# Inferences from Brand Names

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The judgments associated with descriptive or non-descriptive brand names are shown to vary with product category. Brands with descriptive names were consistently rated as higher quality, more effective, more positive and more likely to purchase than brands with non-descriptive names for low involvement products. No effects were found for type of brand name in evaluating high involvement products. Descriptive names had a higher recall level than non-descriptive names for both high and low involvement products.

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of brand names as a major extrinsic cue used by consumers in inferring product quality has been established in previous research (e.g., Jacoby et al 1977; Zeithaml 1988). Brands help to make the consumer choice process easier. They provide a label to information stored in memory, act as a trigger of recall and indicate the level of certain attributes of the product (Kanungo 1968). Therefore, consumers may use brand names to infer many aspects about the brand regardless of whether or not they have ever used the brand of product.

Given the important functions a brand name performs, it is not clear how many good brand names exist. In a study done some years ago, it was found that only 12% of brand names helped sell the product; 36% actually hurt sales and 52% were "non entities contributing nothing to the sales appeal of the product" (Stanton, Sommers and Barnes 1973). In some cases, costly errors and product failures have been attributed to inappropriate and ineffective brand names (Halborg 1979; Bassin 1976).

It would be wrong to conclude that brand names are randomly chosen for the product. On the contrary, marketers spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to try to come up with original names that would hopefully contribute towards selling of the product. Recently there has been some assertion that descriptive brand names are more effective in selling a product than names that are made up of meaningless words (Wall Street Journal, Nov. 29, 1988). However, the relative importance of the type of brand name varies across product categories. Automobile manufacturers have been naming their cars for years with various number and letter combinations with great sales success (Wall Street Journal, March 29, 1989).

Another concern for brand name is due to today's global market. Many companies are turning to foreign countries to transfer "new brands" to the domestic marketplace. Branded products are being brought from Europe and Asia to North American store shelves (Wall Street Journal March 14 1990 B1) and in some cases only the brand name is transferred. For example Kal Kan cat food became Whiskas cat food and sales soared. The understanding of brand name inferences is extremely important in a global market.

A theoretical perspective of the importance of brand name, an extrinsic cue, in product evaluation over inherent product attributes or intrinsic cues is outlined by Zeithamal (1988). Consumers depend on extrinsic attributes more than intrinsic attributes when the evaluation of intrinsic cues requires more effort and time than the consumer perceives is worthwhile. Therefore the extrinsic cue of brand name may take on a much greater role in product evaluation under low involvement conditions where little differences are perceived among brands, and less information is sought

(Zaichkowsky 1985). However, when the consumer is willing to expend the time and effort to gather information about intrinsic product cues, as under high involvement, brand name should have little importance in product evaluation.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether a certain type of brand name (descriptive or non-descriptive) has a differential impact on evaluation on a certain type of product (high or low involvement). From a theoretic perspective this research should provide a guideline as to what type of name would be most appropriate for what type of products. The problem this paper addresses may be more applicable for "new" brands. When a brand is new, it is plausible that consumers may rely heavily on brand name for evaluation. There may be no difference in consumer evaluation of older brands with descriptive or non-descriptive names because consumers would have other sources of information such as product use experience and word of mouth reports. However the initial acceptance and attitude toward new brands is crucial in today's overcrowded marketplace and therefore the present study is extremely relevant for most new brand decisions.

#### Defining Brand Names as Descriptive or Non-Descriptive

A descriptive brand name provides some insight to the function, nature, and feature of the product. Descriptive names indicate what the product contains, or what it can do, whereas non-descriptive names do not disclose any information about the product's attributes. For example, the name "Kleenex" suggests that it cleans. In some sense descriptive names also imply a "fitting" name or an "appropriate" name. For example, a vacuum cleaner is fittingly named "Dust Fighter", which is descriptive of the functions of the product.

Unlike descriptive brand names, non-descriptive brand names do not provide any indication of the product's attributes, functions, or usage occasions. Other studies have categorized brand names on similar lines. Zinkham and Martin (1987) used typical versus atypical brand names, while Kanungo (1968) categorized names as high meaningfulness and low meaningfulness and fitting and nonfitting names. These categorizations are similar to the ones proposed in this study, that is, descriptive/typical/high-meaningfulness/fitting names implying those which have some relationship with the product's functions, features and usage occasion, whereas non-descriptive/atypical/low-meaningfulness/non-fitting are names which are completely unrelated to what the product is used for, when it is used, whom it is meant to be used by, what the product's physical features are like, and so on.

### Importance of Brand Names

The two most commonly used attributes in product evaluation are brand name and price (Jacoby et al., 1977). The ways in which consumers use brand name to infer something about the product ranges from simple feelings or attitudes toward the name to inferring product performance or quality.

Empirical evidence suggests that the degree of semantic or perceptual familiarity with a novel object is closely linked to affect toward the object. Extremely unfamiliar words or objects tend to be evaluated negatively (Zajonc, 1968). In this case, liking for the object is directly related to amount of exposure. In a consumer brand choice experiment, Miller, Mazis and Wright (1971) found that an extremely ambiguous and novel brand name can negatively

r's response to information about the character oranded meat product.

Positive affect towards familiar objects has important consequences on consumer behavior. There is evidence for believing that brand loyalty and brand image are ways to cope with perceived risk of the purchase (Cunningham, 1967; Roselius, 1971). Examining perceived risk at the brand level, Peter and Ryan (1976) report that consumers who are highly risk averse view products and brands more in terms of potential losses than do those who are less risk averse. This suggests that brand name could be an important cue used by consumers to minimize purchase risk. Familiar names or names that convey product information may be seen as safer choices by some consumers.

## Brand Name and Quality Perception

In a frequently cited study by Jacoby, Olson and Haddock (1971), brand image (as mediated by brand name) was found to affect perception of brand quality. They found that consumers may use these cues systematically even when these cues possess little or no relationship to actual product quality.

Rigaux-Bricmont (1981) also reports that brand name and package cover influence consumers' quality evaluation. Brand names, especially descriptive brand names may reveal some information about the product characteristics. This information (relevant and irrelevant) may mediate consumer's perception of quality for that product.

This perception of quality induced by brand name persists even after direct experience of some products. Allison and Uhl (1964) showed that five different brands of beer, indistinguishable in the blind taste test condition, were rated significantly higher and different from each other when brand names were provided. In another study, Makens (1956) presented subjects with samples of turkey meat from the same bird but identified them as a known brand name and an unknown brand name. The samples labeled with the known brand name were rated superior on a hedonic scale.

Petit (1958) showed that pre-experience information could affect consumer preference and taste ratings if it was meaningful to the rater. All subjects were given the same samples and raters preferences were affected positively when told the samples of tomato juice contained salt, lemon juice, etc., but ratings of the same product declined when subjects were told the product had no salt or lemon juice.

## Brand Name and Attitude to the Product

In most of these studies, brand name is treated as a single concept, i.e., no clear distinction is made between different types of brand names. However, other research has tried to seek out the effect of different types of brand names upon various cognitive variables. Kanungo and Dutta (1966) reported that brand awareness was better when the brand name was highly meaningful than if it was low meaningful, and that brand awareness of high-utility products was superior to that of low-utility products. Kanungo (1968) replicated this study in an attempt to test the generality of the above findings using subjects belonging to a different cultural milieu. The research confirmed the earlier findings that brand names having higher meaningfulness values are retained better than those with low meaningfulness.

Zinkham and Martin (1987) divided brand names into typical names (remindful of other names in the product category) and atypical names (dissimilar to other names in the product category). They found that attitude toward typical names benefit from a process of inferential belief formation, whereas atypical name do not. Typical named brands are perceived more favorably than

atypical named brands and the variables which partially explain these favorable attitude shifts are: experience, number of purchases, cognitive differentiation and product interest. Mehrabian and de Wetter (1987) have also found a relationship between emotional connotation of a brand name and product preference.

#### The Role of Involvement

Previous studies which have reported significant effects from brand names seem to have one thing in common. They all use products which might be classified as relatively low involving to the subjects. Products such as branded meat products (Makens, 1956; Miller, Mazis and Wright, 1971), beer (Allison and Uhl, 1964; Jacoby, Olson and Haddock, 1971), coffee (Rigaux-Bricment, 1981), tomato juice (Petit, 1958), or breakfast cereals and laundry detergent (Peterson and Ross, 1972) have been used in studies which find significant effects for brand names.

Consumers relate to the same product differently depending upon their level of involvement with the product (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Under low involvement, there will be a relative lack of active information seeking about brands, little comparison among different brands, a perception of similarity among different brands and no specific preference for a particular brand. If the individual is highly involved with the product, then he will engage in extensive information processing about the product. Therefore in a high involvement situation, consumers might want more information than just the brand name before wanting to commit to a purchase. However, in a low involvement purchase situation consumers may be satisfied with information provided by the brand name and therefore may be willing to make quality evaluation and a purchase decision based on such limited information.

Individuals might also use totally different cues in forming evaluations about a product depending on their level of involvement. In a low involvement situation, Rothschild (1978) postulated that an individual will employ a small number of attributes in decision making, weigh them heavily, and combine them in a noncompensatory manner. In an extreme case, there would be one attribute—familiarity—upon which decision is based. Rothschild and Houston (1977) also suggest that in a high involvement situation, there are a large number of attributes under consideration. Consumers will be satisfied with a small set of attributes (brand name) in low involvement situations to reach a choice decision as they do not see great differences in the brands for low involvement products. Whereas in high involvement situations individuals will want more than just the brand name to make a decision about the product.

In the case of low involvement products, a descriptive name might be more familiar sounding than a non-descriptive brand name and therefore be liked more because in the extreme case where no other information is given consumers will be guided by just one attribute in making a purchase decision, namely familiarity with the brand name. In a high involvement situation when brand name is the only cue provided, insufficient number of attributes are present for the consumer to make evaluative judgement about the brand and base a liking or disliking for it. The consumer will want more information about the brand, will evaluate that information more carefully, and once he has formed beliefs about the brands he will have stronger brand preference than in a low involvement situation.

# **HYPOTHESES**

Quality Evaluation

H1a: Brands with descriptive names are perceived as having higher (quality/product) effectiveness than brands

with non-descriptive names when the product is low involving.

H1b: There is no difference in quality perception/effectiveness between descriptive names and non-descriptive names when the product is high involving.

#### Attitude to the Brand Name

H2a: Descriptive brand names will have more favourable attitudes than non-descriptive brand names for low involvement products.

H2b: There is no difference in attitude toward descriptive or non-descriptive brand names for high involvement products.

#### Purchase Intention

HO3a: A descriptive brand name will elicit a more positive purchase intention/trial response than a non-descriptive brand name for low involving products.

HO3b: There will be no difference in purchase intention/trial response between descriptive and non-descriptive names for high involvement products.

These hypotheses build on the model of information processing that thoughts about the object (cognitions) lead to attitude toward the object (affect) lead to behavioral intentions toward the object (conations), and that these responses are different for the low and high involvement models (Smith and Swinyard 1982). Another model which helps to explain the differential effect is the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, Cacioppo and Schumann 1983) where brand name can be thought of as this peripheral cue used by the consumer when there is little motivation to seek other information

Consumers should be rather positive to purchasing from a low-involvement product based on only information derived from the brand name if that brand name is descriptive in nature. When the brand name is not descriptive it provides no information and the consumer will not be motivated toward the brand. The same difference will not hold for high involvement products as brand name is not the most useful information cue.

## Brand Name Recall

H4: Descriptive names will have a better recall than nondescriptive names for both high and low involvement products.

Since descriptive names are often more familiar sounding, the recall level should be higher than non-descriptive names regardless of type of product. We do not hypothesize differences here, because recall is seen as a measure of memory rather than brand evaluation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### Pretests

Three different pretests involving 161 subjects, 22 product categories and 102 brand names were carried out to:

- a) determine which product categories were relatively low or high involving to the sample populations; subjects rated products on the PII (Zaichkowsky, 1985, 1987).
- b) determine which brand names were judged to be more or less descriptive of certain product categories. Subjects rated brand names on a scale of 1 - very descriptive to 5 very non-descriptive of product category.

c) determine if the product categories were regularly bought by the sample population. Subjects indicated the last date of purchase and how frequently they use product over a one week time period.

Based on the results of the pretests, laundry detergent, soft drinks and vitamin pills were judged to be similarly involving but significantly less involving to the university students than hair shampoo, cassette tapes and cologne, which also had similar PII levels. These products were frequently purchased and used by the sample population. Brand names not familiar to the subjects were used in order to eliminate prior attitudinal effects. Some brand names were real brands not sold in North America; others were obtained through search for ads in foreign magazines such as India Today and New African. Some fictitious brand names had to be created because sufficient descriptive or non-descriptive real brand names were not found during the magazine search for all products in the third pre-test. The final results of the pretest are presented in Table 1. Therefore, the two independent variables used in this study were 1) type of name (descriptive or non-descriptive) and 2) type of product (judged relatively high or low involvement). Individual products were not a variable of interest or analyses since the three products in each group were tested for similar involvement levels.

## Procedure

A sample of 55 subjects participated in the main experiment during class time. The demographic profile of the subjects matched that of the subjects used in the pre-tests. Each subject was given a questionnaire and asked to evaluate 24 new brands in six product categories. After this evaluation at the beginning of the class which took about 15 minutes, subjects continued with the classroom lecture. At the end of the class, one and a half hours later, subjects were given a second form which measured their recall of the 24 brand names by product category.

### Dependent Variables

Subjects' perception of quality and effectiveness of the 24 brands were assessed by two five-point scales: very high quality/ very low quality and very effective/very ineffective. Attitude toward the brand was measured via three 7-point bipolar scales: dislike/like, good/bad, and unfavorable/favorable. Purchase intention and intention to try the brand were measured on five-point scales anchored as very likely to purchase/very unlikely to purchase and very likely to try/very unlikely to try the brand. From the marketers' point of view, it is insufficient to just know consumers' affect, recall and preference because this does not show any tangible commitment on their part toward the brand. Purchase intentions are the closest approximations of such a tangible commitment in an artificial environment. Brand name recall was

<sup>1</sup> Although Zaichkowsky (1985) found that subjects vary on their involvement with any one product, she also found that products might be classified on the involvement continuum. Some products are viewed as more or less involving than others. Therefore the concern is that within our group of subjects that they view one set of products as significantly more involving than the other. Zaichkowsky (1985) also found that the PII scale mean was 90 for a series of products. The revised scale might have a mean of 45, therefore our low involvement products are relatively low involving (<45) while our high involvement products score above 45.

TABLE 1
Brand Name Selected, Mean Descriptive Rating Scoresand Name Categorization

Product	Brand Name	Descriptive Mean Score	Classification of Brand Name
Laundry detergent	1. Bright'n'White	1.3**	Descriptive
•	2. Stayclean	1.5	и
Low Involvement	3. Nirma	4.7	Non-descriptive
PII=40*	4. Omo	4.6	"
"Soft drinks	1. Tangy'n'Sweet	1.8	Descriptive
	2. Mangola	2.7	"
Low Involvement	3. Thumbs Up	4.0	Non-descriptive
PII=44	4. Do It	3.8	
Vitamin pills	1. Vitalife	1.7	Descriptive
	2. Suprahealth	1.7	ii .
Low Involvement	3. Progressor	3.7	Non-descriptive
PII=42	4. Chum	4.2	"
Cologne	1. Flower Bouquet	2.3	Descriptive
	2. Roses	2.2	
High Involvement	3. Bonjour	3.7	Non-descriptive
PII=51	4. Memories	3.6	
Hair shampoo	1. Hairsaver	1.9	Descriptive
	2. Blondes	1.9	
High Involvement	<ol><li>Lakme</li></ol>	4.2	Non-descriptive
PII=51	4. Godrej	4.6	••
Cassette tapes	1. Ultrasound	1.6	Descriptive
-	2. Cleartone	1.7	44
High Involvement	3. Duke	4.7	Non-descriptive
PII=52	4. Micron	4.0	u

<sup>\*</sup> The revised PII scores from 10 (low) to 70 (high).

measured after all ratings by listing the six products with space to write down the brand name beside the product category.

## Coding of Responses

The responses for each subject in each cell (e.g., low involvement/descriptive) were added across all three products in order to obtain an overall score for this cell type (see Figure 1). Product was not treated as a variable. The maximum score for quality, effectiveness, purchase intention and trial measures was 30 for each cell (2 brands x 3 products, 5 point scale). The maximum possible score for attitude was 126 (2 brands, 3 products, 7 point scale, 3 items). The maximum score for recall was six for each cell type (1 point for each correct recall).

#### Manipulation Check

One month after data were collected from the subjects, they were asked to fill out a second questionnaire which measured their degree of involvement with the experimental product categories and also the extent to which they thought the brand names were descriptive or non-descriptive. PII scores were significantly higher for cassette tapes (52), hair shampoo (51) and cologne (51) than for soft drinks (44), vitamins (42) and laundry detergent (40). Brand names chosen as descriptive were always rated significantly more

descriptive than non-descriptive brand names. These results are reported in Table 1.

### Results

A total of 31 males and 24 females participated in the study. Ttests were carried out between the sexes on all dependent variables and no sex bias was found. All hypotheses were tested using a two by two within subjects analysis of variance. Significant interactions were investigated with paired t-tests. The means and standard deviations for all dependent variables over the four cells are listed in Table 2.

# Perceived Quality/Effectiveness

There was a significant interaction between type of brand name and involvement with the product on perception of brand quality F(1,53)=102.78 p<.05. Paired t-tests showed that product quality perception is higher for descriptive named (19.69) than non-descriptive brand names (14.48) in the case of low involvement products t(53)=-9.51 p<.05. However, for high involvement products there were no differences in quality perception for descriptive (18.19) or non-descriptive (17.81) brand names t(53)=0.67,N.S.

Similar to the results for overall quality dimension, a significant interaction effect of product type and brand name type was

<sup>\*\*</sup> A five point scale was used: 1 (very descriptive) to 5 (very non-descriptive).

TABLE 2

Means and Standard Deviations For Dependent Variables

Dependent Measure	Low Involvement Products		High Involvement Products	
	Descriptive Brand Names	Non-descriptive Brand Names	Descriptive Brand Names	Non-descriptive Brand Names
Perceived	19.69	14.48	17.81	18.19
Quality	(2.79)*	(3.36)	(3.55)	(3.50)
Effectiveness	21.44	15.33	19.36	18.18
	(3.42)	(4.02)	(3.69)	(3.86)
Attitude	83.75	53.44	69.47	66.38
Towards Products	(18.15)	(15.45)	(18.48)	(20.40)
Trial	22.04	14.41	17.48	17.48
Intention	(4.83)	(4.54)	(7.35)	(4.05)
Purchase	19.53	12.53	15.71	16.02
Intention	(4.93)	(4.22)	(3.68)	(3.97)
Brand Name	2.89	2.38	3.44	2.33
Recall	(1.74)	(1.50)	(1.73)	(1.36)

FIGURE 1
Brands Within Each Cell Type

High Involvement Products	Non-descriptive Brand Names Lakme Godrej Micron Duke Bonjour Memories	Descriptive Brand Names Hairsaver Blondes Flower Bouquet Roses Ultrasound Cleartone
Low Involvement Products	Nirma Omo Thumbs Up Do It Chum Progressor	Bright'n'White Stayclean Mangola Tangy'n'Sweet Vitalife Suprahealth

observed on the effectiveness dimension F(1,53)=55.82 p<.05. Again, descriptively named low involvement products are perceived as being more effective in performance (21.44) than non-descriptive branded low involvement products (15.33) (t(54)=8.40, p<.05). However, in the case of high involvement products, there is no difference in perceived effectiveness of descriptive (19.36) and non-descriptive brand names (18.18) (t(54)=-1.7 N.S.).

### Effect on Brand Attitude

There was a significant interaction effect of brand name type and product type on attitude towards the brand name (F(1,53)-81.67)

p<.05). Paired t-tests showed that descriptive names produce a more positive affective response (83.75) than non-descriptive brand names (53.44) for low involvement products ( $\iota(54)=-10.61$ , p<.05). With high involvement products there was no difference in brand attitude between descriptive (69.47) and non-descriptive (66.38) brand names ( $\iota(54)=-1.12$  N.S.).

# **Purchase Intention and Trial**

Significant interactions were found for both intention to purchase (F(1.53)=73.94 p<.001) and intention to try the brand (F(1.53)=41.96 p<.05). An examination of the mean scores for low

involvement products reveal that descriptive names elicit greater purchase intention responses (19.53) than non-descriptive brand names (12.53) t(54)=8.34 p<.05. Similar results were found for intention to try the product (22.04) for descriptive brand names and 14.41 for non-descriptive brand names for low involvement products t(53)=9.33 p<.05. However, for high involvement products there was no difference between intention to purchase responses for descriptive (15.71) and non-descriptive (16.02) brand names, nor was there any difference on intention to try the product (17.48 vs. 17.48).

#### Recall of the Brand Name

A significant interaction was found for brand name recall (F(1.54)=4.33 p<.05). For low involvement products, descriptive brand names have better recall (2.89) than do non-descriptive brand names (2.38) t(54)=2.36 p<.05). The same is true for high involvement products, descriptive brand names have higher recall (3.44) than non-descriptive brand names (2.33) t(54)=4.79 p<.05. Therefore, we have a significant main effect for type of name and HO4 is supported by the above findings. Descriptive names have a higher recall level than non-descriptive brand names for both high and low involvement products.

### Discussion and Summary

This study was designed to test the influence of brand names and product types on consumer's perception of quality/effectiveness, attitude towards the brand, intention to purchase and try the brand and level of brand name recall. The results showed that descriptive names are more effective in influencing evaluation than non-descriptive names for low involvement products. For high involvement products, brand names did not seem to have significant impact upon the consumer's evaluation of the product.

These results could be explained by the fact that in case of low involvement products the associated risk with a wrong purchase is low. Individuals wish to make a quick purchase and do not like to actively search for information, and in general prefer to concentrate on only a few attributes. A descriptive brand name gives consumers an indication of the product's attributes or performance expectations therefore they will make inferences from the brand name and prefer it over a non-descriptive brand name.

In case of high involvement products, a consumer may not use brand name as a cue to arrive at conclusions about the product because such a decision might only be made after carefully examining other attributes such as price, product's physical attributes or store image. The risk associated with hasty inferences about the product will motivate the consumers to carry out more information search before committing themselves to a decision about the product's quality/performance expectation.

This paper and pencil experiment also found that consumers exhibit more positive affective (attitude) response with a descriptive brand name than for a non-descriptive brand name with low involvement products. These findings are similar to Zajonc's (1968) results that extremely unfamiliar words or objects tend to be evaluated negatively.

In the case of high involvement products, there was no significant difference in attitudinal response for descriptive or non-descriptive brand names. Consumers are unwilling to form attitudes towards a descriptive or non-descriptive named brand because they do not possess much knowledge about the product (based on the brand name alone) therefore do not want to make an evaluation about the product.

Finally, brand awareness and recall was found to be higher with descriptive names than with non-descriptive brand names.

These findings support earlier results by Kanungo (1968) and Kanungo and Dutta (1966). A possible explanation for such an observation is that descriptive names are more meaningful to the consumer because descriptive brand names produce stronger brand-product association than non-descriptive brand names. Therefore, with a single or repeated exposure, brand awareness is better with descriptive brand names than with non-descriptive brand names.

#### Limitations and Implications

The subjects did not have repeated exposure to the brand names over long periods of time, as would be the case in real life settings. Therefore, the effect of such repeated exposure over time on perception of quality, affect, purchase intention and brand name recall may demonstrate slightly different results.

The findings of this study have certain implications for marketing practitioners and academicians. Halborg (1979) reports that there are in excess of half a million brand names registered in the United Kingdom alone. As a result, several companies are turning to the computer to devise names of unique construction. Given this trend of non-descriptive names, it will be managerially useful to determine the effect of such names on quality perception, awareness, affect and purchase intention in conjunction with perceived level of product involvement.

This research extends the previous work conducted on brand name categorization. Brand name can have differential impact on the cognitive variables that are often studied by brand name researchers. Studies by Zinkham and Martin (1987) and Kanungo (1968) have established the significant influence of brand name categorization on affect and recall. Zinkham and Martin (1987) found that typical named brands are perceived more favorably than atypically named brands. Research on brand name recall by Kanungo and Dutta (1966) and Kanungo (1968) supports the conclusion that brand name recall was higher for high meaningful and fitting names than low meaningful and non-fitting names. This research has shown that the brand name type has a differential influence on attitude towards the brand (cognitive, affective and conative components) depending upon the type of the product to which the name is attached.

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