

# A Preliminary Research on Monetary Reward as Extrinsic Motivation in Long Term Task-based Learning

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**Abstract.** Scholars have long noticed and analyzed the function of extrinsic motivation in learning. Findings were fruitful concerning this topic in and out of China in the past 20 years. Yet not much findings have been found about research on the function of monetary reward in a long-term learning activity with mass participation. This thesis is based on an interview about the role of monetary reward as a kind extrinsic motivation in a long-term English vocabulary competition carried out on an application in which attractive monetary reward is awarded to the high-achievers. It is found that sustained and stable monetary reward could strengthen the initiative of students in the long-term learning activity, but when the monetary reward becomes over attractive, it may bring about negative changes to the learners. The students may choose those learning contents which may bring them better monetary reward rather than contents which are conducive to their academic achievement, and they may reduce the study time of other courses and other activities in the same course, which leads to imbalanced academic development. It is suggested that the teachers should give sustained guidance in the whole activity and attach more importance to spiritual awards rather than depending on monetary reward alone. It is also suggested that teachers should be cautious when changing the rules and tasks and make sure the new rules or tasks are fair so as not to hurt the initiative of students.

**Keywords:** monetary reward; extrinsic motivation; initiative

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary is essential to English majors. Without sufficient vocabulary, making progress in learning English seems rather difficult. Yet, due to various reasons, enlarging the vocabulary seems not so easy. Many students are suffering from the drawbacks of limited vocabulary, yet they don't seem to be making much progress in enlarging it. The reasons for this are varied. Some students complain that there are too many new words in the textbooks and many of them are not "useful" to them; some say that they are too much occupied so they don't have enough time; others seem to be in lack of motivation and confidence to enlarge it. So, expanding their vocabulary becomes increasingly important.

In the English office of the college the author is working in, a series of English competitions were held in order to serve this purpose. From Sept. 11, 2020 to Dec. 13, 2020, the English office organized the third English Vocabulary Competition. The whole competition was done on an app for English learners developed by a Shenzhen-based education company. To enhance the initiative of the participants, this company sponsored the competition. The students who have comparatively better performance could get a certain amount of money ranging from 5 yuan to 35 yuan per week.

Many students showed great enthusiasm in this competition because they felt that the monetary reward was tempting to them. Yet, surprisingly, a number of students showed not much interest in this competition despite of the decent monetary reward. Facing this situation, the author has been wondering how effective monetary reward (as a kind of extrinsic motivation) can be in attracting students to make sustained efforts in a long-term learning progress and how much monetary reward is necessary to give students sustainable driving force to take part in it. So, to answer these two questions, the author interviewed 12 students and analyzed their feedback.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Motivation and Learning Motivation**

Motivation is basically a psychological term. It is generally viewed as the reason for a person's behavior. The way people act or respond vary from person to person. Underlying these different behaviors are different motivations. These motivations are the forces that drive a person to conduct related behaviors.

The research on motivation has a long history, yet to reach a universally accepted definition seems impossible. The main reason for this situation is the self-evolution of this concept, that is, with the development of the research on it, the research methods and concepts of many other fields penetrated into the research of motivation, deepening people's understanding of this concept while making it more complicated.

One of the widely accepted definitions was put forward by Dörnyei. According to him, motivation is "a process whereby a certain amount of instigation force arises, initiates action, and persists as long as no other force comes into play to weaken it and thereby terminate action, or until the planned outcome has been reached" (p. 118). [1]

It must be noted that Dörnyei is a very influential scholar in the field of motivation in foreign language learning. He put forward the Three-dimensional Construction Theory [2] to explain the diversity of learners' motivation. This theory is considered to be comprehensive, yet somehow "sophisticated". His research topics include motivational strategies, [3] future L2 self-image, [4] conceptualizing motivation [5] and so on.

Learning motivation deals with the underlying forces that drives a person to study. Generally, people agree that a learner's learning behavior is driven by his/her learning motivation. The learning motivation of students can be greatly different, and it can lead to different learning habits and results. As to what learning motivation is, according to Mo, learning motivation refers to the psychological tendency that stimulates and maintains a student's learning activity. It can direct a learner's learning activity to the goal designated by the teacher. [6]

### **2.2 Classification of Motivation**

Motivation can be divided into different types based on different standards. The standards include the origin of motivation, the social values of it, the duration of it and so on. Basing on the reasons or purposes behind an action, Ryan & Deci divided it into two types: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation. [7]

As is defined by Ryan & Deci, "Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence" (p. 56). [7] In some cases, the learning activity can bring emotional satisfaction to the learner, so the learner enjoys the learning process, and is willing to conduct the learning activity. In these cases, the origin of motivation is the learning activity. This kind of motivation can be grouped into intrinsic motivation.

"Extrinsic motivation is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome" (p. 60). [7] For example, the praises from teachers, parents or peers can attract and stimulate a student to carry out learning activities that he/she doesn't like. In this case, the origin of his/her learning activity is not from the learning process itself, but from other people.

Though intrinsic and extrinsic motivation seem to be opposite to each other, they are closely related in reality. They can influence each other in many cases, and in some cases, extrinsic motivation can even be internalized. So, teachers should be on alert when dealing with the motivation of students.

### **2.3 Monetary Reward as Extrinsic Motivation**

Reward is an important form of extrinsic motivation. There are various forms of reward, which include money, scholarship, titles, praises and so on. Money is a usual form of reward. Many

scholars have used it as a reward in their experiments. As to the influence of monetary reward to a students' learning, the results are varied.

Edward L. Deci conducted 2 laboratory and 1 field experiment, based on his observation, he came to the conclusion that the intrinsic motivation would decline when money is given as a reward. [8] This conclusion seemed to imply that monetary reward is negative. Yet in an experiment conducted by Eisenberger and Amabile, monetary reward is found to be conducive to enhancing innovation and creativity of the experimental subjects. [9] One thing to be noted is that these experiments were not long-term ones, and the actual effect of monetary reward on students is up to more research and dependent on the subjects and other experimental conditions.

## **2.4 Research on motivation in China**

Motivation is a hot topic to Chinese scholars. A lot of research and experiments have been done by Chinese scholars. Their topics covered the types of motivation, the relationship between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation, the factors that can influence motivation and how to strengthen motivation in different teaching contexts. The following are some important opinions.

Huang and Han made a SEM-based Study on college students' motivational regulation strategies in their college English learning, and came to the conclusion that "college students tended to use the strategies of Performance Self-Talk and Mastery Self-Talk to maintain the level of motivation in their English study, while the strategies of interest enhancement and self-consequating were less frequently used" (p. 173). [10]

Zhu, Yang & Xu argued that "teaching based on mobile terminal can enhance the the extrinsic motivation and learning strategies of students in a conspicuous way" after making an experiment in 4 classes (one control class and 3 experiment classes) (p. 90). [11]

Liu had an empirical research on the relationship between English listening proficiency and learning motivation by applying the Willis' TBLT Framework in listening teaching, and reported the results, hoping to give some suggestions to teachers in the same field. [12]

## **3. The Study**

### **3.1 Research Questions**

The following are the research questions to be answered:

1. Are there any correlations existing between monetary reward and output in the competition?
2. If there are any, what are the specific positive and/or negative influences that monetary reward have on students' learning activities?
3. How is the sum of monetary reward related to the initiative of students?
4. What are the correlations between monetary reward and intrinsic motivation?

### **3.2 Background information of the competition**

As is mentioned above in the Introduction, the third "Yanchuan Cup" English Vocabulary Competition was held between Sept. 11, 2020 to Dec. 13, 2020 (13 learning weeks plus some preparation time). The competition was organized in the form of a long-term learning task assigned in the course of Basic English III. This task was compulsory to all the English majors from the 9 classes in grade 2019. The students' learning activities were recorded and checked on a weekly basis.

In the competition, the students were required to learn the new words in a vocabulary book on Yanchuanzixuewang (an app developed by the sponsor) to get a task point. This app had a system which could preserve the learning records and assess the performance of all users by scoring all the learning activities on the app. The task was checked on a weekly basis, and the score on the app was refreshed accordingly. After a week's learning, the students could get a score given by the app (app score). A score of 500 points from the app was equal to a 100 task point. When the app score was

less than 500 points, the task point was produced by dividing the app score by 5, and when the app score was more than 500, the task point the learner could get remained 100.

The students could adjust their learning process basing on their own level. But to stimulate them to make more efforts, the sponsor would gave monetary reward to students with good performance. The money was given every week based on the app score ranking list (The list was refreshed every week).

To get the monetary reward, many students would strive to get a higher app score in spite of the ceiling of the task point.

### 3.3 Respondents and Sampling

Altogether 12 students were interviewed. They were all English majors in their second year in the college the author was working in. They all took part in the English Vocabulary Competition, though with diverse performance in it. Purposeful sampling was employed in the research. In the sampling of the interview, factors like gender, age, average app score on a weekly basis were put into consideration. Since more than 80% of the English majors in my college are female, only 2 male respondents are chosen. The age of the respondents may not be an important factor because the age gap of them is not conspicuous, but the age information of the respondents are listed for reference. The most important factor considered is the app score of the participants. According to their app score, the respondents can be divided into three groups: high-achievers, medium achievers, and low achievers. The basic information of the 12 respondents are listed below.

Table 1. Background information of respondents

Student	Group	Gender	Age	Average App Score on a Weekly Basis
A	High-achievers	Female	20	902
B		Female	20	2536
C		Female	20	1056
D		Female	20	1168
E	Medium-achievers	Female	20	591
F		Female	21	498
G		Female	20	833
H		Female	20	503
I	Low-achievers	Male	20	387
J		Female	20	0
K		Female	20	64
L		Male	21	236

### 3.4 Interview Outline

To better understand the function of monetary reward in the competition, 10 questions are designed. Based on the purpose of them, these questions can be divided into 5 groups. Each group is designed to focus on one topic. The details are in the following table.

Table 2. Classification of questions

Group	Question	Focus
A	1-2	background information
B	3	Purpose of study
C	4-7	The general influence of monetary reward on learning
D	6-7	The influence of monetary reward on time devotion
E	8-10	The attractiveness of monetary reward

### 3.5 Research Methods

Two methods are employed in the research: documentary analysis and interview.

In the research, the literature on motivation, extrinsic motivation and monetary reward are collected and analyzed so as to get a better comprehension of it. To get the feedback from the students, an interview about monetary reward is designed and the feedback from the interview is analyzed in a comprehensive way.

### 3.6 Research Steps

Altogether there are five steps in this research.

#### Step 1. App score analysis

In this step, the author collected the data of all participants of the English Vocabulary Competition, and counted the total app score of each participant and the total app score of all participants, and then he calculated the average app score of all participants.

#### Step 2. Sampling

After getting the average app score, the author analyzed the app score distribution, and then compared the average app score with the total app score of each participant. After that, he selected 12 samples basing on the app score distribution. The performance of the 12 students in the competition fell into three groups.

#### Step 3. Interviewing

The interview was conducted between Feb. 23rd, 2021 and Feb. 25th, 2021 through the Internet in the form of words instead of a verbal way given the Covid-19 situation. 12 students were interviewed, and they all answered the questions given in a comprehensive way, so the feedback was acceptable.

#### Step 4. Analysis of the interview

The analysis of the feedback from the interview was conducted based on the research questions. The feedback of the interviewees were compared within their own group, and then the feedback from every group was compared with those of the other two groups.

#### Step 5. Composing the thesis

The thesis was composed after the analysis of the interview was done. The findings and the suggestions are presented in the thesis.

## 4. Monetary Reward and Learning

### 4.1 The Attractiveness of the Monetary Reward in the Competition

The monetary award was given based on the app score which was refreshed every week. According to the awarding system, in each class, the top 12 students (the average student number in each class is 34) could get the prizes ranked from the first to the sixth. The corresponding rewards for the six prizes were 35 yuan, 30 yuan, 25 yuan, 20 yuan, 15 yuan and 10 yuan (for each prize, there were 2 winners). If the app score of the participant was above 800 yet he/she was ranked below 12, he/she could get 5 yuan as a kind of encouragement. According to the statistics from the company, the award in total was 28860 yuan. In average, each student was awarded with 7.35 yuan every week.

In the interview, the students were asked about their attitude towards the attractiveness of the monetary reward to them. To avoid ambiguity, they were also asked about the minimum money amount that is attractive to them and the money amount that is very attractive to them. The results are listed below. When the student did not give his/her answer to the question given, their answer is marked with "--" in the table.

Table 3. Student's evaluation of the monetary reward

Student	Attractive or not	minimum in attractiveness	very attract-ive amount	Intended price goal
A	Yes	30	50	no
B	Yes	10	30	1 <sup>st</sup>
C	Yes	5	30	1 <sup>st</sup>
D	Yes	--	--	any prize
E	Yes	20	100	between 1 <sup>st</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup>
F	Yes	--	--	no
G	Yes	20	50	no
H	Yes	5	10	3 <sup>rd</sup>
I	Yes	20	100	no
J	No	50	--	no
K	--	--	--	2 <sup>nd</sup>
L	Yes	15	25	2 <sup>nd</sup> or 3 <sup>rd</sup>

The table above reveals that the majority of the students agreed that the first prize of the competition (35 yuan) was attractive to them. To four of them, it was "very attractive". This provides a basis for the whole research. But the attractiveness of the awards varies from student to student.

The students were also asked about whether they had a clear intended goal to win a certain prize, 7 out of the 12 respondents said yes, and replied with their intended goal. The table above shows that there is great disparity in the students' expectations, and the high-achievers seem to be more able to achieve their goals.

#### 4.2 Monetary Reward and Students' Willingness to Participate

From the above part (A), it can be concluded that the monetary reward was attractive to the students, but how attractive was it? Was it possible that the main driving force of the students in participating in the competition was the monetary reward? To seek answers to this question, the following question was asked:

Q3. Suppose there were no monetary reward given, and no punishment for not taking part in the competition, would you still take part in it?

According to the responses of the interviewees to question 3, 6 of the 12 respondents answered with a yes plus some explanations. This indicates that the motivation of these 6 respondents were not driven by monetary reward. The students who answered with a yes provided some reasons for their choice. These reasons include the benefits brought by the competition and the convenience brought by the app. For example, Student H mentioned that the app could "correct our pronunciation and help us to enlarge our vocabulary". Nevertheless, to those who gave negative answers, the role of monetary reward was not conspicuous. Most of the respondents mentioned reasons other than monetary reward. Only two of the respondents said that without monetary reward they would not take part in the competition.

#### 4.3 The Influences of Monetary Reward on Learning

After analyzing the feedback of students, a comprehensive understanding of the influence of monetary reward on learning has been achieved. Many aspects of a participant's learning have been affected by monetary reward. These aspects include a learner's initiative, study time, and contents of study. To be more precise, the following table is made to include the details to be discussed when these aspects are analyzed.

Table 4. Aspects and details of influence of monetary reward on learning

Sequence No.	Aspects	Details
1	initiative	intensification, weakening, zero change
2	study time	total amount of study time, distribution of time spent in a day, distribution of time spent in different subjects
3	contents of study	Innovation; opportunism; structure

#### 4.3.1 Monetary Reward and Initiative

1) Monetary reward intensifies learning initiative in a general way.

In the interview outline, question 4 and 5 are designed to assess the influence of monetary reward on the students' initiative. The students can choose one of them to answer basing on their own situation.

Q4. If you agree the influence of monetary reward on your initiative to take part in the competition is positive, please describe the positive influence in detail.

Q5. If you agree the influence of monetary reward on your initiative to take part in the competition is negative, please describe the negative influence in detail.

In the feedback, 10 out of 12 respondents believed that monetary reward had exerted positive influence on their initiative. From the responses, it is safe to say that monetary reward can intensify the learning initiative of most students. The answer offered by Student I is typical in supporting this opinion, he said:

"I agree that the monetary reward is positive to my initiative. Only monetary reward can help me in my real life and stimulate me to devote more study time into the competition in a sustained manner."

According to the rule of the competition, there was a ceiling of the app score that was necessary for students to get the full task point. When the app score (which refreshes every week) was more than 500 points, the task for this week was virtually finished. In this situation, the role of the task as a driving force was reduced to the minimum and the function of the monetary reward as a driving force became most conspicuous.

As is indicated in table 1, the weekly app score of 2/3 of the students was over 500, which indicates that most of them showed more initiative and devotion in the competition than the task required. This can also prove that monetary reward intensifies learning initiative in a general way.

It should also be noted that sustained and stable monetary reward can strengthen the initiative of students in a sustained way. After the monetary reward was given to the students in the second learning week, the students' confidence in the veracity of the competition was strengthened. So they devoted more time into the competition. The reply from Student G & B can prove this:

Student G:

I was not very confident in the veracity of the competition at the beginning, because the monetary reward was so much. I thought it was for the whole competition. So in the second week, I had a plan.

Student B:

... every time I got the money I was happy, and I would think of getting it next week.

Another aspect worth observation is the competitiveness brought by the monetary reward. To get a bigger reward, some students confessed that they would check the scores of others to see whether they could keep their expected position. This could bring more competitiveness as many students would devote more time to ensure they could get their intended prizes. Student B even enjoyed the competition in it, as she said "with more competitiveness, my initiative can be better stimulated."

2) Monetary reward can weaken learning initiative in some cases

Though most students agreed that monetary reward could strengthen their learning initiative, there did exist a few cases in which the learning initiative was weakened. Two of the 12 respondents replied that their learning initiative was weakened and one of them reduced the amount of time he intended to devote into the competition because of the monetary reward. The reasons they offered included lack of purpose in the process, waste of time, tiredness, decrease in interest, dependence on the reward, and weakening of initiative. The following are their remarks.

Student L:

“To learn for money is blind. They have no purpose in it. It’s just a waste of time. The app could help us in many ways, but they can’t fully utilize the app.”

Student H:

“I felt tired after taking part in it for some weeks. My interest went down, and my initiative was weakened. I think it’s too easy to generate dependence on the reward.”

### 3) Zero Change in Learning Initiative

In certain cases, the monetary reward might exert zero influence on the learning initiative of students. As is mentioned above in A in Part IV, 6 of the 12 respondents replied that they would take part in the competition even if no monetary reward would be given. This might be able to prove that money had no influence on their initiative, but after a careful examination of the prize records, I found that all of them had won some monetary rewards, and in the weeks when they won these rewards, their app scores were all above 500. This made their replies not so reliable since they might have been actually influenced by the monetary rewards.

But there was one rare case. One respondent said she would not take part in the competition even though the monetary reward was given because she did not like the app and the way to practice English on it. She did not take part in the competition though it was compulsory. In the 13 weeks of the competition, her total app score was 0. So in her case, the influence of monetary reward on her initiative was zero, and she had no change in initiative that was related to monetary reward.

## 4.3.2 Monetary Reward and Study Time

### 1) Total Amount of Extra Study Time

Because of the monetary reward, students might have devoted more time than they usually would in order to get it. To analyze the truth of this possibility, questions 6&7 were designed to seek information about it.

Question 6: If you agree that the monetary reward could strengthen your participation willingness, did you devote more time than you planned to get the reward? If yes, how much more time did you put into it (on a weekly basis)?

Question 7: If you agree that the monetary reward could reduce your participation willingness, did you devote less time than you planned to get the reward? If yes, how much time did you reduce (on a weekly basis)?

All the 12 respondents answered the questions. The following table shows the total amount of extra time that the students devoted into the competition to get more monetary reward on a weekly basis.



Table 5. Total amount of extra study time on a weekly basis

Student	Attitude	Total Amount of Extra Study Time
1	Yes	about 2 hours
2	Yes	about 3-4 hours
3	No	0
4	No	0
5	Yes	about 4 hours
6	Yes	about 6 hours
7	Yes	about 6 hours
8	Yes	about 3 hours
9	Yes	not mentioned
10	Yes	0
11	Yes	about 3 hours
12	No	a deduction of 3.5-4 hours

From the statistics in table 3, 7 out of 12 respondents agreed that the monetary reward did stimulate them to devote more time than planned into study, and each of them devoted a certain amount of extra time, ranging from 2 to 7 hours every week. This shows that monetary reward is positive as a stimulant in arousing the initiative of students.

## 2) Distribution of Time Spent in Different Courses

Another aspect to be noticed is that the monetary reward has reduced the students' learning time in other subjects. As is stated previously, the monetary reward in the competition was attractive to many students, so the students were willing to put more time into the competition to get a higher reward. Personally the author had received complaints from other teachers saying that the students would skip some basic exercises in their teaching courses and the excuses these students gave were that they were busy with the competition so they were short of time.

## 3) Distribution of Time Spent in a Day

It is also worth noting that some students changed their timetable just to get a higher reward. Some students were too "crazy" trying to get the top prizes so they would even stay up late after 12 o'clock at night to learn, causing some problems with their roommates, and some students were recorded by the app to have started to learn early at at 5 o'clock in the morning doing reading exercises, which is much to the surprise of teachers.

### 4.3.3 Monetary Reward and Contents of Study

The monetary reward has changed the structure of the contents of students' study. As is revealed in table 5, 7 out of 12 students devoted more time than planned into the competition. Some students even chose to skip some basic exercises assigned by teachers of other courses. So it is safe to say that the knowledge structure of many students have been changed by the competition.

Another change is brought about by the scoring system of the app. Student J reported that after some practice, some students found that doing certain types of exercises on the app could give them some advantages, so they would choose to do more of these kinds of exercises. This happened even when the students were very familiar with these exercises because of repeated practice. This might have wasted some time, thus going against the original intention of the competition.

## 5. Suggestions

Since the whole thesis is a discussion about the role of monetary reward in a long-term study activity involving participants from different classes, it should be noted that all the suggestions to be made in the following are given on this basis.

### **5.1 Spiritual awards should go with monetary rewards.**

Generally, sustained monetary reward helps to strengthen the initiative of students. Students may become more aggressive in finishing the tasks, and most of them may become more willing to devote more time into study, but the drawbacks of the monetary reward should be given enough attention. Some students may become too much dependent on the monetary reward, and their interest in the knowledge itself may be reduced in the long run. To avoid these problems, spiritual award is strongly recommended to supplement monetary reward. The teachers should make full use of spiritual reward while reducing the impact of monetary reward. At the same time, the spiritual function of monetary reward should be explored. The students' interest in monetary reward should be diverted to study when it's excessive, and students should be guided to view monetary reward as a kind of praise. In addition, students should be guided to build their sense of achievement on the knowledge and the progress they have gained in the study activity.

### **5.2 Sustained guidance should be offered to students in order to solve the in-process problems.**

In a long-term study activity, many unexpected problems would occur. Some problems arise because of the flaws of the activity itself. These flaws may include wrong print, wrong answers, and hidden unfairness. Some problems are caused because of the wrong practice of the students. Other problem may involve uncontrollable factors. For example, a sudden blackout may influence the fairness of the competition, especially when the task is assigned to be finished in a short period of time. So it is advisable to designate a teacher or a group of teachers to be in charge of and to watch the whole process.

### **5.3 The tasks and rules should be set with comprehensive and reasonable consideration.**

In a long-term study activity, when money is given as reward, the teachers should be very cautious about the possible negative effects brought about by money. Some students may be very sensitive about money, so when their economic interest is affected by the change of the rule, they may easily suffer emotional fluctuations, which will affect their devotion to the study task. Besides, as is mentioned above, when the monetary reward is attractive enough, problems like excessive devotion, tiredness, and opportunism may occur. So when setting a task, teachers should examine the rationality and effectiveness of it in a comprehensive and reasonable way. To avoid these problems, it is necessary for the teachers to examine the tasks before, during, and after the study activity. When the activity is a long one, re-examining the tasks in a periodical manner is suggested.

### **5.4 Least changes should be made to the task or rules of the activity.**

Teachers should be very cautious about any change in the rule or task. Though regular re-examination of the tasks is suggested, it does not imply any support of a frequent change of the tasks. This is especially important when the competition involves participants from different classes. In fact, It is suggested that least changes should be made. There are three reasons. First, it may cause emotional fluctuations and lack of confidence in the activity, which may reduce the students' willingness to devote. Second, it may cause some unexpected problems. When there is any rule change, new problems will always go with it. For example, it's not easy to get everyone informed about the new rule or task, and even when the new ones are received by every participant, how to apply the new rule would sometimes cause problems. Third, the validity of the new rule or task is still to be tested. In an activity which involves different classes, the change in the rule or task may receive different responses from these classes because of their different backgrounds. When there is any opposite opinion in the reception of the new rule or task, the teachers will be in a very embarrassed position.

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