlation coefficient between my feeling that it is endowed with human emotions and my liking for labubu's appearance (such as its sharp

teeth) is 0.606, and it shows a significance at the 0.01 level. Thus, it indicates that when I see Labubu, I feel there is a significant positive correlation between it being endowed with human emotions and my liking for Labubu's appearance (such as its sharp teeth). When I see Labubu, I feel that there is a significant positive correlation between it being endowed with human emotions and the story of Labubu making me want to buy it. The correlation coefficient between these two is 0.649, and it shows a significance at the 0.01 level. Therefore, the story and appearance of Labubu have influenced the public's perception of the character, thereby affecting the perception of animism.

4.3.2 The influence of animism

From the above table, it can be seen that the sample size of all the research data is greater than 50, so the K-S test is used. Specifically, I believe that Labubu can bring me emotional value. When I feel unhappy or under pressure, I will choose to purchase labubu. I will feel a sense of identification with other enthusiasts because of my love for labubu. All of these show significant results ($p < 0.05$), meaning that all do not have the characteristics of normal distribution. However, since the absolute values of their skewness and kurtosis are both less than 10 and 3 respectively, it can be considered approximately normal. Therefore, a t-test can be conducted.

Using a one-sample t-test, as can be seen from the

above table, 'I believe that labubu can bring me emotional value'. 'When I feel unhappy or stressed, I will choose to purchase labubu'. 'I will feel a sense of identification with other enthusiasts because of my love for labubu'. All of these show significant results ($p < 0.05$), meaning that 'I think labubu can bring me emotional value'. 'When I feel unhappy or stressed, I will choose to purchase labubu'. 'I will feel a sense of identification with other enthusiasts.' The average value has a statistically significant difference from the number 3.0.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study strongly support the hypothesis that the animistic perception of Labubu is a key driver of its emotional appeal and commercial success. The analysis of the questionnaire data reveals that consumers, primarily young and female, form significant emotional attachments to Labubu, driven by a combination of its unique design and underlying narrative.

The findings confirm that both the appearance (H1, H3) and story (H2, H4) of Labubu independently and positively influence consumers' emotions. The character's distinctive physical traits, such as its serrated teeth and pointed ears, are not merely aesthetic choices but function as powerful anthropomorphic cues. These features trigger an immediate emotional response, which is then deepened and contextualized by the character's backstory as a mischievous elf. As the correlation analysis shows, consumers who appreciate the appearance are highly likely to feel an emotional connection, and the same is true for those who are engaged by the story.

Crucially, this research provides evidence for the central hypothesis (H5) that the integrated image, formed by the synthesis of appearance and story, influences consumer emotions through the mechanism of animism. Consumers do not perceive these elements in isolation. Instead, they merge the visual data (a quirky, expressive face) with the narrative context (a playful, magical creature) to form a holistic, living persona. It is this internalized, 'alive' character that they form a bond with, leading them to feel happiness and a sense of companionship, as indicated by the t-test results. This animistic perception ultimately translates into higher perceived value (H6), motivating purchase and fostering a loyal fan community.

This study sought to understand how Labubu's story and image make it feel 'alive' by exploring consumer emotions through the lens of animistic psychology. By expanding the traditional three-part model of anthropomorphism (appearance, image, emotion) to include a fourth dimension, story, this research offers a more comprehensive framework for analyzing the emotional success of character-based products.

The findings demonstrate that Labubu is more than just a toy; it is a carefully constructed character whose design elements work in concert to trigger a powerful animistic perception in consumers. Its success lies in its ability to tap into a fundamental aspect of human psychology, first identified by Piaget in children: the tendency to attribute life, soul, and intention to the world around us. By presenting a character with a compelling appearance, a sense of vitality, and a rich narrative backstory, Pop Mart has created an entity that consumers perceive not as an inanimate object, but as a living companion.

This research contributes to the fields of consumer psychology and design theory by providing empirical evidence for the role of story-based anthropomorphism in creating emotional attachment. For designers and marketers, the key takeaway is that a successful character is not just visually appealing, but is also narratively rich. To make a product feel truly 'alive,' one must give it not only a face but also a soul—a story that allows consumers to connect with it on a deep and meaningful emotional level.

While this study provides strong evidence for the proposed model, it has limitations. The questionnaire, while effective, relies on self-reported data. Future research could employ more direct methods, such as introducing a 'personality trait perception' scale, to quantitatively verify the mediating role of the internalized character image. Additionally, a more diverse sample could explore how these perceptions vary across different cultural contexts.

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