

## Critical Thinking and Creativity in Multimodal Text Writing: A Qualitative Study of Vocational High School Students within the Merdeka Curriculum Framework

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### Abstract

*This qualitative research investigates how vocational high school students demonstrate critical thinking and creativity in composing multimodal texts within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms under Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum. Conducted in two schools in Bekasi with 20 eleventh-grade students, the study employed interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Findings reveal that students actively engaged in higher-order thinking processes—such as analyzing, evaluating, and integrating information—while creating multimodal texts. Creativity was evident in students' use of original themes, personal experiences, and digital media integration. Teacher scaffolding and feedback played a crucial role in enhancing both critical thinking and creative expression. The study highlights the Merdeka Curriculum's potential to foster autonomy, multimodal literacy, and student-centered learning. Theoretically, it contributes to the discourse on 21st-century skills in EFL contexts. Practically, it suggests pedagogical strategies for integrating multimodal tasks that cultivate students' analytical and creative capacities.*

**Keywords:** *Critical thinking, creativity, multimodal texts, EFL, Merdeka Curriculum, vocational schools*

### Abstrak

Penelitian kualitatif ini meneliti bagaimana siswa sekolah menengah kejuruan menunjukkan kemampuan berpikir kritis dan kreativitas dalam menyusun teks multimodal pada kelas English as a Foreign Language (EFL) dengan menggunakan kerangka Kurikulum Merdeka. Penelitian dilakukan di dua sekolah di Bekasi dengan melibatkan 20 siswa kelas XI melalui wawancara, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa siswa terlibat aktif dalam proses berpikir tingkat tinggi seperti menganalisis, mengevaluasi, dan mengintegrasikan informasi saat membuat teks multimodal. Kreativitas tercermin melalui tema orisinal, pengalaman pribadi, dan integrasi media digital. Dukungan guru berupa scaffolding dan umpan balik berperan penting dalam menguatkan kemampuan berpikir kritis dan kreativitas siswa. Studi ini menegaskan potensi Kurikulum Merdeka dalam menumbuhkan kemandirian, literasi multimodal, serta pembelajaran yang berpusat pada siswa. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperkaya diskursus mengenai keterampilan abad ke-21 dalam konteks EFL. Secara praktis, penelitian ini memberikan implikasi pedagogis tentang strategi pembelajaran berbasis multimodal yang dapat mengembangkan kapasitas analitis dan kreatif siswa.

**Kata kunci:** Berpikir kritis, kreativitas, teks multimodal, EFL, Kurikulum Merdeka, SMK



## INTRODUCTION

The integration of critical thinking and creativity into English language education has become an urgent priority in the 21st century. Global transformations in the fields of technology, communication, and education demand that students not only acquire basic language skills but also develop higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) and multimodal literacy. In this context, education is no longer simply about the transmission of factual knowledge but rather about equipping learners with the ability to critically analyze information, solve problems creatively, and communicate ideas across a range of modes and platforms. These demands are reflected in many international educational reforms, such as the OECD's "Education 2030" framework (OECD, 2018), which highlights creativity and critical thinking as essential competencies for lifelong learning.

In Indonesia, these global shifts have been translated into national educational reforms through the introduction of the Kurikulum Merdeka (Merdeka Curriculum). This curriculum represents a paradigm shift in the teaching and learning process. Moving away from rote memorization and exam-oriented practices that characterized previous curricula, the Merdeka Curriculum encourages teachers to design learning experiences that are studentcentered, flexible, and project-based. Among its key features are the promotion of autonomy, the emphasis on differentiated learning, and the cultivation of 21st-century skills, including critical thinking and creativity. Within this framework, students are expected not only to master content knowledge but also to apply it critically and creatively in authentic contexts.

### Multimodal Texts in EFL Education

One of the most significant pedagogical innovations associated with the Merdeka Curriculum is the encouragement of multimodal learning and multimodal literacy. Multimodal texts are texts that combine two or more semiotic modes—such as linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial resources—to create meaning (Kress, 2010). Examples include posters, infographics, digital stories, presentations, and videos. In an increasingly digital society, students encounter and produce multimodal texts in their everyday lives, from social media posts to YouTube videos. Consequently, it has become imperative that education integrates multimodal literacy into the curriculum.

For students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, multimodal writing tasks provide unique opportunities. They allow learners to overcome linguistic limitations by supplementing their written English with images, visuals, and digital designs. This combination not only makes communication more effective but also encourages creativity and critical reflection. The New London Group (1996) argued more than two decades ago that literacy should be reconceptualized as "multiliteracies," extending beyond monomodal print texts to include the wide range of communicative practices shaped by technology and globalization. Today, this perspective is more relevant than ever, especially in

Indonesia, where young people are increasingly engaged in digital platforms but where educational practices often lag behind technological realities.

#### Critical Thinking and Creativity

Two key competencies that multimodal writing can potentially foster are critical thinking and creativity. Critical thinking is commonly defined as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information in a logical and reflective manner (Ennis, 2011; Paul & Elder, 2014). In the context of writing, critical thinking involves planning, evaluating the credibility of sources, organizing ideas coherently, and providing justifications for arguments. Creativity, on the other hand, refers to the ability to generate original, valuable, and contextually appropriate ideas (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). In writing tasks, creativity can be expressed through originality of themes, the integration of personal experiences, and the innovative use of digital tools and resources.

Although distinct, critical thinking and creativity are deeply interconnected. Sawyer (2011) describes them as “two sides of the same coin,” as effective problem-solving often requires both analytical reasoning and innovative idea generation. In the context of multimodal writing, critical thinking ensures that students evaluate and structure their content thoughtfully, while creativity allows them to design and present their ideas in original ways. Together, these competencies form the foundation of 21st-century education (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

#### Research Gap

While the potential of multimodal writing to foster critical thinking and creativity has been explored internationally, research in the Indonesian context—particularly in vocational high schools (SMK)—remains limited. Studies in the United States, Europe, and parts of Asia have documented how multimodal tasks promote student engagement, enhance motivation, and cultivate higher-order thinking (Jewitt, 2008; Shin & Cimasko, 2008; Archer, 2011). However, most Indonesian studies on multimodal literacy remain focused on higher education or theoretical discussions rather than empirical investigations at the secondary level.

Moreover, vocational high schools represent a particularly important but underresearched context. Vocational students are often expected to acquire not only academic knowledge but also practical skills relevant to the workplace. In this regard, critical thinking and creativity are essential for employability and lifelong learning. Yet, existing research in Indonesia tends to focus on general high schools (SMA), leaving vocational contexts understudied. This gap is significant because the challenges faced by vocational students—such as limited resources, diverse academic abilities, and strong ties to industry expectations—may affect how they engage with multimodal writing and how critical and creative skills are developed.

#### Research Objectives

To address these gaps, this study investigates how vocational high school students in Bekasi demonstrate critical thinking and creativity in multimodal writing tasks



within the EFL classroom under the Merdeka Curriculum. The study focuses on three research objectives:

1. To explore how critical thinking is manifested in students' multimodal writing.
2. To examine how creativity is expressed and supported in these tasks.
3. To analyze the role of the Merdeka Curriculum in shaping students' critical and creative engagement.

#### Contribution of the Study

Theoretically, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on multimodal literacy and 21st-century skills by extending discussions into the Indonesian vocational school context. Pedagogically, the study provides insights into how EFL teachers can integrate multimodal writing into their teaching to cultivate critical thinking and creativity. Practically, the findings offer recommendations for policymakers and school leaders on how to implement the Merdeka Curriculum effectively to support multimodal literacy.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes the exploration of human experiences and the meanings individuals ascribe to their actions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative approach was chosen because the research sought to understand in depth how students demonstrated critical thinking and creativity in multimodal writing within natural classroom settings. Rather than measuring variables through standardized instruments, qualitative inquiry allowed the researcher to capture rich, contextualized, and nuanced data.

Specifically, this study used a case study approach, focusing on two vocational high schools in Bekasi. According to Yin (2014), case studies are particularly useful when researchers aim to answer “how” and “why” questions, as in this investigation. The case study design enabled the researcher to explore complex classroom dynamics, students' writing processes, and teachers' roles in supporting critical and creative engagement.

#### Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in two vocational high schools (SMK) in Bekasi, West Java. These schools were selected purposively because they had adopted the Merdeka Curriculum in their English language teaching and incorporated multimodal projects into their instructional design. Bekasi, as an urban-industrial city, provides a relevant context because vocational education plays a significant role in preparing students for employment in technology-driven industries.

Participants consisted of 20 eleventh-grade students (10 from each school) who were engaged in EFL classes that included multimodal writing tasks. The students were selected based on three criteria:

1. Enrollment in classes where multimodal writing was integrated into the curriculum.
  2. Prior exposure to digital tools such as Canva, PowerPoint, or video editing software.
  3. Willingness to participate in interviews and consent from their guardians.
- Additionally, two English teachers were involved as key informants to provide context regarding instructional practices and curriculum implementation.

#### Data Collection Techniques

To capture multiple perspectives and ensure triangulation, the study employed three data collection methods:

1. **Semi-Structured Interviews** Conducted with all 20 student participants, lasting approximately 30–45 minutes each. Questions focused on students' experiences with multimodal writing, their thought processes, challenges, and perceptions of creativity. Example questions included: "How do you decide which sources or materials to include in your project?" and "Can you tell me about a time when you felt your project was especially creative?" Interviews were conducted in a mix of English and Indonesian to ensure clarity and comfort.
2. **Classroom Observations** Four classroom sessions were observed in each school (eight sessions total). Observations focused on teacher-student interactions, group discussions, use of digital tools, and evidence of critical and creative thinking during multimodal writing activities. An observation protocol was used to document behaviors systematically, with categories such as planning and organizing, evaluating sources, problem-solving, creative expression, and teacher scaffolding.
3. **Document Analysis** Students' multimodal projects (digital posters, presentations, and video clips) were collected and analyzed. Lesson plans, teacher feedback, and school curriculum documents were also reviewed to understand instructional design. Analysis criteria included evidence of critical thinking (e.g., logical structuring, justification, evaluation of information) and creativity (e.g., originality, personal expression, aesthetic design).

#### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (2014) interactive model, which involves three steps:

1. **Data Condensation** o Interview transcripts, observation notes, and project documents were transcribed and coded. o Initial codes were developed inductively, such as "evaluating sources," "original design choices," "peer collaboration," and "teacher feedback." o Codes were then grouped into broader categories aligned with the research questions, including manifestations of critical thinking, expressions of creativity, and role of scaffolding.
2. **Data Display** o Thematic matrices and charts were created to visualize the relationships among codes and categories. o For example, one matrix compared evidence of critical thinking in interviews with observations of classroom activities.
3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification** o Themes were refined by revisiting the data repeatedly to ensure consistency. o Emerging conclusions were compared

against existing theories, such as Bloom's Taxonomy, Torrance's Creativity Framework, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

#### Trustworthiness of the Study

To enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings, several strategies were implemented:

- Triangulation: Multiple data sources (interviews, observations, documents) and multiple participants (students and teachers) were used.
- Member Checking: Summaries of findings were shared with student participants to verify accuracy and interpretation.
- Peer Debriefing: The researcher discussed coding and thematic interpretations with academic supervisors to minimize bias.
- Thick Description: Detailed contextual information was provided to enable readers to assess transferability.

#### Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their guardians. Students were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used in reporting. Audio recordings and documents were stored securely and used solely for research purposes. Approval was granted by the institutional ethics committee of the researcher's university.

#### Summary

In sum, this qualitative case study design, involving purposive sampling, triangulated data collection, and rigorous analysis, was well-suited to explore how vocational high school students in Bekasi demonstrate critical thinking and creativity in multimodal writing within the framework of the Merdeka Curriculum.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Manifestations of Critical Thinking in Multimodal Writing

The analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and student projects revealed multiple ways in which vocational high school students demonstrated critical thinking during multimodal writing activities. Students engaged in critical thinking across three main stages: planning, composing, and revising.

**Planning Stage.** During planning, students carefully selected topics and evaluated the credibility of sources. For example, one student explained in an interview:

"Saya tidak langsung ambil dari Google. Saya bandingkan dulu beberapa sumber, kalau ada dari jurnal atau berita resmi, saya pilih yang itu. Kalau dari blog biasa, saya cek dulu apakah bisa dipercaya."

This indicates students' ability to evaluate information—a higher-order cognitive process described in Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revised Bloom's Taxonomy. Observations confirmed that several groups engaged in critical discussions about whether images or data found online were appropriate to include in their projects.

**Composing Stage.** During the actual creation of multimodal texts, students demonstrated critical thinking by organizing ideas logically and integrating multiple modes for coherence. For instance, in a digital poster about environmental

sustainability, one group placed statistical data alongside images of polluted rivers, with explanatory captions in English. This combination of linguistic and visual modes demonstrated their ability to synthesize information across modalities.

Revising Stage. Finally, critical reflection was observed in how students revised their work based on peer and teacher feedback. One student described revising the layout of her presentation because “the order of slides did not make sense.” Such reflection is consistent with Ennis’s (2011) emphasis on metacognition as a component of critical thinking.

Taken together, these findings show that critical thinking was not only present but actively integrated into students’ multimodal writing processes.

2. Expressions of Creativity in Students’ Work Creativity was vividly expressed in students’ multimodal projects.

Analysis revealed three dimensions of creativity: originality, personal expression, and flexible use of digital tools. Originality. Many students selected themes that reflected their personal interests or local contexts. For example, one student created a digital story about street food culture in Bekasi, integrating photos she had taken herself with English captions. This originality moved beyond replicating textbook themes, illustrating Torrance’s (1974) indicator of originality in creative work.

Personal Expression. Students infused projects with personal narratives and cultural references. For instance, in a group project about cyberbullying, students included their own reflections and short dramatizations in video format. One participant explained:

“Supaya lebih menarik, kami tambahkan pengalaman teman yang pernah diejek di media sosial. Jadi bukan hanya teori, tapi juga nyata.”

Such expressions not only enhanced authenticity but also encouraged empathy, creativity, and deeper engagement with the task.

Flexible Use of Digital Tools. Students demonstrated creativity by experimenting with various digital platforms. Some used Canva to design posters, while others preferred video editing apps such as Kinemaster or CapCut. Observations showed that when faced with technical challenges, students improvised by combining tools—designing infographics in Canva, exporting them, and embedding them into PowerPoint or video presentations. This flexibility reflects Torrance’s dimension of creative fluency and adaptability.

Overall, creativity in multimodal writing was not limited to aesthetic choices but extended to content originality, cultural integration, and technological innovation.

3. The Role of Teacher Scaffolding

While students demonstrated critical and creative abilities, the role of teachers proved crucial in supporting these processes. Teacher scaffolding was observed in three main forms: modeling, guiding questions, and constructive feedback.

Modeling. Teachers often began lessons by demonstrating how to evaluate sources, design layouts, or combine images and text effectively. For example, one teacher showed students how to cross-check information from different websites. This aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners can achieve more with guidance than independently.

Guiding Questions. During classroom activities, teachers posed reflective questions that prompted students to think critically about their work. Questions such

as “Why did you choose this image?” or “How does this design support your message?” encouraged students to justify their choices. Observations indicated that students responded with deeper analysis when prompted in this way.

**Constructive Feedback.** Teacher feedback, both oral and written, shaped how students revised their projects. In one observed session, a teacher suggested that a group rearrange their slides to create a clearer flow of argument. Students later reported that such feedback helped them “see their project from another perspective.” This practice reflects scaffolding strategies highlighted by Hammond and Gibbons (2005), emphasizing the balance between challenge and support.

Thus, teacher scaffolding was integral to nurturing students’ critical thinking and creativity, ensuring that tasks were not only completed but also refined through iterative improvement.

#### 4. Influence of the Merdeka Curriculum

The Merdeka Curriculum emerged as both an enabler and a challenge in fostering critical and creative multimodal writing. **Enabling Aspects.** Students appreciated the freedom to select topics aligned with their personal interests. This autonomy motivated them to invest more effort in their projects. Project-based learning encouraged collaboration and authentic problem-solving. Teachers also reported that the curriculum gave them flexibility to design lessons that integrated multimodal literacy.

**Challenges.** Despite these strengths, the implementation faced several obstacles:

- **Limited Access to Technology.** Not all students had equal access to laptops or smartphones with sufficient storage and editing applications.
- **Teacher Preparedness.** Some teachers felt unprepared to teach multimodal writing, lacking training in digital tools and multimodal pedagogy.
- **Time Constraints.** Project-based tasks often required more classroom time than traditional activities, creating tension with coverage of other curriculum demands.

These findings suggest that while the Merdeka Curriculum provides structural support for fostering 21st-century skills, its success depends on adequate resources, teacher training, and institutional commitment.

#### 5. Discussion with Theories and Previous Studies

The findings of this study resonate with and extend existing research.

- **Critical Thinking.** Students’ evaluation of sources and logical structuring align with Bloom’s revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Similar findings have been reported by Brookhart (2010), who emphasized that authentic writing tasks foster higher-order thinking.
- **Creativity.** The originality and cultural integration observed in student projects support Torrance’s (1974) model of creative thinking. Sawyer (2011) also highlighted that creativity emerges when learners are given autonomy and encouraged to take risks—conditions present in the Merdeka Curriculum.
- **Scaffolding.** Teacher guidance observed in this study reflects Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD and confirms the importance of scaffolding for developing higher-order skills. This aligns with Hammond and Gibbons’ (2005) findings on scaffolding language and learning.



- Curriculum Context. The Merdeka Curriculum's flexibility mirrors global shifts towards student-centered and competency-based education, as emphasized by OECD (2018). However, challenges of infrastructure and teacher readiness echo concerns raised in studies of multimodal pedagogy in developing countries (Hung, Lee, & Lim, 2012).

In the Indonesian context, these findings extend prior studies by highlighting how vocational students—often overlooked in literacy research—are capable of demonstrating sophisticated critical and creative skills when provided with appropriate scaffolding and curricular support. This study explored students' perceptions, reading skill development, and technology acceptance regarding the use of e-books in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, framed through the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Data were drawn from interviews with 20 junior high school students, classroom observations, and document analysis.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to explore how vocational high school students in Bekasi demonstrated critical thinking and creativity in multimodal writing tasks within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom under the Merdeka Curriculum. By analyzing data from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, four major findings emerged.

First, students consistently engaged in critical thinking processes throughout the stages of multimodal composition. They planned their projects by evaluating sources, comparing information across multiple websites, and identifying reliable materials. During composition, they organized ideas logically, integrated visuals with written text, and reflected on how each element contributed to meaning-making. The revision process further revealed their metacognitive abilities as they restructured content based on peer and teacher feedback.

Second, students demonstrated creativity through originality, personal expression, and flexible use of digital tools. Many projects displayed unique themes rooted in students' local culture and personal experiences, while others creatively combined various digital platforms to achieve innovative designs. Creativity was not limited to aesthetic features but extended to the integration of authentic narratives and critical perspectives.

Third, the role of teacher scaffolding proved essential. Teachers facilitated learning through modeling, reflective questioning, and constructive feedback. Their scaffolding helped students refine their projects, engage in deeper analysis, and take creative risks. Without this guidance, many students admitted that their work would have remained superficial.

Finally, the Merdeka Curriculum provided structural opportunities for fostering autonomy, project-based learning, and multimodal literacy. Students appreciated the freedom to choose relevant topics, while teachers valued the flexibility to adapt instruction. However, challenges such as unequal access to

technology, limited teacher training, and time constraints indicated that the success of the curriculum depends on systemic support.

In conclusion, vocational high school students are capable of displaying sophisticated levels of critical thinking and creativity in multimodal writing when provided with supportive curricular frameworks and pedagogical scaffolding. The findings suggest that multimodal writing is not merely an add-on but a powerful pedagogical practice aligned with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum and 21st-century education.

### Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to the theoretical discourse on multimodal literacy and 21st-century competencies in several ways.

First, they extend the application of multimodal literacy frameworks (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2010) to vocational EFL contexts in Indonesia. While much of the literature focuses on higher education or general secondary schools, this study demonstrates that vocational students are equally capable of engaging critically and creatively with multimodal tasks.

Second, the study reinforces the view that critical thinking and creativity are interconnected rather than separate skills. In multimodal writing, students used critical analysis to select and evaluate information, while creativity allowed them to present that information in original and engaging ways. This supports Sawyer's (2011) argument that innovation emerges at the intersection of critical reflection and creative exploration.

Third, the research provides empirical evidence for the effectiveness of teacher scaffolding in multimodal writing tasks, supporting Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that balance autonomy with structured support.

### Pedagogical Implications

Several pedagogical implications arise from the findings:

**Integration of Multimodal Projects.** Teachers should systematically incorporate multimodal writing into EFL curricula. These projects not only enhance language skills but also cultivate critical and creative capacities. Examples include digital storytelling, infographics, and collaborative video projects.

**Explicit Teaching of Critical Evaluation.** Students benefit from explicit instruction on how to evaluate sources, justify design choices, and organize multimodal content logically. Teachers should provide frameworks and guiding questions to support these processes.

**Encouragement of Creative Risk-Taking.** Teachers should create a classroom culture that values experimentation, originality, and personal expression. Feedback should not only correct errors but also nurture students' creative potential.

**Professional Development for Teachers.** Teacher training programs must include modules on multimodal pedagogy and digital literacy. Without adequate preparation, teachers may struggle to implement the Merdeka Curriculum effectively.

Equitable Access to Technology. Schools and policymakers must address digital divides by ensuring that all students have access to devices and reliable internet. Providing shared resources and flexible project deadlines can help mitigate inequalities.

#### Practical Implications

At a practical level, this study has implications for schools, policymakers, and curriculum developers:

**For Schools:** Investment in digital infrastructure, such as computer labs and multimedia software, is essential. Schools should also provide opportunities for collaborative projects that mirror workplace practices, aligning vocational education with industry needs. **For Policymakers:** The government should support the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum with adequate funding, teacher training, and monitoring mechanisms. Policies should encourage innovation while addressing systemic challenges such as technology gaps.

**For Curriculum Developers:** Future iterations of the curriculum should include clearer guidelines on multimodal literacy, along with assessment rubrics that capture both critical and creative dimensions of student performance.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, it also opens avenues for further investigation:

**Longitudinal Studies.** Future research could track students over several years to examine how multimodal learning influences long-term development of critical thinking and creativity.

**Comparative Studies.** Studies comparing vocational and general high schools, or rural and urban contexts, could shed light on contextual variations in multimodal literacy practices.

**Emotional and Motivational Factors.** Future research could explore how students' emotions, motivation, and self-efficacy interact with their critical and creative engagement in multimodal tasks.

**Teacher Perspectives.** Expanding research to include teachers' professional development experiences could provide deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities of multimodal pedagogy.

#### Closing Statement

Overall, this study demonstrates that multimodal writing is a powerful pedagogical tool that aligns with the vision of the Merdeka Curriculum and the global agenda for 21st-century education. By fostering critical thinking and creativity, multimodal tasks prepare vocational students not only for academic success but also for active participation in digital societies and the workforce. For Indonesia, this represents a crucial step toward creating an education system that is both future-oriented and responsive to local realities.

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