



SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS:  
A Component of Social Media Strategy  
in Modern Dental Marketing

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As digital advertising trends continue to expand and play a role in brand promotion, a new type of online marketing strategy is bridging the gap between conventional strategies and word of mouth marketing based on personal relationships: the social media influencer (also known as a brand ambassador.) Influencers act as a personal connection between specific companies or brands to relay messages that develop a sense of direct relationship with their target audiences. Based on their personalities and communication effectiveness, a successful influencer can develop a follower base consisting of thousands of audience members.

In dentistry, there is tremendous opportunity for growth within the digital brand ambassador marketing space. Unless dentists and oral health brands take advantage of and incorporate influencers to connect with prospective patients, non-dental brands such as beauty bloggers, vloggers (video bloggers) and product manufacturers will fill and saturate the space available.

Influencers must possess certain qualities that allow them to effectively attract and engage large audience sizes in a way that compliments the overall message of the dental brand or private practice. Because nearly nine out of ten consumers (and prospective dental patients) utilize word of mouth recommendations to make purchasing decisions, the incorporation of brand ambassadors is an effective strategy for private practice and oral product brand growth.

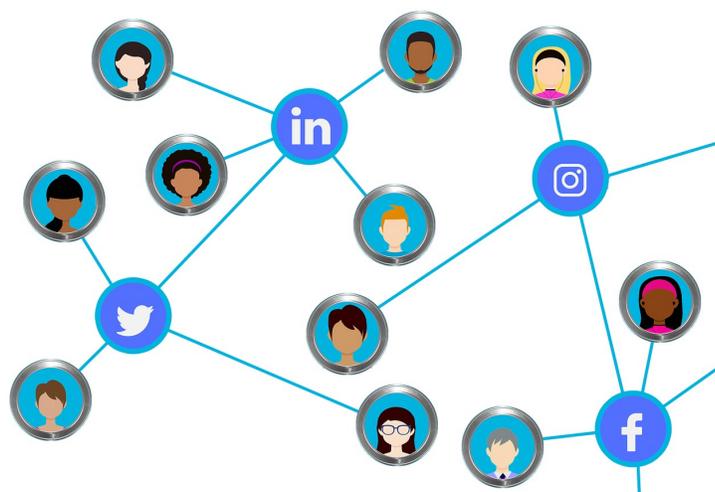
## WHAT ARE SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS?

Social media influencers (SMI) are individuals that use online platforms such as vlogs, video how-tos, and social media platforms including Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter in a way that allows them to have a tremendous impact on (usually younger) consumers and social business strategies. Ultimately, their credibility and “likability” plays a key role in how they directly impact consumer attitudes and relationships with the affected brand(s) being promoted or reviewed.

Influencers are sometimes called “brand ambassadors” (BA), who, as SMIs establish relationships with organizations to represent and distribute their messages across social networks in an attempt to be more relatable to the target consumer group. (Smith, et. al., 2018)

### How Influencers are Effective at What They Do

The more compelling and likable the influencer is, the more of an impact they have on purchase intentions and opinions of consumers fitting target market groups through a method called “observational learning process” where intentions and behaviors are learned by observing the influencer. (Lim, et. al., 2017) This happens as audiences engage in, watch, or follow the ambassador’s message, because of how well they are able to connect with them on an emotional level.



Depending on the type of network structure being used, companies can use social media websites to influence opinions and follow certain types of kinetic modeling to influence the way their products are advertised. Implementation of ambassador programs allows opinions of their followers/subscribers to be influenced, specifically by making it appear that the influencer has more authority about a product due to a large number of followers. Their high credibility is thereby, in turn, able to “influence the opinion of other agents.” Individuals with lower connectivity “are more prone to be influenced by well-connected [influencers].” (Toscani, et. al., 2018)

## Who are the Ambassadors, Themselves?

Influencers occur when individual social media users establish themselves as a credible source on a specific industry. Perhaps it is a beauty vlogger, offering advice on how to apply a particular type of cosmetic product, or a mechanic explaining how-to projects for aspiring DIY viewers. The influencers themselves must have access to a large audience and by “virtue of their authenticity and reach” be able to persuade others. This concept didn’t exist 10 years ago. Some of today’s most popular influencers are not even human, such as “Doug the Pug.” (Herron, 2018)

## Traits of Social Media Influencers

Many of the characteristics posed by influencers include admiration, aspiration, and recognition. Without these key traits, it becomes more challenging for them to generate or connect with followers, and thereby promote the brand with which they serve as an ambassador. When matched with the social identity of consumers (the way a consumer senses that they are, their self-concept, and social groups they belong to,) an influencer can consequently affect the “self-image, self-esteem and behavior” of the consumer. Depending on the situation, followers tend to lean toward a particular type of influencers because of certain characteristics, personalities, and expertise. But factors including ethnicity, personal interests, and humor are also important. (Phan and Yedic, 2018)

## Ambassadors as Company Stakeholders

Ambassadors and influencers are beginning to be seen as stakeholders in companies, because of how they humanize brands and have explicit relationships with the companies involved. Brands should view them as such, rather than as a separate, unconnected partner they employ for marketing purposes. (Smith, et. al, 2018) In 2016, approximately \$570 million was spent by US organizations on Instagram ambassador campaigns alone. The ambassadors, however, do not necessarily make much money; in fact, income itself is not apparently the key motivator for becoming a brand ambassador. Rather, it seems to “revolve around social stake” as well as loyalties and networks they already hold. (Smith, et. al, 2018)



## HOW SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS PERTAIN TO DENTISTRY: EXPANDING TRADITIONAL WORD OF MOUTH MARKETING STRATEGIES

Word of mouth (WOM) marketing is one of the most important networking strategies of any private dental practice. Yet, WOM networks are limited in the audience numbers they can reach. In order for someone to receive recommendations to a particular dentist's office, they must ask the right person at the right time and hope to receive the information that they're looking for.

Today, there is an overwhelmingly significant shift in marketing strategies — especially among younger generations who utilize social media — and likable individuals as influencers in their purchasing decisions. Those industries, such as dentistry, which have not traditionally steered toward the incorporation of SMI should begin seeking marketing partners to bridge the gap where non-traditional access to consumers (prospective patients) is currently unmet. This includes everyone from private practice dentists to oral health educators and product manufacturers who want to reach more prospective patients/customers in their target market.

As social media influencers becoming more impactful on markets such as dentistry, they play a crucial role as stakeholders in the success of brands, retailers, and health providers.

### Choosing an Ambassador to Influence Consumer Habits and Purchasing Behavior

When it comes to incorporating a SMI campaign, not just any influencer will do. Locating one that meets and is effective in key categories is vital for an ambassador to be effective enough to reach the desired marketing outcome.

The use of mathematical equations based on kinetic modeling can be used to determine the effectiveness and success of certain types of influencers within a social network and the role they have on how products (or even hashtags) are spread across media. Mechanisms for such studies can be useful for companies wishing to incorporate influencer marketing models and how to select and/or manage the most effective influencers to do so. Such data is vital for determining what the purpose of influencer marketing is and how it can affect brands not currently using brand ambassadors. (Toscani, et. al., 2018)

Table 1: Total number of social interactions involving three hashtags in the most popular social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, and Youtube) in the period March-April 2018. Source: brand24.com.

Week	#metoo	#shareacoke	#cambridgeanalytica
10 March	17	-	-
17 March	10521	-	468
24 March	14954	194	10662
31 March	16375	306	9768
7 April	15936	594	10055
14 April	15337	723	13497
21 April	0	1293	6626

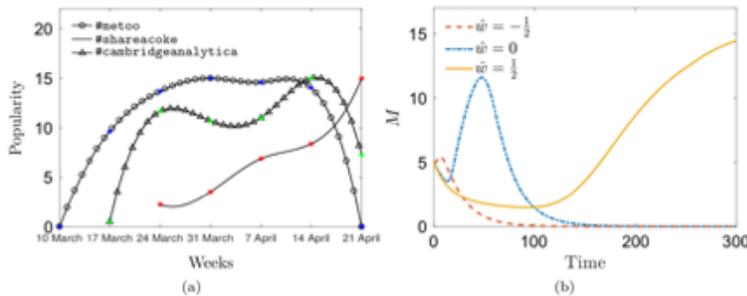


Figure 1: Kinetic modeling and mathematical analysis can determine the efficacy of social media strategies. (Image Source: Toscani, et. al, 2018)

Selection of the appropriate media influencer will “increase consumer attitude as well as influence purchase intention.” As such, it’s key to find individuals who will captivate audiences and attract the largest audience base. Incorporating the right type of influencers requires strategic planning and marketing steps to ensure the ideal message is communicated along in order to achieve the type of follow up sought after. (Lim, et. al., 2017)

Choosing the best ambassador happens through a systematic, step-by-step process consisting of vital processes that are key to ensuring an effective influencer strategy, including:

**SOURCE CREDIBILITY**

Does the influencer seem to be a credible source? They will need to be educated on the subject in order to communicate accurate and valuable information that’s beneficial to the audience. Additionally, do they already have a wide follower base or are they able to generate one?

**SOURCE ATTRACTIVENESS**

Is the person attractive? While this can be biased and subjective, an influencer that is physically attractive is more likely to engage audiences, which is ultimately the point of an SMI campaign.

**PRODUCT MATCH-UP**

Is the influencer the right type of person to promote and/or discuss the type of product or service being promoted?

*(In dentistry, the previous two processes pair together, as the best influencer would need to be someone with healthy, yet aesthetically attractive teeth.)*

## MEANING TRANSFER

How well is the influencer able to relay the message in a voice that matches that of the practice's overall vision? Is it one that best represents the practice methods of the dentist(s)?

Ultimately, each of these characteristics and roles impacts consumer attitudes, and thereby their purchase intention. (Lim, et. al., 2017) In dentistry, the influencer that is chosen will have a direct impact on the practice's message and type of prospective clients requesting new patient appointments or seeking out a provider for a specific type of service.

# Multi-Branding Strategies to Save Costs

Addition of new marketing outlets can add a significantly larger dollar amount to annual marketing budgets, especially for businesses like private dental practices. Fortunately, an effective Influencer has the potential to impact education, awareness, and strategize as a team with multiple brands at one time to accomplish a shared mission. This makes it possible for two or three influencer personalities or pages to utilize the same resources and information, especially when shared audiences are being targeted, while all parties benefit and without necessarily posing as source with a conflict of interest. As brands work together, they become even more effective to “play off of” one another in order to reach a common goal for all parties involved. (Herron, 2018)

It is not always necessary for brands to act independently in order to incorporate an influencer program. For instance, Walmart has caught onto influencer outlets by teaming with sources like BuzzFeed to market products such as Tasty kitchenware. Tasty itself is known for signature recipe videos that often lack any type of persona, yet still establish a connection with their followers. Together, each of the brands/companies can incorporate the use of SMLs and continue to grow their consumer base without directing the message to only promote one particular message. When Tasty posts videos using their kitchenware products sold at Walmart and it's promoted by BuzzFeed, all three brands benefit.

In dentistry, referring specialists and practices can collaborate to promote community events (such as public dental clinics,) special

As in the instance of Tasty, it's possible for brands to establish influencer relationships, even if an actual face or voice is never involved. Tasty videos typically only include imaging and texts. The brand itself becomes the ambassador, almost becoming a type of marketing persona, that in turn acts as an influencer for the brand itself. (Herron, 2018)

offers, products (like a particular type of braces) as they educate the public in their geographical area, without necessarily creating competing with one another or minimizing relationships with other dental providers in the area. The message reaches a wider audience within the community because of the shared followers, while resources and production expenses are divided between the two businesses.

For example, one of the town's pediatric dentists may decide to have their influencer visit the orthodontic practice next door as they interview one of the clinicians on types of Phase I intervention techniques for children under age 10, and then post it to the pediatric office's social media accounts while tagging both the orthodontist and two practice pages, respectively. Both businesses benefit from the information through a shared influencer, which is then distributed to their patients, with contacts of their current followers being able to see the content online.

## What Impact Does an Influencer Have on Prospective Dental Markets?

In the oral health care industry (whether it be private practice dentists or large-scale dental product manufacturers,) there is an opportunity for social media influencer strategies to be incorporated into current marketing trends.



Beauty vloggers, bloggers, and brand ambassadors have already begun promoting certain types of oral care items without the oversight of major dental manufacturers, such as those involving activated charcoal toothpastes and coconut oil rinsing. These promotions are traditionally being sold by non-dental professionals in an untapped social platform. In response, the dental industry and oral health practitioners have worked tirelessly to try to counteract these measures on a one-on-one and written web content basis, but to little avail. (Lim, et. al., 2017) The best answer lies in the incorporation of a professionally backed influencer campaign, rather than traditional and exhaustive clinical patient education during individual appointments.

It's vital that more industries start to recognize and begin reaching out to utilize this type of marketing strategy, including those in the health and science sectors. Making the false accusation that influencers aren't vital partners in the promotion and sales of health-related products puts related product manufacturers at a disadvantage when competing on the market. (Lim, et. al., 2017)

## Informing Prospective Patients to Make Better Educated Health Decisions

Social media influencers have the potential to be useful in both trends as well as online learning. The key is to identify such influencers on social media who are able to facilitate learning for prospective and current patients, or other dental professionals. In dental education, using sites such as Facebook and Twitter “can foster interaction and communication between students and instructors,” because of the limited face-to-face time such individuals have to work on building networks of peers. Such findings are useful in identifying possible influencers due to the data they make public and searchable on sites like Twitter. The larger the number of retweets, the more engaged and larger the audience becomes. Such platforms “can provide educational practitioners different ways of understanding and explaining the public opinions toward online learning and mobile learning” thus potentially affecting the opinions and knowledge level related to specific fields of study. (Shen, et. al., 2017)



Celebrities such as Katy Perry have millions of social media followers. In contrast, scientists (even those who are “popular” by the industry’s standards) have only a fraction of the followers that Pop icons and movie stars do. The reason being is that scientists rarely have time to explore and manage their own communication strategies on social media for public education purposes. Sadly, their findings on vital scientific research (such as climate change and sustainability) often go unnoticed by mainstream culture. (Phan and Yedic, 2018)

The answer? Scientists and health care professionals should begin incorporating social media influencers in order to raise awareness and encourage change among the public. Such ambassadors would help to broaden the audience and communicate vital information to the public. (Phan and Yedic, 2018) The same could be said for dental product manufacturers or private practice dentists, whether they be centered on specific treatments or promoting self-care products to enhance the health of their patients. Even if dentists choose not to utilize expensive tiered influencers, marketing professionals suggest that they incorporate their own organic promotion to raise awareness and push toward better outcomes of their current marketing strategies. (Arulrajah, 2018)

## Ethical Concerns Related to Selection or Use of Brand Ambassadors

Identifying appropriate ambassadors and developing an effective marketing strategy through influencer personalities poses both financial and ethical concerns, especially as new regulations are enacted to disclose sponsored social media posts.

Ethical issues (primarily that of compensation) are a key concern as ambassadors develop relationships online and promote certain products through what would otherwise appear as word of mouth marketing. (Smith, et. al., 2018) Social media influencers help companies to more effectively impact consumers, who are becoming harder to reach, thereby increasing their exposure. However, certain countries (in one case, Sweden) are beginning to enforce guidelines to “ensure customers integrity” and are now requiring influencers to disclose their paid partnerships with brands. Companies feel that this “truthful marketing” may pose a negative influence on consumer perceptions, thereby becoming counterintuitive to influencer campaigns. (Phan and Yedic, 2018)



Certain claims regarding “truthful marketing” where influencers must disclose their information poses opportunities for innovation and expansion. Truthfulness adds to the brand’s reputation, because when consumers pick up on “falsity” it can do the opposite. As more social media platforms are beginning to require influencers to identify paid sponsorships, incorporation of truthfulness is vital in order to maintain a connection and following with consumers. This creates ethical and legal considerations for companies such as dental brands or healthcare providers using influencer strategies going into the future. (Phan and Yedic, 2018)

To minimize — or perhaps completely eliminate — the concern of ethical and legal restraints placed on dental professionals by regulatory boards, dentists and oral health brands will need to consider:

- **Appropriate disclaimers on websites, social media channels, and within each individual piece of content being produced**
- **Incorporation of private ambassadors to address conflict of interest and specific practice methodology concerns**
- **Observe geographical marketing restrictions posed by governmental authorities**
- **Terms of use guidelines dictated by specific social media channels**
- **Whether to engage a 3rd party to manage, select, employ, and dictate content produced by an ambassador**

Engaging private ambassadors, influencer services, or producing one’s own media content must be done in a thoughtful manner that considers all health-related and platform-enforced advertising regulations so as to avoid potential legal concerns for dentists and oral health brands in the future.

# Dental Brands Currently Using Influencers

A number of private and corporate dental brands are already currently using social media influencers, setting an example as to how oral health brands can incorporate ambassadors both for “big brand” purposes as well as geographic-specific private practice promotion. Each use similar methods to increase brand familiarity and sales of selective services or products.

## Private Practice SMI

Dr. Richard Marques of London is one example of a private practice SMI strategy. Marques is a private practice dentist with over 5k Twitter followers and more than 14k Instagram followers. (UpCity.com, 2018)



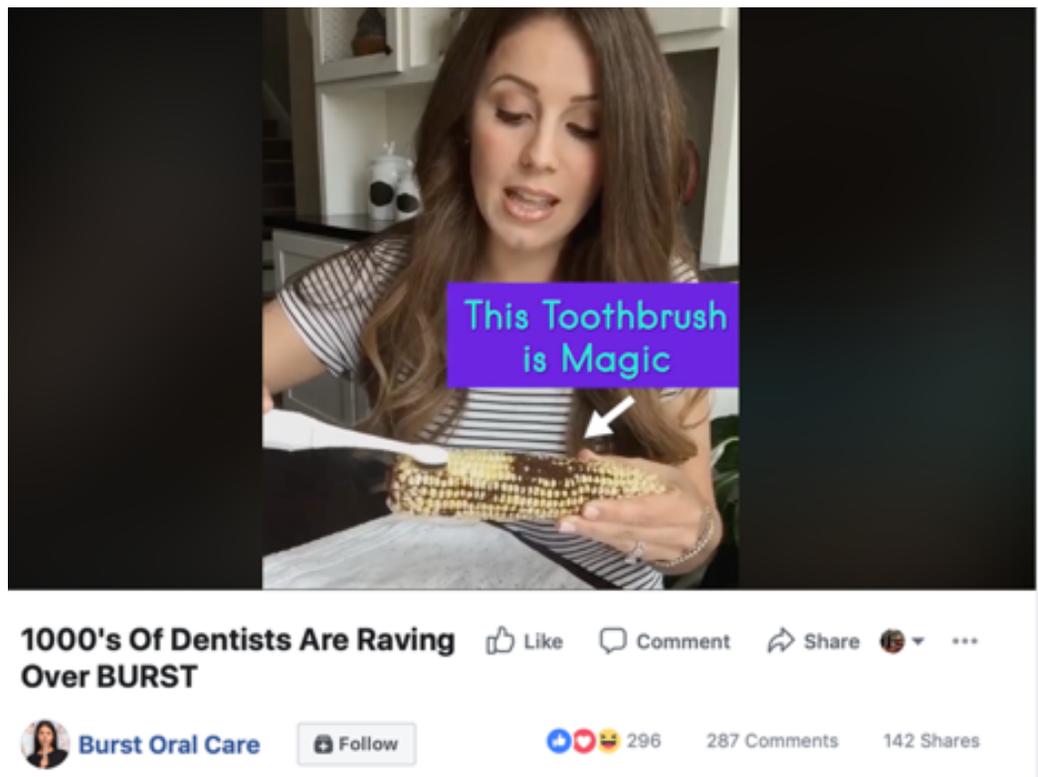
Figure 2: Dr. Richard Marques has nearly 20k followers across his social media channels. (Image Source: UpCity.com)

Marques and similar dentists use their social media pages to allow their own personality to interact with and attract viewers, while promoting oral health information, before-and-after imaging, emotional connections, stimulating a sense of relationship, and entertainment with the public, thereby grasping the attention of prospective patients while continuing to engage current ones.

### Oral Health Brand Ambassadors

Brands like Burst Oral Care use independent dental professionals to serve as ambassadors across social media to promote the product while also making commissions off of the sales of electric toothbrushes. Texas Registered Dental Hygienist Jessica Morgan is one of hundreds of ambassadors that are part of Burst's marketing platform. Within two months of joining Burst as an ambassador, Morgan had 100 subscribers. As she began producing and promoting organic content (including YouTube videos and Facebook Live events,) her individual subscribers grew to over 1k followers within one year. Burst has since hired her on as a senior mentor and Social Media Manager to moderate all of the brand channels. (J. Morgan, personal communication, October 19, 2018).

Figure 3: Burst ambassador Jessica Morgan demonstrates how to use Burst's electric toothbrush through engaging audiences via organic video production. (Image Source: Jessica Morgan)



Mimicking the advertising strategies and SMI techniques of brands such as these can prove to be an effective way for dentists to utilize similar methods in a manner to increase brand familiarity and sales of elective services/products to their target audience.

## INCORPORATING SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS INTO PRIVATE PRACTICES

Ambassadors allow dentists to educate patients alongside modern marketing strategies, allowing them to make more informed decisions about their care. Using influencers makes information easier to access, understand, relate to, and trouble-shoots issues that the public or students may not feel educated on, answering questions in “real life” by “real people.” (Shen, et. al., 2017) SMIs play a key role in reaching specific audiences and maintaining “word of mouth” marketing in a world of online connections.

In *The new influencers: a marketer’s guide to the new social media*, Gillin points out that in certain types of buying decisions (especially those that are “high-risk” or involve complex technology,) traditional advertising may be ineffective and rather an influence of some type is necessary. As a result of his research he discovered that in 2003, as many as 92% of individuals said they made purchase decisions based on word-of-mouth influence. This is up from 67% in 1977. (Gillin, 2007)

Traditionally, dentists often rely on word of mouth techniques for publicity and patient awareness. While retailers have seen the speed of sales increased thanks to online resources, so has word of mouth and marketing. Brands can use satisfied customers as brand ambassadors to promote their products within a digital era, furthering the reach of traditional word of mouth referrals. In a time where we live in instant gratification, social media influencers accelerate their reach. (Subramanian, 2018)



Dentistry isn't any different. Word of mouth references by paid influencers and brand ambassadors stimulate conversations between real people every day. When chosen carefully, such influencers create a trust with their audience and help those viewers/listeners to better understand the product available for them to purchase. (Subramanian, 2018) Dentists who choose to invest in such services have a tremendous potential to grow their current patient base.

Because most of today's dental care products promoted by influencers are those linked with beauty vloggers or non-dental professionals, the dental industry presents with additional challenges by attempting to build the same level of following as ambassadors sharing contradictory and/or competitive information.

Oral health brands and professionals should work to incorporate different types of influencers to match key market and prospective consumers, such young families, college students, uninsured/underinsured, professionals, and seniors. Generation X and Y consumers are more likely to research products before buying them, making an information swap via influences more affordable than ever. Influencers use their own words to "describe their aspirations and motivations." (Gillin, 2007) If dental brands want to continually connect with and convert consumers with younger generations, an influencer network is essential.

## CONCLUSION

Because so many patients rely on word of mouth referrals to locate the best oral health providers in their area, SMIs create a relatable and likable point of contact that allows for supplementation of traditional WOM recommendations and already existing WOM networks. As such, dentists can utilize SMIs to grow their new patient numbers and existing patient base through a method that feels more like a personal referral than more conventional marketing techniques do.

Influencer selection is one of the most important steps of an SMI campaign. As “brand ambassadors,” bloggers with thousands of followers are shown to influence the buying habits of approximately 82% of their followers, based on polls. Similarly, “approximately 80% of online marketers claimed that social media influencers are potential endorsers who boost their online businesses to higher levels.” (Lim, et. al., 2017)

The trust relationship built between potential customers and a “real” person is more than double that of paid TV advertisements. (Subramanian, 2018) It simply seems more reliable and can actually work to speed the process of purchases made. Because we live in an instant gratification society, influencers aim to make connections with the public when individuals might otherwise scroll past seemingly generic and traditional types of ads. (Subramanian, 2018)

Dental ambassadors mimic the traditional WOM referral strategies utilized by private practice dentists for decades, while facilitating marketing techniques at a wider-reaching scale that’s tailored to target audiences. When carefully selected and able to attract a large number of followers, influencers are able to build familiarity among prospective patients toward the practice or oral health brand being promoted, generating a better return on investment in current digital advertising strategies.

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