

SUSTAINABLE MARKETING: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN CONTEXT OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR

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Abstract

The society has changed its habits, and public demand requires a more extensive offer of environmentally friendly goods and services on the market, including more products of plant origin. New plant-based products continuously appear on the market. As competition in the segment of plant-based beverages intensifies, brands are forced into differentiating their products by including elements of sustainable marketing in their marketing materials to induce consumers into making purchase decisions and purchases. This study aims to find out which sustainable marketing elements contribute to consumer decisions to purchase and consume plant-based beverages. The article presents the results and trends based on the 1st stage of the study – a pilot survey and structured in-depth expert interviews. The pilot survey identified the key sustainable marketing elements in consumer decisions to purchase plant-based beverages: *product availability at food supermarkets; advertising at point of sale indicating price discounts; healthy product composition and raw materials; convenient in-store placement, price discounts and natural raw materials, etc.* Based on the results of the pilot survey, there were changes made in the consumer questionnaire, and the 2nd stage of the study – a survey of the Latvian population to find out the complex factors affecting consumer buying decisions – was launched in February 2024.

Key words: consumer behaviour, consumer decision making, food consumption, food value chain, sustainable marketing, sustainable development.

Introduction

The growing public interest in various matters related to food healthiness and sustainability increasingly prompts producers, food processors and traders to respond to the developments. For instance, a growing number of milk processors and traders, fruit and vegetable producers, etc. partner with biologically certified farmers to create separate biological product sub-brands. Sustainability is on the agenda of almost every business. The interaction of the food system players in the food value chain – from the delivery of raw materials and the production of grain, livestock, fish and other agricultural products to transportation, processing, retail, wholesale, and food preparation, selling and ultimately consumption and disposal – can promote sustainable management. A key role in the overall food system value chain is also played by consumers who create demand. Specifically, demand for more sustainable products rises due to awareness of climate and environmental changes, retailers' marketing communication activities, information at retail selling points or on product packaging, etc. Moreover, an increasing share of population strives to be sustainable in their actions and willingly opt for plant-based products as well as products made by companies that implement sustainable development initiatives and abide by the principles of sustainability. However, the high price of plant-based or ecological products is often an obstacle to buying these products (Gómez & Lee, 2023; Bormane, 2018, 2021). Furthermore, consumers lack understanding of sustainability, and public awareness needs to be raised as to high-quality products and the added value – environment-saving production processes, recyclable packaging, etc. (European Commission, 2023). In order to educate and advise consumers on sustainable products and the impact of their consumption, sustainable marketing needs to be used. Unlike conventional marketing which mainly focuses on promoting products and services to make profit, sustainable marketing also

highlights the environmental, social and economic aspects (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Martin & Schouten, 2014; Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Bormane 2021; Sharma, Aswal, & Paul, 2023; Bormane *et al.*, 2023; Yadav, Gupta, & Nair, 2024).

For the purposes of this study, sustainable marketing means a strategic approach of marketing aimed towards promoting environmentally friendly and socially responsible products and services whilst highlighting the environmental, social and economic aspects and attaching great importance to building and maintaining relationship with consumers and the social, economic, natural and legal environment. Previous research has identified *product packaging, information availability to consumers and loyalty programs, availability of scientific research results, affordability and product functional characteristics* as the key factors affecting purchase decisions in the food product segment in Latvia (Šķiltere & Bormane, 2018). This study aims to find out which sustainable marketing elements contribute to consumer decisions to purchase and consume plant-based beverages. The article presents the results and trends based on the 1st stage of the study – a pilot survey and structured in-depth expert interviews.

The article deals with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially – SDG 12.

Materials and Methods

The study takes place in multiple stages: the 1st stage identifies the sustainable marketing elements and their theoretical impact on consumer behaviour using the monographic method; the impact of sustainable marketing elements on consumer buying decisions is explored based on a pilot survey designed to find out which sustainable marketing elements contribute to consumer decisions to purchase and consume plant-based beverages; structured in-depth expert interviews

are conducted. In the 2nd stage, based on the results of the pilot survey, there are changes made in the consumer questionnaire, the target audience for the further study is determined (people aged up to 50), and a survey of the Latvian population was launched in February 2024 to identify the complex factors affecting consumer buying decisions and to find out whether there are differences in consumer decisions to purchase and consume plant-based beverages across respondent groups – by age, sex, education, income and their choice of diet.

This article presents the results and trends based on the 1st stage of the study – a pilot survey and structured in-depth expert interviews.

Survey results are processed in Microsoft Excel by using crosstab analysis to compare relationships between respondent groups and sustainable marketing elements that might impact decision of purchase. To evaluate results descriptive analysis, arithmetic mean, frequency and mode are used to shed a light about key sustainable marketing elements and how they are distributed across the population of interest.

Sustainable marketing is the creation of the utmost customer value by integrating environmental and social considerations in the marketing process. This includes the development and advertising of products and services that meet customer needs whilst mitigating the adverse impact on the environment and society. Sustainable marketing has two main goals in terms of environmental and social sustainability. Firstly, sustainable marketing means marketing in a sustainable way – so that all marketing processes be environmentally friendly and socially beneficial. Secondly, sustainable marketing means sustainability of marketing as a set of concepts, cultural values and practices (Belz & Peattie, 2012; Martin & Schouten, 2014). In other words – the purpose of sustainable marketing is to help build a society where striving for sustainability is a norm. For conventional marketing, the desired result is selling and ideally also building consumer loyalty, whereas for sustainable marketing, the desired result is selling a sustainable product in such a way that the consumers have knowledge, motivation and resources to use and recycle the product in a sustainable way. Sustainable consumption can manifest itself as consumption planning to avoid impulse purchases and buying in excess, appropriate packaging sorting and recycling, etc. It is therefore a duty of businesses to educate the society on matters of sustainability in order to take care of the environment together, as the sustainability efforts of businesses will not attain the desired result if consumer behaviour and habits do not change as well (Antonetti & Maklan, 2014; Braslina *et al.*, 2020; Casno & Sloka, 2023).

In the food supply chain, especially the selling stage, companies often see no need to invest in integrating principles of sustainability in their business. The reason in most cases is insufficient knowledge, awareness or motivation (Pislaru, Herghiligiu, & Robu, 2019).

Traders need to realise that the consumption way of

thinking promoted by conventional marketing is the main driver of adverse environmental impact. With companies increasingly offering products and services in a more sustainable way, it becomes possible to also make sure that consumers recognise and accept (by voting via their purchase) their sustainability initiatives and values aimed towards promoting sustainable consumption and maximising their strategic business advantages (White, Habib, & Hardisty, 2019). Moreover, the implementation of sustainable and environmentally friendly processes at a company results in non-financial performances that yield savings and economic benefits (Wijaya & Said, 2024).

According to previous research in this field, the growing demand for sustainable products has prompted companies to include sustainability elements in their marketing activities. For instance, statements, certificates, or other informational elements in marketing materials serve to differentiate their products from others (Annunziata, Mariani, & Vecchio, 2019). Integrating sustainability elements in marketing materials can, in turn, enhance the company's brand image and reputation by showing the company's commitment to environmental and social responsibility. Consumers increasingly tend to demand sustainable products and services, and marketing materials play a decisive role in demonstrating these attributes (Belz & Peattie, 2012). Overall, one can notice the importance of interaction with social, environmental, and economic development factors in advising and educating consumers and public on the relevance of sustainability matters. The inclusion of sustainability elements – such as stamps, certificates, eco-labels, statements, and proofs of sustainability practices – in marketing materials makes consumers not only more aware of environmental issues and environmentally friendly products, but also a key part of a sustainable practice which helps companies reach their business objectives in terms of sustainability initiatives.

When analysing literature on consumer behaviour and making purchase decisions, consumer behaviour was found to be complex process, as consumers can make informed needs-based decisions having considered various factors, or immediate buying decisions based on numerous incentives – taste, smell, design, atmosphere or economic benefits (Stankevich, 2017; Hanaysha, 2018; Egan, 2020). This study mostly focuses on the last two stages of the consumer buying decision process – purchase decision and purchase. Consumer behaviour and the buying decision process varies depending on the need, the product purchased, the motivation of purchase and use, the personal values, and the expectations of product use. It is important to use appropriate marketing activities and communication channels at each stage. Based on the theoretical aspects presented in scientific literature, one can conclude that it is the purchase decision and purchase stages at which the sustainability goals of companies and brands are attained, as the consumer

has made the choice and purchased a sustainable product (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2009; Praude & Bormane, 2012; Martin & Schouten, 2014; Kotler & Keller, 2015; Šķiltere & Bormane, 2018; Qazzafi, 2019; Egan, 2020).

The analysis of scientific literature identified seven conditions for raising consumer awareness of sustainability: 1) *company impact measurement and attestation* – certification and third-party audits to prove the effectiveness of sustainability initiatives by companies and brands; 2) *sustainable product characteristics and composition*; 3) *clarity and transparency (consistency)* – a clear sustainability labelling on the product packaging (certificates, stamps, statements); 4) *suitability to target audience* – the sustainability elements highlighted in the marketing materials need to be appropriate to the target audience; 5) *sustainable product availability*; 6) *sustainable product promotion*; 7) *long-term orientation and corporate identity* – the marketing materials need to reflect the long-term commitment of the company and/or the brand to sustainability (rather than short-term superficial efforts). The said conditions are based on 59 sustainability elements which are designed for inclusion in marketing materials and used further herein to make sure of their impact on consumer purchase decisions and purchases.

Results and Discussion

In order to find out the consumers' view as to which elements of sustainable marketing contribute to making a purchase decision and purchase, a pilot survey was conducted. By territory, it targeted all working-age inhabitants of Latvia. The general population is made of employed persons residing in Latvia – 891,196 people according to the Central Statistics Bureau (Central Statistics Bureau, 2023). The representative sample for the pilot survey, with the acceptable error of 5%, is 384 respondents. 414 respondents took part in the survey (n=414, 351 or 85% were women, 63 or 15% were men, the survey period ran from 09.11.2023 till 08.12.2023). Women and men are not represented equally among respondents, but the interpretation of results factored in that most buying decisions in the family (especially when it comes to food) are made by women (Krizan *et al.*, 2022) and such structure of respondents is therefore appropriate to the specifics of the study.

Data were collected across five respondent groups: 1) diet – vegetarian (abstains from the consumption of meat), vegan (abstains from the consumption of products derived from animals), flexitarian (periodically abstains from the consumption of products derived from animals or consumes some plant products, such as plant-based milk), omnivorous (consumes both meat and milk products) or other; 2) sex (male or female); 3) age (up to 24, 25-50, 51 and older); 4) net income per month (no regular income, up to 534 EUR, 535-1,114 EUR, 1,115 EUR and more); 5) education (primary, secondary, higher, other).

Prior to the study, it was assumed that plant-based products are predominantly consumed by vegetarians, vegans and flexitarians, but the results of the pilot survey show an increasing number of plant-based product consumers among respondents who describe themselves as omnivores. This is most often the case with men (67%) and respondents aged above 51 (66%), whereas most women (54%) count themselves under the category of flexitarians, vegans or vegetarians. Many respondents aged 25 to 51, too, count themselves under these categories (49%). Interestingly, it is most often respondents with secondary education (59%) who count themselves as flexitarians, vegans or vegetarians, followed by those with higher (incl. incomplete higher) education (49%). Such result stems from generational differences in understanding – younger respondents (with secondary education) have grown up in an informational space where sustainability issues are present, so these respondents tend to opt for a more sustainable diet more often.

For analysing the results of the pilot survey and assessing the impact of the 59 sustainable marketing elements on the purchase of plant-based beverages, the arithmetic mean rating was used 'Figure 1'.

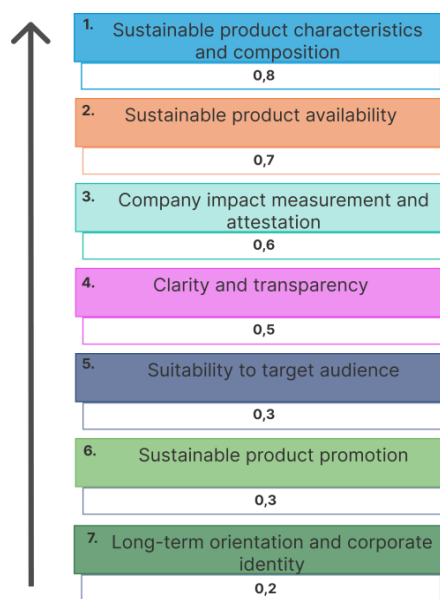


Figure 1. Conditions for promoting the purchase of sustainable products in order of importance, 2023, n=414.

Source: arithmetic mean respondent rating, scale of ratings: (-2) unimportant; (-1) rather unimportant; (0) neutral; (1) rather important; (2) important).

In all demographic groups of respondents, *product characteristics and composition* were rated as the most important conditions when it comes to purchasing sustainable products, while *long-term orientation and corporate identity* were rated as the least important.

Overall, respondents aged up to 24 and those counting themselves as vegans tend to rate the impact of sustainable marketing elements on the purchase of

sustainable products as rather high, which suggests that these respondent groups are more sensitive to the different marketing activities. Men and respondents aged over 51, in turn, rate this impact lower. Older respondents tend to rate the impact of sustainable marketing elements on purchase decisions as neutral and pay less attention to sustainable marketing activities when shopping.

The results of the pilot survey show a general trend that the use of sustainable marketing elements in marketing materials contribute to making purchase decisions and purchases. For instance, consumers appreciate convenience, physical availability, and convenient packaging.

According to the results, consumers attach great importance to price discounts, product composition, raw materials, environmental and animal impact, which play a major role in context of purchasing sustainable products. Product packaging colour, floor labels at points of sale, authentic sustainability message, and participation in sustainability conferences, in turn, have been rated as the least important sustainable marketing elements for the promotion of buying. Surprisingly, lotteries – widely used as sales promotion activities – have been rated negatively. It might be because of the extensive use that consumers no longer find such promotion mechanism appealing. Outdoor advertisement showing product features and positive environmental impact, too, has been rated as unimportant or neutral, probably because consumers have no time to delve into the content of the advertisement to fully perceive the message.

The results also show a substantial difference in the rating of sustainable marketing elements between women and men. For instance, price discounts and convenient and intuitive in-store placement are the most important sustainable marketing activities affecting purchase decisions for men. Women, in turn, find healthy product composition important. Overall, one can conclude that men place greater importance on rational and functional product values.

Rational elements (ease of use and financial benefit) draw much attention regardless of age group. Meanwhile, the younger the consumer, the more attention is devoted to sustainable marketing elements, which makes the consumer easier to influence. For those aged between 25 and 50, the importance of sustainable marketing elements in making purchase decisions is lower, but relatively important is product availability, convenience, healthy composition and raw materials, with price discounts rated as less important. The age group of 51 and above shows the most surprising results – contrary to expectations that older respondents might prioritise price discounts and other promotional activities, this group has rated sustainable marketing elements pertaining to natural, biological and ecological raw materials as the most important, and price discounts are not even near the top of the list. This suggests that older respondents pay more attention to their health, purchases are planned in

advance, and decisions are thoroughly considered rather than impulsive.

Different dietary groups rate sustainable marketing elements differently. Omnivores and flexitarians pay more attention to functional elements pertaining to convenience and availability, whilst also considering healthy product composition and price discounts. Vegetarians, too, appreciate product availability at supermarkets but even more healthy product composition and raw materials with no adverse animal impact. Price discounts are not ranked among 5 most important elements for buying sustainable products. Vegans, on the contrary, attach much greater importance to raw materials with no adverse animal and environmental impact. They also appreciate easily sortable product packaging, and they, too, have not ranked price discounts among the most important elements, which suggests that this group pays much more attention to sustainability matters and the use of sustainable marketing elements can affect their purchase decisions and purchases.

Comparing respondents by income, it is evident that all groups rate product availability as the most important element. Naturally, respondents with no regular income and low to average income also rate price discounts as important, whereas those with income above 1,115 EUR per month and those who prefer not to specify their income level have not ranked price discounts among the most important elements. Respondents with higher income rate availability, convenience and healthiness as more important, with price discounts and campaigns ranked lower. Respondents with average or low income and without regular income have, in turn, rated price discounts as more important. Respondents without regular income appear to be more oriented towards sustainable action – the only group to rate the environmental impact of raw materials so high, while respondents with average and high income and those who have not specified their income level pay more attention to healthy product composition.

Overall, respondents see rational elements, such as product availability and convenient and easily sortable packaging, as important for promoting the purchase of sustainable products, as these elements allow one to buy sustainable products and become more sustainable oneself without much effort. Consumers have rated price discounts as important, which is understandable in the current economic circumstances, but healthy product composition and raw materials with no adverse animal and environmental impact are rated high, too. These are therefore the sustainable marketing elements that one should focus on and companies (brands) should implement in their marketing materials and activities. One can observe a trend that price discounts are currently important to consumers in Latvia. The older the respondents, the more sensitive to price changes they become and the more importance they attach to product packaging and ease of use.

Consumers sometimes act inconsistently with their views expressed in surveys – in the case of sustainable management, purchase decisions may differ from the theoretical and practical knowledge in this field. After summarising the results of the pilot survey and identifying the trends of consumer behaviour, structured in-depth expert interviews (n=10) were conducted to find out the opinions of experienced marketing and sustainability experts on the use of sustainable marketing elements in influencing consumer purchase decisions and promoting purchases. The experts selected were industry professionals with at least 10 years of experience. The structured in-depth expert interviews period ran from 19.12.2023 till 21.01.2024.

When asked about consumer awareness and understanding of sustainability matters, the experts were unanimous that understanding of sustainability matters is improving overall but is still low among Latvian consumers compared to other European countries (European Commission, 2023). Importantly, it greatly varies among consumer groups – for instance, younger consumers, or the so-called Generation Z, are certainly more knowledgeable and themselves actively pursue sustainable actions on a daily basis, whereas older generations have much less understanding and knowledge on sustainability matters. Part of the society see sustainability as a global problem that does not concern them directly or perceive it as a problem imposed by European Union directives. The experts also stress that the state should engage more in informing the public and building a deeper understanding of sustainability matters because currently this lies on the shoulders of businesses and non-governmental organisations.

The experts were asked to rank by importance the conditions for building understanding of sustainability to promote decisions of buying sustainable products (especially plant-based products) ‘Figure 2’.

The experts picked *sustainable product availability* as the most important one, referring in comments to both physical in-store presence and affordability. It was followed by *suitability to target audience* – according to the experts, it is very important to educate and tell consumers what the brand does and why sustainable development in general is important. Furthermore, this information needs to be delivered in an appropriate and gripping way.

Also, rated as very important were *sustainable product characteristics and composition*, which is actually an essential precondition for talking of including sustainable elements in marketing communication at all. *Sustainable product promotion* and *clarity and transparency* have been rated as important. Consumers need clear and unambiguous elements that prove the sustainability of the product and brand, while promotional activities serve to both introduce consumers to the story of the brand and raise awareness of sustainable development in general.

The experts rated *long-term orientation and corporate*

identity as the least important conditions – not because they are unimportant as such, but because they do not directly contribute to making purchase decisions and purchases. The experts stress that brands certainly need to work with these conditions but also keep in mind that they will require long-term activities that do not yield immediate purchases.

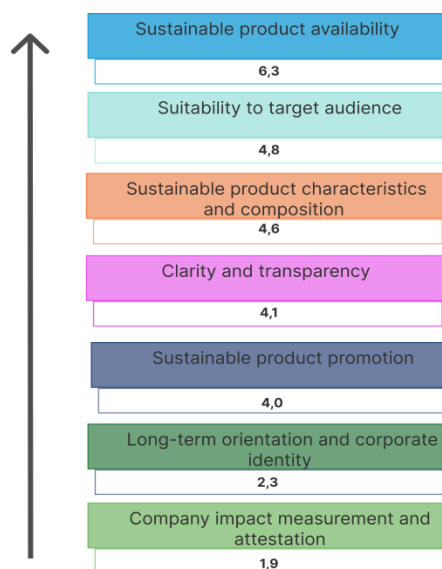


Figure 2. Conditions for the promotion of purchase of sustainable products in order of importance, 2023, n=10.

Source: arithmetic mean, expert rating, evaluation scale: (7) most important; (1) least important.

As concerns sustainable marketing elements and their impact on consumer decisions and sustainable product purchases, the experts mentioned advertising at point of sale (posters, stands and other POS materials) indicating price discounts as well as product availability at supermarkets as facilitating marketing activities. It was stressed in the interviews that normally price discounts should not be a decisive factor in purchasing sustainable products but the current economic situation in Latvia gives price a key role in product selection.

Overall, the main differences between the consumer views in the pilot survey and the expert assessment of the use of sustainable marketing elements for the promotion of purchase decisions and purchases are that the experts rated advertising materials at points of sale indicating price discounts as very important, while the consumers only rated these elements as *rather* important. The latter stems from the consumers’ unwillingness to recognise that their buying decision may be influenced by advertising materials at points of sale. Sustainability message in the form of authentic story-telling, in turn, has been rated as important by the experts but neutral with a negative trend by the consumers. According to the experts, it is story-telling that helps build brand awareness, understanding of sustainability matters, and also brand loyalty. There is also a substantial difference in ratings for outdoor advertisement showing product

features – important according to the experts and neutral according to the consumers. Here one can give a similar explanation that consumers are not fully aware of the factors and elements that influence and incite them towards making purchases.

The results of the consumer pilot survey and the expert interviews on the conditions for promoting consumer understanding of sustainability and sustainable marketing elements to promote consumer purchase decisions and purchases are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

Sustainable marketing elements which contribute to consumer purchase decisions and purchases

No.	Conditions for promoting consumer understanding of sustainability	Sustainable marketing elements to promote consumer purchase decisions and purchases
1.	<i>Sustainable product availability</i>	Product availability at food supermarkets and online stores, convenient and intuitive in-store placement, on-shelf concentration – at least 3 products of the same brand placed together.
2.	<i>Sustainable product promotion</i>	Advertising stands and posters at points of sale, mass media advertising indicating price discounts, price discounts, tasting at points of sale.
3.	<i>Sustainable product characteristics and composition</i>	Healthy product composition, raw materials or natural, biological, ecological or local origin, without food additives, raw materials with no adverse animal and environmental impact, packaging is easy to use, made of recycled materials, easy to sort, recycle or reuse.
4.	<i>Clarity and transparency</i>	An ecolabel or biolabel on the product packaging
5.	<i>Suitability for target audience</i>	The sustainability message stresses benefit to the consumer's health.

Source: Author's calculations based on the results of the pilot survey* and structured expert interviews**.

Scale: *(-2) to (2) for consumer ratings where (-2) important; (-1) rather unimportant; (0) neutral; (1) rather important; (2) important; **(1) to (7) for expert ratings where (1) – unimportant; (7) – important.

Conclusions

1. There is a trend that consumer purchase decisions and purchases are contributed to in particular by such sustainable marketing elements as: *product availability at food supermarkets; advertising stands and posters at points of sale indicating price discounts; healthy product composition; convenient and intuitive in-store placement; price discounts; natural raw materials, without food additives; convenient packaging (volume, use); easily sortable packaging; raw materials with no adverse animal impact, etc.*
2. By including sustainable marketing elements – such as stamps, certificates, ecolabels as well as statements and proofs of sustainability practices used – in marketing materials, companies cannot only improve consumer understanding of sustainability, knowledge on environmental issues and environmentally friendly products, but also engage consumers in the promotion of sustainable practices.
3. Both rational elements (such as product availability, convenient packaging, price discounts and healthy product composition) and social elements (raw materials with no adverse environmental impact) are rated as important for the promotion of sustainable products. Stimulating sustainable marketing activities for drawing attention may be price discounts (especially for older consumers), but the

price becomes less important as the consumers' income level increases, and then it becomes more about the functional benefits of the product. This leads to a conclusion that consumers with a higher income level more consciously choose to consume sustainable products and purchase them based on origin, ingredients, packaging, ease of use, etc.

4. Overall, one can conclude that it is important to address specifically women, the younger audience, and the vegan audience through sustainable marketing elements, as these categories place greater importance on the use of sustainable marketing elements in promoting purchases.
5. The results of the pilot survey and expert interviews have been used for the 2nd stage of the study launched in February 2024 to find out the views of the Latvian working-age population on the complex factors affecting the purchase of sustainable food products and establish whether there are differences in consumer decisions to purchase and consume plant-based beverages across different respondent groups.
The results of the study will be of use to businesses for promoting food products and raising discussions on the need to develop social campaigns highlighting sustainability issues and informing the public, and to other researchers for in-depth studies.

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