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LUXURY CONSUMER IDENTITY PROJECTS - A STUDY OF MORAL SENSITIVITY IN LUXURY CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

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Abstract

Consumer behavior in the luxury goods market is often characterized by status-seeking and conspicuous buying motivations. These attitudes can plausibly be explained by hedonistic self-centeredness, which constitutes the base of the post-modern consumerism. Yet, decadent consumption practices repeatedly evoke public criticism about personal irresponsibility, carelessness and disregard for the collective good. While exploring buyers' attitudes in the United Arab Emirates, the current study investigates, how luxury consumers respond to the strong societal drivers for a more responsible consumption. In the environment of a decreasing influence of long-established social categories, luxury consumers are growing concerned about the transformation of the sense of their identity. By investigating two research questions, the study seeks to address the latest socio-cultural transformations: firstly, it inquires whether in the social setting of affluent consumers, a moralism about consumption exists. Secondly, it explores the character of non-market-mediated consumer identity projects underlying luxury consumers' marketplace morality. The study is an empirical inquiry focusing on consumer behavior in luxury furniture segment. Based on semi-structured in-depth consumer interviews, the research analyzes moral attitudes of luxury buyers. While providing a deeper understanding of motivational antecedents in the luxury market, the analysis yields new insights into luxury consumers' marketplace behavior. Furthermore, the study discloses prevalence of moralistic identity work among luxury consumers. From a managerial standpoint, the results call for a greater consideration of the role of ethics in the communication between the production and consumption.

Keywords: Marketplace Morality, Luxury Goods, Consumer Identity Work

1. Introduction

Morality is a complex field consisting of various occasionally mutually conflicting concepts. Different moral lenses can emphasize numerous attributes of human behavior and generate diverse systems of moral values. Although the belief that desirable thoughts and actions and notions of "right" and "wrong" are existent across different cultures, there is no universal agreement about how the domain of morality can be defined. While morality plays on both individual and group levels, it is the social agreement, which defines a moral status of a matter and gives a normative conclusion about the issue in question. Through social interaction, people

attempt to get their identities endorsed by the others initiating a process of comparison where social behavior is being adjusted to the cultural context.

Likewise, the moral order of luxury relies on the social and economic setting within which it is located. Historically, the concept of luxury had mainly negative moral connotations, being described in terms of depravity, pretentiousness, exaggeration and tastelessness (Mandeville, 1714; Sibbit, 1800; Veblen, 1899). Earliest attempts to rehabilitate luxury have been made by Smith (1759) and Hume (1752) aiming to de-moralize it and highlight its economic and in case of Hume - also aesthetic advantages.

There is a lack of consensus about the definition of luxury due to its complexity and ambivalence. Still, a profound multidimensional conceptualization of luxury brand value is established within the academy, involving financial, functional, individual, and social dimensions (Gurzi and Woisetschlager, 2017). In the traditional academic luxury research, focus often lies on a purely materialistic interpretation, and luxury is linked to status and conspicuous consumption as a signaling behavior (Kapferer, 1998; Vigneron and Johnson, 1999; Wiedmann *et al.* 2007). A different academic underpinning related to luxury research is the concept of the "extended self", which follows the notion that consumption helps people to define their own identity, and their possessions become extensions of the self. Construction of the self is enhanced by various possessions, which play a major part for the individual sense of self (Belk, 1988).

The luxury market is experiencing significant changes asking for new territories of conversations. Companies are capitalizing on the increasing importance of digitalization and social media, while simultaneously they need to consider freedom of expression and unique experiences these transformations bring about. The new generation is ready to spend more money on luxury experiences rather than investing in exclusive possessions and is anticipating that luxury brands will embrace sustainability and ethical issues.

Within consumer behavior studies, investigating the self as a moral entity and moral behavior as a deepest principle guiding a person is still a scarcely researched field (Stets and Carter, 2012; Wilk, 2001). The development of the moral self as a link between moral judgement and moral action (Blasi, 1983) is fundamental for subsequent behavioral decisions of an individual. Examination of luxury consumers' work on the moral self and its relation to moral behavior is a question of interest for this study. Maturity of the moral self can boost consumers' need for agency in the expression of their identities and possibly undermine the value of brand management efforts (Bhattacharjee *et al.* 2014). The study focuses on United Arab Emirates as a promising luxury arena hosting a notable population of affluent consumers. However, this market faces a significant stigma of showy consumption by individuals seeking social status and positive recognition by others (Arthur *et al.* 2017; Vel *et al.* 2011). My study intends to investigate the self-identity work of luxury consumers in the UAE both on the societal and individual levels. It intends to go beyond the common connotations attached to the concept of luxury and hypothesizes that luxury cannot be seen entirely in the light of dissipation and that there exist moral motivations associated with luxury consumption practices. The results of the research indicate that the strong market moralization processes have an effect on luxury consumers' buying motivations. Consumers' identity work undergoes a process of emancipation from the power of brand marketers towards a greater consumer sovereignty, where moral aspects play a significant role.

By mainly taking the marketer's perspective and widely ignoring the consumer's side the extant luxury research leaves a gap in the literature, which the present study fills. The main contribution of this paper is to produce a balance in consumers' morality research by investigating intrinsic motivations and identity work of luxury consumers as a part of their decision-making process. Luxury brand marketers can benefit from these insights in developing new brand strategies, where marketing communications are consistent with consumers' perceptions of the moral self.

After a brief preview of luxury market tendencies in section two, the third part of the paper explains the theoretical model used in the inquiry. Section four provides a description of the methodology applied to design the present qualitative study. The results of the research are analysed in the sections five and six, and in the section seven a conclusion is provided.

2. Shape of the luxury landscape

The global luxury market continued to grow at a rate of 5% in 2018 to an estimated 1.2 trillion EUR globally (Bain & Company, 2019). CreditSuisse (2019) estimates that 42 million adults have wealth between 1 million and 50 million USD, of whom the vast majority fall within the 1–5 million USD range. North America accounts for the greatest number, significantly above Europe. China now accounts for 8% of all HNW individuals, while Latin America, India and Africa together account for only 2% of the total.

A study by BCG-Altgamma (2019) covers more than 12 thousand respondents, and suggests that 4-5% of Luxury Consumers generate approximately 30% of global market. Sales of luxury cars continued to dominate the market, growing 5% to 495 billion EUR. Luxury experiences are increasing in relevance marking a redefinition of consumers' values and preferences. Further, luxury companies have started to pay focus on a new consumer class, High-Earners-Not-Rich-Yet (HENRYs), the next generation consumers craving luxury that conveys their beliefs and identity. Significant investments are made in younger segments of the population, labeled as Millennials and Gen Z.

Hence, there are some inherent tensions following these statistics. First, the democratization of luxury (Hennigs, 2015; Tsai, 2005) leads to middle market consumers trading up to higher levels of quality and brand prestige. As a result, the companies face a trade-off between strategies of increased brand penetration among broader public and the requirement to preserve the exclusivity and uniqueness of the luxury product.

Second, 4-5% of the upper end luxury consumers, the so-called true luxury consumers, still account for almost one third of the sales and historically build the core consumer base. The current massification of luxury (Brun and Castelli, 2013; Hennigs *et al.* 2016) can alienate true luxury consumers, as they do not identify themselves with this new target group. Luxury brands are expected to be at the forefront of the industry and know exactly how to cater luxury consumers in a relevant way.

Third, the global wealth structure observed by region does not reflect in luxury sales. The share of the European consumers in luxury sales decreases despite of the constantly lengthening upper tail of the wealth distribution in Europe. Apparently, people's buying habits do not correspond to their income level, and a broad group of high net worth individuals is possibly withholding luxury consumption.

Forth, luxury brands become increasingly dependent on markets operating within non-democratic political structures, which feasibly causes business risks. Yet, for the brand identity, the pitfall can be adaptation to tastes, preferences, attitudes and values of those markets (Cui *et al.* 2015). This again can threaten the loyalty of the core customers on the home market (Kapferer, 2014). In order to retain true luxury consumers as core customer base, luxury managers need to deeply understand the luxury concept and the intrinsic motivations directing luxury consumers' behavior.

3. Theoretical framework

With the predominant practice to measure merely hedonic and utilitarian shopping conditions of consumers (Batra and Ahtola, 1991), the current luxury research demonstrates several significant limitations. The main goal of utilitarian theories is to increase the amount of what is intrinsically good and to avoid the amount of what is intrinsically bad (Bentham, 1780). Utilitarians look at consumers as efficient and rational agents, inclined to evaluate the products according to their functional features. The utilitarian perspective is cognitively driven and instrumental, asserting that the happiness is the only intrinsic value. The highest principle of morality is to maximize happiness and to prevent pain and suffering. Hedonic consumers, on the other hand, indulge in experiential consumption affected by sensory experience of aesthetic or sensual pleasure, seek enjoyment and excitement. Hedonic consumer behavior is described as multisensory, related to fantasy and emotional aspects (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1982).

To advance the assessment of luxury consumers' attitudes, the author proposed a new model (Figure 1) by adding a third, deontological dimension to the consumers' value perception

paradigm. The deontological perspective, as described by German Enlightenment philosopher Kant (1785), allows for moral values, intentions and commitments. This approach enriches the investigation, as the values do shape and reshape consumers' preferences and can be important factors in their decision making. Deontological position places the focus on the intentions behind the consumption, drawing a more complete picture of luxury consumers' motivations and sources of attitudes. Under assumption that consumers act on the basis of their identity meanings, this paradigm brings in examination of the self as a moral entity.

A theoretical framework for the consumers' perspective can be provided by the concept of consumer sovereignty (Gintis, 1972), a theory which describes the rational, utility-maximizing consumer as a key agent in the economy. On the other hand, brand marketers' intervention can reduce consumers' authority to freely form and express their own identity and ultimately decreases their freedom of choice. Consumer sovereignty seen as a continuum reveals a scale between social conformity at one end and individual agency at the other.

Drawing together these two theoretical lines of consumer moral orientation and consumer sovereignty, the author developed a conceptual framework of luxury consumer value dimensions. It maps luxury consumers according to their moral concerns and susceptibility to be influenced from outside powers, such as social pressures or marketing efforts. The suggested model proposes a shift from the marketer to consumer as an object of the research.

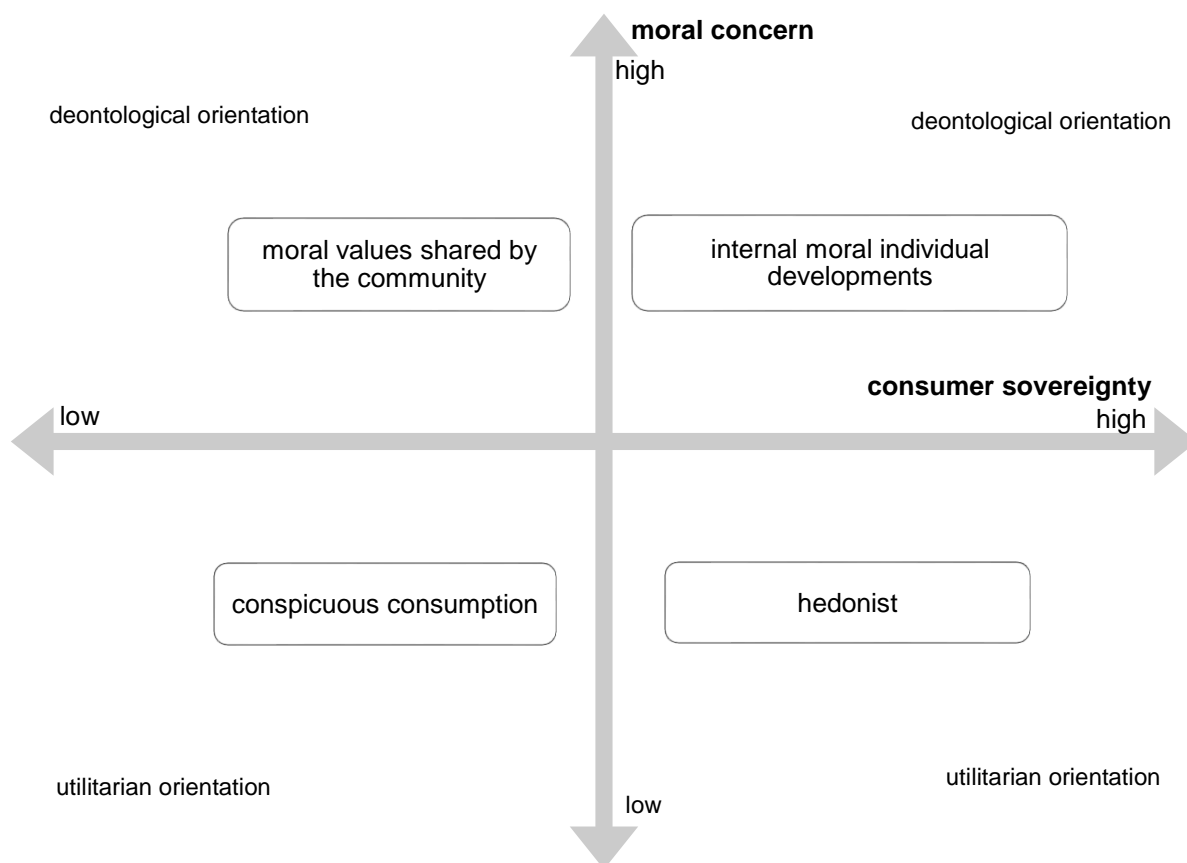


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of luxury consumer value dimensions

Source: Developed by the author

4. Research design and methodology

The above described model was employed as a methodological tool to map luxury consumers' attitudes across the dimensions of identity definition and freedom of choice. Earlier luxury research demonstrates a methodological constrain associated with the identification and approachability of the respondents. Convenience sampling and limited sample size are the major issues for the luxury investigation. A further potential weakness arises with the dynamics and ambiguity of the notions of morality and luxury and the cross-cultural application of these constructs. The subjective understanding of the concepts can lead to inconsistency in interpreting the research results. In order to overcome these constrains, the author used hermeneutically grounded interpretive framework suggested by Thompson (1997). This approach allows for insights derived from analysis of qualitative data gained through the description of the meanings, which consumers give to their luxury buyer experiences and delivered as stories and narratives.

In the investigation of the attitudes on the luxury market, the author adopted an inductive approach focusing on interviews with customers and experts along with continuous field observations. Two data sets were collected to create a comprehensive framework of luxury consumer attitudes. The first data set concerned managers of luxury product retailers, the second one involved real luxury consumers. The empirical material consisted of a set of 21 in-depth-interviews with luxury consumers and 20 in-depth-interviews with luxury store managers in fashion, design and car retail companies in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The interviews ranged in length from 0.5 to 2 hours and were audio recorded, wherever participant's authorization was provided.

The research approached the question of what the meanings and symbolic associations are that consumers use to construct their sense of identity. Luxury consumers' individual meanings surfaced through the conversations and revealed the reversible relationship between social setting and subjective identity.

The interview design was shaped differently for retail managers' and luxury consumers' target groups. The first ones focused on observations, while the second ones were examined in terms of their impressions, experiences and were required to produce their moral self-concept descriptions. These accounts were rated in 7-point Likert scale to assess the intensity of person's moral judgement.

Luxury retail managers were initially asked to describe several archetypical consumer profiles and give details about their attitudes towards different areas sensitive to consumers' identity and morality. Further, in the course of the conversation, managers were encouraged to give a detailed account on a sales process from client acquisition to project finalization with a specific emphasis on consumers' moral attitudes. In the interpretation process, various codes were generated and merged in order to reach a conceptualization of the results.

Consumers' interviews were shaped so that the questions evolved from general statements, as "describe yourself as a person" and "what does luxury mean to you" to specific questions about the importance of products' eco-friendly materials and sustainable production processes as well as behavioral responses. Each conversation began with general questions about the informant's background, interests, and life goals and then the participants were invited to develop the description directing to their attitudes towards luxury consumption, brand selection, consumption practices, brand community relationships, and encounters with outsiders.

Furthermore, questions concerning the participant's moral beliefs and values were raised toward the end of each encounter aiming to identify whether the respondents engage in activities that benefit human welfare. The questions involved consumers' concerns with sustainable production, environmentally sound packaging, workplace conditions in the factory, but also community, personal and aesthetical values, attitudes towards materialistic beliefs, tax-paying, charity donation and source of wealth. The result of the interviews were stories of personal identities which were examined within a framework of traditionally established social meanings and belief systems.

5. Research analysis

The interpretative procedure included two distinct stages. In the first phase, the text analysis was completed, in which interview transcript was read to gain a sense of the entire subject. The second stage was comparative, where the researcher looked for patterns and differences across the individual interviews. The outcomes were mapped within the consumer value framework (Figure 2) with the aim to indicate the grade of luxury consumers' moral concern. The results showed significant differences in consumers' value dimensions as perceived by consumers, on the one hand, and luxury retail managers, on the other hand.

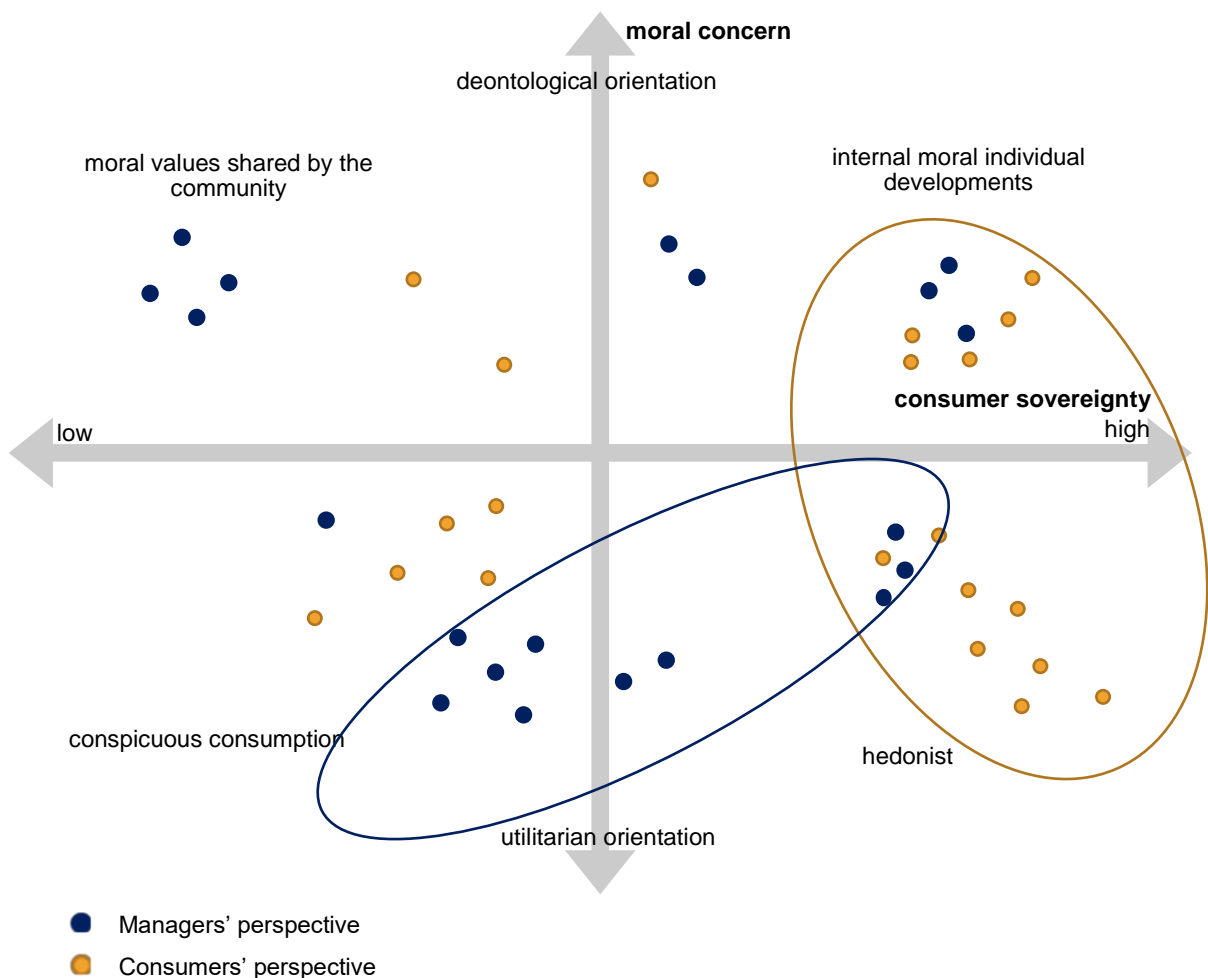


Figure 2. Value dimensions from consumers' and managers' perspectives

Source: Developed by the author

Consumers recurrently described themselves as independent from the market-related influences. Many of them showed a strong interest in experiential luxury as a response to the critique of materialistic world view. The respondents indicated strong self-reported volunteering and donation behavior. Furthermore, in light of the global sustainability challenges, the participants emphasized their concern with environmental issues and confirmed that product sustainability is what they expect and demand from luxury product suppliers.

Some of consumers' responses disclosed an intense connection to their community or family, which in certain cases exposed itself as desire to demonstrate possessions. This association was stronger among the interviewed UAE nationals in comparison to expatriate respondent group. With regard to status consumption, the latter category expressed a greater

interest in being socially recognized by broader public rather than merely the family circle. Besides the established luxury brand values as functionality, quality and uniqueness, the desire for luxury as a tool for signaling status is still prevalent.

Furthermore, consumers indicated the ubiquitous interaction between aesthetic values and moral. For example, a participant stated that using objects of high aesthetic value and quality publicly enhances the visual comfort of the community and can be viewed as a beneficial moral act. Good taste is generally considered as a virtuous and worthy part of individual's self-identity among the luxury consumers.

Retail managers, however, affirm that utilitarian attitudes are still persistent on the consumers' side reflecting in buyers' pragmatic way of reasoning about the products. Consumers are inclined to engage in negotiation process enthusiastically and appreciate the sense of having transacted a business deal. The sales process rarely involves discussions about moral aspects. For example, salespeople reported that they do not use product sustainability as a unique selling point of a luxury product, as they do not regard it as important buying motivator for the consumers in the region.

The study indicates a growth in the number of luxury consumers with intrinsic motivations. The findings clearly point out that the modern luxury consumer shows a strong self-esteem and identity along with the desire to consume principle-based and consciously. The luxury consumer is considerably less inclined to demonstrate material goods in the hope to be rewarded with social status and respect. The respondents confirm that consumers increasingly see themselves as agents in the expression of their identities instead of relying on luxury brands as vehicles for their identity communication. These developments are of concern to luxury businesses and call for a greater consumer involvement in the creation of the luxury brand value.

Luxury consumers find themselves in different stages of personal identity work and depending on this stance they pursue their identity goals. As an example, informants explained that they opt for luxury products for aesthetic reasons and see a moral superiority in good taste. These distinctions help the respondents to disassociate themselves from other groups by using moral viewpoints. Group disconnection practices were explained with the desire to protect the ideals of aesthetical and functional perfection, technological advancement and value preservation.

6. Conclusion

Dignity, excellence and confidence are beliefs luxury consumers value high, drawing identity related distinctions to mainstream consumers. Confirming to consumerist norms is not regarded as a morally justified mind-set. Luxury consumers do not want to see themselves as self-centered materialists or victims of commercial advertising, indicating a strong consumer sovereignty.

The study reveals substantial inconsistencies between the narratives around moral stances as presented by luxury consumers and luxury retail managers. Apparently, due to lack of a noticeable moral action, consumer's moral identity is not perceived by the community. This might bring into question the existence of a link between moral reasoning and engagement in moral action; between what people think they ought to do and what they do. The gap between the moral judgement and moral action or the question, whether people "practice what they preach", is broadly discussed in the academic literature (Aquino *et al.* 2009; Lapsley and Hill, 2009; Reynolds and Ceranic, 2007). The research indicates that moral identity can be an important source of moral action, but for an effective moral performance there are more factors needed, as self-regulation and external incentives (Hardy and Carlo, 2011). How this link is established by consumers buying on luxury market is a promising topic for future research.

The previous research within the realm of ethical luxury consumption mainly brings to light isolated ethical decisions and moral acts having short-term impact (Achabou and Dekhili, 2013; Davies *et al.* 2012). With its changed focus towards moral identities of luxury consumers this study reveals moral developments leading to lifestyle choices, which have long-term moral implications both for the individual and the society.

Against the emerging societal discourse about moral aspects of life, such as individual responsibility for climate change, emerging social inequality, wealth distribution, this study

exposed the self-identity work of luxury consumers as a process of navigating between the spaces of stability and change.

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