



RESEARCHING CONSUMER ATTITUDE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PRIVATE EDUCATION SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

The present paper offers a study of the attitudinal complex and its influence on consumer behavior regarding private pre-university education services, at the same time offering marketers a new approach to the tertiary sector. In order to understand the subject a quantitative study was conducted, starting with a statistical survey that focused on the analysis of the relations of association or causality that were identified between the variable components of the attitudinal model that was previously constructed. Educational services are generally considered as having a high degree of importance, similarly to health services, that involve more stakeholders with a substantial resource allocation before taking a decision to either to purchase or not to purchase. When a parent or a future parent begins to be preoccupied with the development of their child they ask the following questions: (1) What type of institution should I choose for my child's development? (2) What is the main advantage offered by a private kindergarten or school? (3) How many of my acquaintances have access to this type of services? (4) What are the parameters that I could use in order to measure the degree of development that a child can reach attending a private kindergarten or school? (5) What is the degree of success obtained by a person after completing their study within the private education system? Thus, a series of specific behavior patterns can be determined for the consumer of private education services, along with proposals on the basis of which companies and marketers can develop growth strategies for the educational segment. Specialists must closely monitor the relationship between the quality of the offered service - the consumer's degree of satisfaction - allocated resources - the obtained performance.

JEL Classification: D11, I20, M00, M31

Keywords: attitude, quantitative research, modeling, consumer behavior, education services, association and causality relations

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1. INTRODUCTION

The research of attitude in the context of private education services has lead to the development of three attitudinal dimensions: affective, cognitive and conative, each with a series of identified particularities that form between attitude and perception, learning, motivation and effective behavior. These identified relationships between behavioral variables can be those of association or causality and influence the decisional process directly or indirectly. The identified attitudinal effects can lead to a better understanding of consumers of private education services and other services. This was achieved through a marketing research that established a first look regarding the situation of education services related to the individuals that purchase and use them. The study accounted for the fact that the market for private education services in Romania finds itself on an ascending trend.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

From a psycho-sociological perspective, Allport (1935) characterizes attitude as being a mental state of conscious preparedness, organized through experience, but that exerts a dynamic influence over an individual's response regarding an object or a situation. Murphy (1931) considers that attitude can be established in accord with or against an object. Baldwin (1901-1905) underlines that attitude can also be an availability for the attention or the action of a predefined behavioral model. Cantril (1932) states that attitude refers to a semipermanent state of mental education that predisposes the individual to a reaction toward a certain stimulus. According to Warren (1934), the mental disposition that is specific to a certain type of "input" experience through which a state of readiness is attained for a certain activity represents attitude. Attitude is the result of the evaluation that is projected by the consumer onto the capacity to produce or satisfy the requirements for purchasing or consumption, but also those that are expressed through evaluation criteria. In the opinion of Rosenberg and Hovland (1960) attitudinal components are determined by the cognitive, affective and conative components. The cognitive component is represented by the consumer's beliefs and traits that they attribute to a product or service. These values or beliefs are formed at the intersection of the consumer's needs and the product or the service's elements that are perceived to be able or not be able to satisfy the consumer's needs. The affective component contains the individual's predisposition to like an object or situation, while the conative component refers to the act of purchasing. Rosnow and Robinson (1967) consider that the attitudinal element attributed to an individual forms a system of organizing their emotions, beliefs and predispositions through which they justify their behavior. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) define attitude as a predisposition to leaning in order to respond either favorably or unfavorably to an object, person or given situation.

3. THE STRUCTURE OF ATTITUDE AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS WITH BEHAVIORAL COMPONENTS

Attitude serves four functions: the frame of reference function, expressing fundamental values, ego defensive function and adjusting. The frame of reference function refers to a partially unknown medium and the attitudes that form during the learning and development process. The function to express fundamental values is the way in which the consumer assign a central attitude, one that they are very reticent in regards to change, to a product or a brand. The ego defensive function reduces anxiety and protects the environment, providing the consumer mechanisms to project, compensate or rationalize. The adjusting function allows the consumer to maximize the satisfaction after the purchase or to reduce the disappointment caused by utilizing the purchased product.

Consumer attitude can be found in a close relationship with personality. This variable reaches 2 levels: the external level represented by identical behaviors, but reveal different

situations and the internal level. The social psychoanalytical theory of Horney (1942) recognizes social factors as having a high level of importance when the individual consciously analyzes their needs and desires. Among the desires that they can aspire to, there are the notion of superiority over others, the desire to avoid loneliness, the need for safety or that to reduce anxiety. Horney's theory manifests itself through three interpersonal typologies: one that moves toward people, one that moves against people and one that moves away from people. Another theory that can help in investigating consumer behavior is Jung's analytical theory (1915) through which 3 forces are shown: the self or conscious spirit, perceptions, thoughts and feelings, the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious or the inheritance of symbols from historical events that marked humanity and that are available to people since birth. Allport's theory (1937) related to traits and factors suggests that personality can be divided into types of reactions that are common to people, but also different intensities from person to person. This theory suggests that personality can be divided into types of reactions called traits or factors. Traits and factors are common to all people, but their degree of intensity vary from person to person. Westfall (1962) came up with a list of these traits: active, dominant, sociable, strong, impulsive, calm, attentive.

4. QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative study was conducted in order to further understand attitude relating to private pre-university education services. The quantitative study sought to explore as many attitudes that can influence the consumer's behavior, but also the association or causality relations that result from the conceptual model that was proposed and demonstrated through the conducted research. Thus, a statistical survey was created and conducted online, according to the methodology established by ESOMAR (2016), on the count that it provided a more streamlined managing and analysis of the data with minimum resources. This quantitative research was conducted in the June-December 2018 period through a survey that contained 29 questions. *The conceptual framework* was determined by the private pre-university education system in Bucharest, in the form of nurseries centers, kindergartens, schools and high schools. *The general purpose* of the quantitative research was the identifying and establishing the way in which attitude can influence consumer behavior but also identifying the relationships that form between affective, cognitive and conative attitudes and the decisional construct. *The analyzed collectivity* was comprised of both users and nonusers of private pre-university education services, female and male, that live in Bucharest, with average and above average income and ages between 20 and 59. When it came to sampling, growing interest for the private education services market within the online medium was integrated in the collectivity and groups of parents and future parents from social media, specific websites and educational blogs.

The data gathering method was randomly conducted on a database compiled by the authors in the 2016-2018 period, after attending several education-related events that took place in Bucharest. The survey contained items using the Likert scale with scales from 1 to 10 used to illustrate the level of importance attributed to the statements provided within it. The questionnaire could be accessed through the Google Forms platform as a result of receiving an invitation either through email or through messages received within parent groups in channels previously mentioned. Participants to the study expressed their agreement or disagreement in writing for the gathering and processing of the data purely for an academic purpose.

The sample size for the survey regarding the influence of attitude on consumer behavior has been established on the basis of the calculation for absolute frequencies (Kendall and Yule, 1969) which was determined through the means of the software called Random Number Generation. The estimated sample that was reached was 600 respondents, which was not itself representative for the city that was taken into consideration, but could represent a necessary

basis for analyzing attitude as an essential part of the decisional construct. Finally, 215 people were taken into account when evaluating results, as it was the number of respondents deemed as being valid. The total population of Bucharest was taken into account when establishing the sample size, a population comprising of 2.106.144 people, according to INSSE (2016), 981.835 (46,62%) men and 1.124.309 (53,38%) women. The targeted population for the study had ages between 20 and 59, being comprised of 950.499 people, 44,92% women and 55,08% men. Sampling was done using a non-probability method, specifically the quota method and revealed four subgroups as follows: the first sample was formed by respondents aged 20 to 29, the second with respondents aged 30-39, the third 40 to 49 and the last one comprised of respondents with ages 50 to 59.

5. PROPOSED ATTITUDINAL MODEL

Understanding the field of attitude is a complex issue, as establishing the elements that reside within the consumer's so called "black box" is extremely difficult in order to study the moment they decide either to purchase or not to purchase. Attitudes are difficult to change or control, they can intensify with age and consumption decisions can be surprising in many cases due to the fact that they can be based on subjective criteria. The present paper illustrates a conceptual model proposed by the author, based on the current specialized literature, but also on the work belonging to renowned researchers in the field of behavior modeling such as Nicosia (1966), Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1978) or Howard and Sheth (1969). The constructed model can be applied in any other industry because it offers a clear path to investigating and understanding behavioral variables, but also the relationships that form between them and converge to a final decision. Thus, the conceptual model was determined within 4 blocks:

Influences that can be directly observed or Block A, Exogenous Influences or Block B, Consumer Behavior Components within Block C and Block D that contains The Purchase Decision Process.

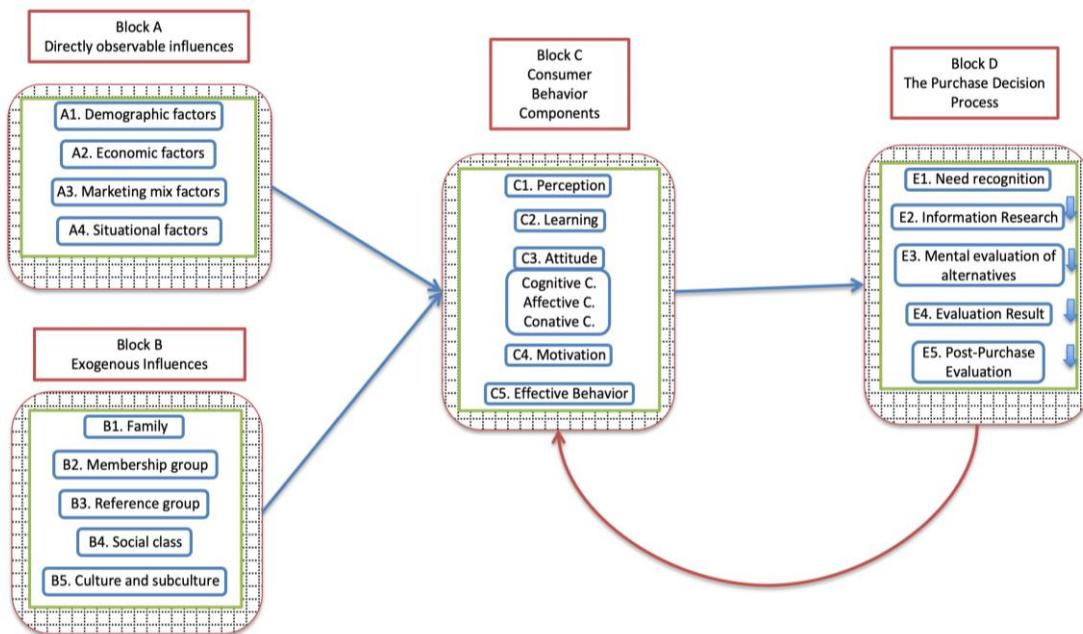


Figure 1 Conceptual model of the influence of attitude

Source: conceptual model proposed by the authors

The model shows unidirectional fluxes between Block A, Block B and Block C with a unidirectional flux and a feedback flux between Block C and D. Block A - Directly observable influences contains factors that have a high degree of applicability: demographics, economic factors, marketing mix and situational factors. These variables can create immediate results that can be easily integrated into complex decision processes within a managerial plan (Cătoiu & Teodorescu, 2004). Block B - Exogenous influences that are represented by: family, membership groups, reference groups, social class, culture and subculture. They describe the components of the social environment and offer an explanation for the consumer's behavior whether the behavior is influenced by the actions of family or culture, all of the components have a strong influence on the individual (Kotler & Armstrong, Principles of Marketing, 2018). Block C or Consumer Behavior Components comprises endogenous variables that are of interest within the author's analysis: Perception, Learning, Attitude, Cognitive - Affective - Conative Components and Effective Behavior. Grouping these variables required a complex approach and helped in studying the proposed subject. Block D is comprised of: need recognition, information research and mental evaluation of alternatives, evaluation result and post-purchase evaluation. The last block can offer a complete perspective on the final consumption decision.

6. RESULTS OF THE QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH REGARDING THE INFLUENCE OF ATTITUDE ON BEHAVIOR

The quantitative research regarding the influence of attitude on the private pre-university education service consumer was conducted using a statistical survey and displays the association or causality relations formed between the variables that were included and studied within the attitudinal model created by the author. In order to understand the process behind the research 3 segments were established through which the effect of attitude on behavior could be observed: influences on the behavior of the private pre-university education services consumer; attitude and consumer behavior and the purchase decision process.

The attitudinal variables were analyzed through sampling categories represented by the respondent's sexes, income, education levels and age groups. The majority of questions that were within the survey used a Likert scale from 1 to 10, similar to the grading used in the Romanian education system, where a value of 1 represented total disagreement and 10 total agreement for the statement that was presented. When choosing private education services, the first analysis was related to the importance of the family's income: "*The family's income must be taken into account when it comes to deciding whether or not to purchase private pre-university education services.*" It was revealed that income is considered more important by men, with a medium score of 9.3, people aged 50-59 but also by respondents with a higher degree of education. Family income came in first place, before personal income, which could mean that individuals consider that all of the household's members must participate in the education and development of the future student. Following the importance of the family's income, the price is considered less essential in choosing private education, the focus being on the type of education that the private institution offers in addition to a publicly funded institution.

The situations in which individuals deem the purchase of private pre-university education services to be necessary were the following cases: the moment in which the child reaches the age in which they can benefit from education services and the event in which the family's income can allow the purchase. Choosing the private institution thus depends on the family's income but also on the child's age. Before taking the decision of enrolling the child into the educational system, respondents take into account the active role of their family: "*The family is the one to decide whether or not to purchase private education services.*", on the count that the

basis of the decision is placed on recommendations and previous personal or professional experiences of the parents and of immediate family members. Moving further, the membership group in which the family might be included had a medium score of 8.7, being essential for the decisional process. The group might be formed by other members of the extended family that may have children with ages close to the respondent's child. When it came to the influence of the reference group, 4 vectors of approach were considered: "*Do consumers have a reference group of a social type?*", "*Do consumers consider that there is a sort of social stigma attached to following a reference group?*", "*Do consumers aspire indirectly to a reference group?*" and "*Do consumers aspire to a reference group in a way that is not constrained by social pressure?*". Anticipating cognitive dissonance in the context of the juxtaposition with a reference group, the survey used 2 affirmative phrases and 2 phrases that negated the negative aspects that could be associated to reference groups. The results were contradictory due to the fact that respondents agreed moderately with the statement that private pre-university education services are not for people considered to be snobby, but moderately disagreed with the statement that people with a high degree of education would not use such services in an ostentatious way. When it came to social classes, respondents manifested a high degree of agreement toward the statement that a person's job and level of education have an influence in deciding upon using private pre-university education services. Furthermore, when respondents were asked "*Would you be inclined to purchase private pre-university education services?*" the answers provided differences when education levels and income levels were taken into account. From a cultural point of view, there seemed to still be certain barriers when it comes to the usage of private education services in Romania, aspect that was present when it came to the survey's respondents. The socio-cultural barrier has the biggest effect on the youngest of groups, ages 20-29, which are afraid of being wrongly labeled by others if they purchase private pre-university education services, while respondents of a more mature age were in total disagreement and stated that they are not influenced by the opinions of society.

7. ATTITUDE AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

When it came to the components of consumer behavior, the analysis was focused on investigating perception, learning, attitude, motivation and effective behavior. Beside these processes, the research pursued a more in-depth investigation of attitude and its three components, as identified by the literature: cognitive component, affective component and conative component.

Regarding perception, respondents were presented with 6 phrases, formulated in a positive way, on the basis of results previously obtained during the in-depth interviews. Each of the phrases addressed perception of: private pre-university education services, advertising, price, personnel, location but also the buildings and amenities used in delivering this type of services. Thus, the highest average (9.5) at a total sample level was obtained for the phrase "*The personnel in private education seems more well-prepared and more professional to me, than personnel employed in the state-subsidized system.*", indicating that respondents manifested a high degree of agreement. Respondents had what can be classified as a positive perception of personnel from the private pre-university education service sector, but also toward buildings and amenities that belong to private education institutions or toward their placement in what they consider to be "good areas" of the city.

Information that the respondents had regarding private pre-university education services either come from relatives and acquaintances, or secondary data and it can have an impact on their behavior.

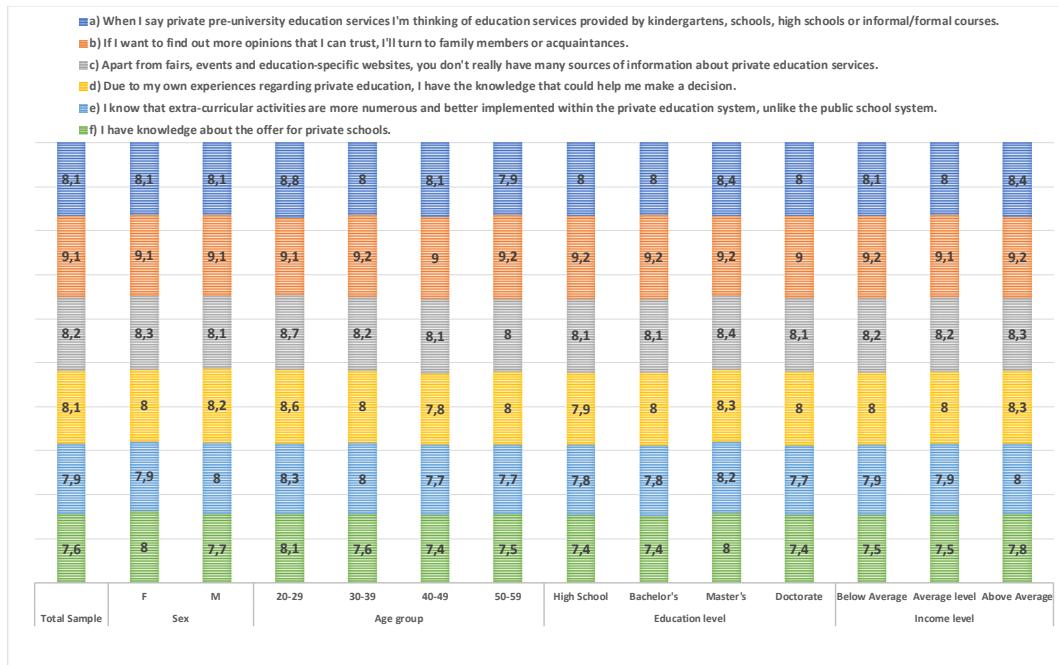


Figure 2 Learning through sources of information

Source: graphic representation elaborated by the authors

The majority of respondents call on relatives and acquaintances before deciding to use a private education service. Other options taken into account were represented by information from offers regarding private education or personal experience related to the field.

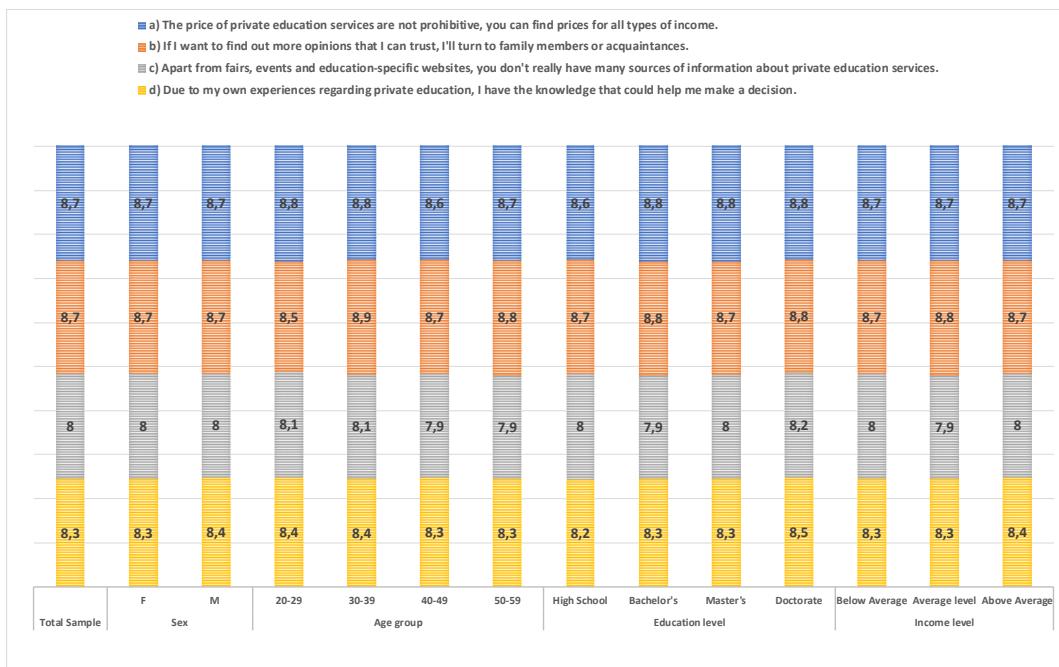


Figure 3 Attitude

Source: Statistical survey conducted by author

When it came to attitude, respondents were first presented with a set of statements that were created using the information acquired with the help of in-depth interviews that were conducted in the qualitative research stage, before the quantitative research. These four statements

approached attitude from a general perspective, leaving more specific angles of approach for later sections of the survey. Thus, the reasoning behind this approach was that a high degree of agreement toward the presented statements translated into a positive attitude, and so did the opposite: a high level of disagreement meant a negative direction for attitude.

Thus, following the information identified during the qualitative research, that respondents form attitudes related to private pre-university education services by associating them to public services, respondents were presented a statement that described private services as being superior to those provided by the state. This statement received an average score of 8.7. The next characteristic that was analyzed was the attitude regarding the price of private education services: *"The price of private education services isn't prohibitive; you can find prices for all types of income."* This revealed a positive attitude from the respondents when it came to the price of these services, showing that they would be inclined to pay more for this type of services. Considering the notions presented within the scientific literature of the field, specifically regarding the components of attitude, their dynamic and the attitudes that result from the preponderance of each of the components (Hawkins & Mothers Baugh, 2010; Solomon, 2012), three directions were investigated: Affective Component, Conative Component and Cognitive Component.

8. THE DECISIONAL PURCHASE PROCESS

The cognitive model contained within itself a block named decisional process that referred to the variables: need recognition, information research, mental evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, post-purchase evaluation, non-purchase, post non-purchase evaluation. Individuals that choose private education services the moment in which the child of the household reaches the age at which they need to be enrolled in the education system, whether they receive recommendations from relatives or acquaintances, or they research information from secondary sources. Some people choose private education services after they have been disappointed by weak performances by the public education system or due to the amenities offered in public education institutions. Evaluating the alternatives refers to the situation in which the consumer uses a structure of beliefs and associated values, which in this case were linked to factors such as: personnel training and education, received recommendations, the price of private services and the methods used during educational activities. The purchase was preferred by people who are willing to invest more money into their children's future, who want to attain a higher social status or people who place a higher price on the advantages that the private sector seems to have when compared directly to state financed education. Those who choose private education services seemed to be inclined to recommend it to others and take into account their evaluation when it comes to price, personnel training and education, location, amenities - all aspects that would seem to translate into a high standard of education services.

9. CONCLUSION

The present paper refers to a relatively new subject for Romania and highlights a possible behavior of consumption for private education services. Consumer attitude regarding private education services is underrepresented in studies and scientific literature, sometimes going so far as to be incorrectly merged on top of perception. When forming attitudes respondents tended to take into account a constant comparison between private and public education services. Attitudes regarding price, personnel, location and advertising were identified as being positive. When it came to different types of attitudes, based on the preponderant presence of one of its components, the Conative Component received the highest scores, thus indicating that attitudes regarding private pre-university education services are formed based on behavioral learning processes. According to the results, respondents showed positive attitudes, regardless if they

were formed preponderantly on the affective, conative or on the cognitive component. Out of all three, attitude based on the Affective Component received the lowest score. According to the results of the quantitative research, one can draw the conclusion that attitude regarding price has a much more powerful impact than attitudes regarding other aspects of private pre-university education services.

On the subject of limitations of this study, one of the major concerns was the relatively small amount of resources that could have been used by the authors, the lack of information about attitudinal studies regarding the population of Bucharest, but also the apprehension on the part of some respondents when it came to fully respond to the statistical survey in its entirety. Another limitation was represented by the fact that there are no ample sources of information published regarding private education institution in Bucharest and the authors were limited to participating at educational fairs and events in order to conduct a detailed investigation.

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