

SUSTAINABLE LEADERSHIP AMONG SPANISH MARKETING PROFESSIONALS. A MYTH OR REALITY?

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Abstract.

This study focuses on the analysis of sustainable leadership in companies within the marketing sector in Spain. To address this subject, a qualitative study was carried out of the answers given by sixty middle and high managers from the sector to a set of fifty-four questions, 46 of which were associated with Avery and Bergsteiner's Sustainable Leadership framework. The results of the study show a clear trend towards a bee-type leadership in the Spanish marketing field. The marketing managers interviewed highlighted the importance of ensuring, from an organizational perspective, the well-being of employees, the setting of long-term goals and a concern for the environment. Although from the results obtained from our study there seems to be a clear trend towards bee-type leadership, there remains a need for companies in the marketing sector to continue to work harder towards becoming more sustainable. Despite the good results, in this sense, the marketing managers interviewed considered that work must continue to achieve sustainable leadership at its fullest.

Keywords: sustainable leadership; marketing management; corporate social responsibility; bee-type leadership, locust-type leadership

Author contributions

The three authors have contributed equally towards the development of this article.

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Introduction

"We are a sustainable company" is a statement increasingly made in recent years by many companies, both nationally and internationally, and being able to make such a claim has come to be considered as bestowing a competitive advantage. The company's sustainability strategy is usually transmitted by its marketing department through its website, in press releases and in its annual report. Therefore, the marketing and communication departments are responsible for getting the message across to the public that their company cares and is concerned for the environment and sustainability.

The concept of corporate social responsibility has, like any concept, been evolving over time. At first, sustainability was associated at the corporate level with a company being “green”, but this understanding of the term is inadequate as it did not consider the triple bottom line, which includes social sustainability, environmental sustainability, as well as the positive economic-financial impact on the company itself.

It is interesting and attractive for companies to include sustainability as part of their corporate vision to enable them to bolster and sustain their competitive advantage in an ever more difficult business environment. Companies are therefore now adopting more sophisticated strategies of tailoring "brand content" to reach consumers emotionally and to attach or hook them to their brand. To do this, it is therefore necessary to include the element of sustainability. The public perception of the company as a socially responsible actor in business and society, an image which needs to be strategically communicated and diffused, aims to produce a positive opinion of the brand and one that is subsequently diffused among stakeholders and through media coverage to spread the message more widely.

It is an effective strategy, if developed jointly with the right target groups and if the appropriate market niche is identified, aimed at ensuring an effective message to be communicated regarding environmental awareness and social welfare.

So far, we have discussed how a brand can be portrayed as sustainable through its external communication strategy, however for a company to be accepted as being truly sustainable, the mere diffusion of an image does not suffice. Instead, it is essential to publish and communicate the evidence of the real sustainability actions that it carries out both internally and externally. Usually, the impact of these actions is centred on the following areas: product design, production, logistics, packaging, and market segmentation. This implies reviewing the materials used in the production of the product, the reduction of the carbon footprint in the atmosphere and the need to use resources efficiently, such as in their use of water or paper.

It is of course more attractive to the consumer for the companies they use to be sustainable. After initial contact with the brand, the client then looks for more from the company. Its sustainable marketing strategy needs then to feed into a company-wide strategy that considers the company's positive impact on both the environment and society generally, thereby transforming this strategy into a competitive business advantage that is transferred to their customers in the form of value (Belz and Karsten, 2010).

According to Tseng et al (2018), sustainable marketing also implies the long-term economic sustainability of the company, so the strategy created must include good leadership and management practices to achieve a better organization and better products and better outputs, and achieve better relationships with its stakeholders, with the general objective of contributing to the achievement of a better world.

As with the design and development of any business strategy, this implies working in a coordinated and aligned way within the company's general corporate objectives and actions (Varadarajan, 2010), otherwise its implementation is not possible.

Within a company's marketing objectives, new environmental concepts must be considered (Menon and Menon, 1997), as well as the company's social policy (Torugsa et al, 2012) and environmental responsibility (Fraj- Andrés et al., 2009) and the response of consumers (Menguc and Ozanne, 2005). Citation of one reference in the text from a publication by one or two authors, name of both authors should be written (Hall, 2011; Hall & Fitzgerald, 2016).

Sustainable leadership

Over the last decades, numerous leadership philosophies have been developed, among which is the recent concept of “sustainable leadership” (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006); a type of long-term management that is based on acting fairly and ethically with all stakeholders (that is, both internal and external to the company).

Adopting a long-term perspective and strategy has helped companies survive in difficult times, such as in economic crises and recessions (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011), as well as in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which little by little we are leaving behind.

According to Avery and Bergsteiner, the existence of sustainable leadership can be observed at the organizational level, while also considering the company’s principles, processes, values, and ways of working (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011). Traditionally, the management of corporations was carried out with an authoritarian leadership style, often reflecting the personality of the individual heading the company as well as his/her professional background. We are currently moving towards management models that are more stakeholder-oriented and that aim to respond to the objectives of people and society.

In this sense, sustainable leadership has more advantages than disadvantages, such as having a broader participation of employees and stakeholders in the decision-making and development processes within the organization and in the greater cost effectiveness in the use of resources, all together enhancing brand reputation and generating social respect.

According to the Cambridge Institute for Sustainable Leadership, sustainable leadership should not be considered a different school of leadership, but rather defined as a particular type of leadership that considers the sustainability challenges facing the world (Wisser, 2011). Relevant elements of this type of leadership are equity, environmental justice, intergenerational equality, and governance (Tuppen and Porritt, 2003).

The analysis of the application of sustainable leadership has been extended to various contexts and sectors, for example, in the educational sector or organizational settings (Crews, 2010; Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011; Davies, 2007). The first sustainable leadership model considered in this manuscript is that from 2006 of Hargreaves and Fink, who analysed sustainable leadership in the educational sector. According to these authors (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006), the implementation of sustainable leadership in education promotes the exchange of opinions and ideas.

Davies (2007) and Lambert (2011) also developed sustainable leadership frameworks at the organizational level in the education sector, both in the United Kingdom and in the United States (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006; Davies, 2007; Lambert, 2011). According to Davies (2007), sustainable development entails key elements that determine the long-term improvement of the school, such as leadership that is based on a moral purpose that puts success within everyone's reach. According to Lambert (2011), sustainable leadership requires commitment at all levels of the organization to develop a culture in which leadership skills can be generated (Lambert, 2007).

Also, to note is the framework developed by the Cambridge Institute for Sustainable Leadership — CISL, Wisser (2011) that developed a model of sustainable leadership that was

based on three main elements: (1) the internal leadership context and external context (2) the leader's style, skills, traits, and knowledge; and (3) leadership actions.

None of these characteristics applies exclusively to the concept of sustainable leadership, however, together, they can respond to the challenges of sustainability. In this sense, according to Kouzes and Posner (2007), good leaders must be honest, with a vision of the future, competent, inspiring, and intelligent, as well as having the ability to be flexible and to adapt to the specific context of the organization (Kouzes and Postner, 2007). Thus, a sustainable leader must also care about the well-being of humanity and of all forms of life.

Avery and Bergsteiner's (2011) leadership model is based on 23 key factors that underlie the concept of sustainable leadership, all of which will contribute over time to improving organizational performance. If we compare this model with those previously presented by Davies (2007) and Lambert (2011), one of the main differences is that Avery and Bergsteiner's sustainable leadership framework has been applied to a wider variety of organizational contexts than just the education sector. Examples of this include Kalkavan's 2015 study where she analysed the level of sustainable leadership among managers in the Turkish insurance industry and that of Bulmer and Riera (2021) that evaluated the degree of sustainable leadership among female managers from the logistics sector in Spain.

Avery and Bergsteiner's framework divides organizations into two main categories, one called (1) "locust leadership" and one that is known as (2) "bee leadership." The leadership philosophy of the locusts is mainly based on obtaining profits, to the point of wanting to obtain them at any cost, even if it means harming the environment or others (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011).

On the other hand, the bee leadership approach provides a vision of social and shared leadership, that is very much stakeholder oriented. The application of this leadership style in the corporate world implies that a company can be sustainable only if the basic needs of all stakeholders are considered; otherwise, it cannot be considered as such. In addition, it is more holistic in nature and is based on generating value for stakeholders.

Although it has been shown that the application of bee leadership in companies is more sustainable and profitable in the long term, many national and international companies persist in applying a more conventional model, such as the locust model, prioritizing benefits that are short-term, versus medium or long term. (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011).

We used Avery and Bergsteiner's (2011) theoretical framework as the basis for the methodological approach described below.

Objective

The main objective of this study is to identify the level of sustainable leadership among managers in the marketing sector in Spain. As aforementioned, we will use Avery and Bergsteiner's model as the framework for the development of the 54-question survey that was put to sixty managers in the field of marketing in Spain. The purpose of the study is to answer the following questions

- How do managers in the marketing sector perceive leadership in the companies they work for?
- Is their perception aligned with a prevailing approach to bee-type leadership, locust-type leadership?

pe leadership, or neither?

Studies on sustainable leadership in the marketing sector are scarce, and therefore the approach is innovative.

In the following sections of this study, the research methodology, the results obtained, the discussion and the conclusions will be presented.

The methodological section of the research describes the qualitative analysis that was carried out and includes the specific questions within the questionnaire that was completed by the 60 respondents. In the discussion the results obtained are analysed in more detail and compared with results obtained in previous studies. The conclusions bring together the main results of the research, without neglecting the limitations of the present study that will serve as a basis for the development of future studies.

Materials and Methods

The main objective of this study is to identify the level of sustainable leadership among managers in the marketing sector in Spain. To achieve this objective, a qualitative study was carried out based on the analysis of the answers given by sixty middle managers and senior managers from the marketing sector in Spain, who answered a 54-point questionnaire.

As stated at the beginning of the study, the questionnaire was based on and developed from the Avery and Bergsteiner model of sustainable leadership and has 46 questions; 8 additional questions were added to them to gather more specific information concerning the respondents. Given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the questionnaires were created with Google Forms, and were distributed digitally through email and WhatsApp, guaranteeing, in any case, the anonymity of the respondents.

Of the 54 questions raised, 8 are introductory questions, seeking to learn a little more about the profile of each manager interviewed (Part I) and 46 have the objective of analysing the level of sustainable leadership of the company in which the managers carry out their activity; as seen below (Part II).

PART I - Introductory questions

- Gender:
- In which country are you located?
- Sector
- Role
- Years of experience:
- You work in the organization _____. Could you tell me a little more about your organization? What do you work on?
- Have you always worked here? Why did you join this company?
- What challenges do you face when currently working in your organization? Please, indicate two or three, the most relevant.

PARTE II: Sustainable leadership questions

- 1) In terms of training and development I aim to develop everyone continuously.
- 2) In terms of training and development I aim to develop people selectively.
- 3) For me, long job tenure is very important at all levels.

- 4) At some level I can accept a high degree of personnel turnover.
- 5) I mostly make promotions from within the organization wherever possible.
- 6) I mostly appoint people from outside the organization wherever possible.
- 7) I am concerned about employees' welfare.
- 8) For me employees are interchangeable and employee cost is a very significant cost item in accounting.
- 9) In my opinion a CEO works as the top team member or as the representative of the team.
- 10) In my opinion a CEO is a decision maker and can be considered as the person in charge.
- 11) "Doing the right thing" in the business is more important than profit.
- 12) For me, assessable risks can be taken in any situation to increase profit.
- 13) I prioritize long-term business objectives over those that are short term.
- 14) I prioritize short-term profits and growth considerations.
- 15) I think that change is an evolving and considered process.
- 16) I think that change is something rapid, volatile, perhaps even ad hoc.
- 17) I think that people should work with maximum independence from others to increase their profits from their work.
- 18) I think people should follow their managers' orders and obey instructions.
- 19) In setting business objectives, I always emphasize protecting the environment.
- 20) In my opinion, the environment is there to be exploited to increase profit.
- 21) I think that the interests of the people and of the community within the business environment should be carefully considered in making business decisions.
- 22) I think the people and community should be exploited since they are available to the business to increase profit.
- 23) I think that everyone matters, whether they are related to the business or not.
- 24) I think, since we are in business to generate profits, that only shareholders matter.
- 25) I believe in vision statements embodying a shared view of the future as an important strategic tool.
- 26) I believe that a vision of a shared, consensual future does not necessarily drive the business.
- 27) I believe the decision making in the business should be consensual and devolved.
- 28) I believe the decision making in the business should be primarily manager centred.
- 29) I believe staff are capable of self-managing.
- 30) I believe managers should manage and control staff.
- 31) I think team working should be extensive and empowered.
- 32) I think team working should be limited and manager centred.
- 33) I think widely shared culture fosters and enables the meeting of business objectives.
- 34) I think the pursuit and the achievement of short-term business objectives constitutes a valid business culture.
- 35) I believe the sharing of knowledge is especially important and should be practised throughout the organization.
- 36) I believe that knowledge-sharing is important only to the extent of a need-to-know basis with people having access only to what they need to fulfil their specific roles in meeting the

overall business objectives.

- 37) In business I need to foster a high degree of trust through relationships and good will.
- 38) In business we must control and monitor staff to compensate for a low trust environment.
- 39) In my opinion strategic innovation is especially important and therefore should be encouraged at all levels of the organization.
- 40) In my opinion, innovation is risky and therefore should only be managed by managers.
- 41) I highly value emotionally committed staff.
- 42) In my opinion, financial rewards suffice as motivators, therefore I do not expect emotional commitment from the staff.
- 43) In my opinion, quality ought to be embedded within the culture of the business.
- 44) In my opinion, quality may only be achieved through mechanisms of control.
- 45) I effectively communicate the business culture and the strategic actions to be developed.
- 46) I understand that the functions of the workers on my team are easily achievable using new technologies, and that using them can eliminate jobs

In turn, the questions are sub-classified according to the following criteria: Fundamental practices (questions 1 to 26), Higher level practices (questions 27 to 38) and Key drivers of performance (questions 39 to 46).

To complete the questionnaire, respondents gave a score between 1 point and 5 points; via the application of the Likert scale (Explained below).

- 1 – I completely agree
- 2 - I agree
- 3 - I neither agree nor disagree
- 4 - I disagree
- 5 - I completely disagree

Results

The survey was answered by different managerial profiles from the field of marketing, from different sectors, such as: insurance, pharmacy, finance, publishing, mass consumption, environmental protection, health, waste management, training, services, technology, automotive, retail, entertainment, IT, real estate, logistics, consultancy, tourism, NGOs, food, telecommunications, agriculture, hotels, construction, the organization of fairs and conferences and sports.

All the managers carried out their activity in Spanish companies, 40.7% of them were women and 59.3% men, with between 3 and 45 years of experience in the field of marketing.

To the question, "What challenges does your company face?", the interviewees highlighted the organizational challenges listed below. This information is important as these challenges may potentially affect answers concerning specific sustainable leadership given by the respondents.

- Development, visibility, and perception of the brand.
- The competition. Maintain brand leadership.

- Empathy among the company's stakeholders.
- The transformation and digitization of the industry. Portfolio update, strategic change within the sector.
- Adaptation to the international environment (for example, to LATAM).
- Have an impact on society.
- Innovation.
- Grow in times of crisis, such as in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Avoid “greenwashing” and ensure that sustainability is real and efficient.
- Creation of a powerful brand aimed at a multi-target audience.
- Deal with the increase in raw material prices.
- Build reputation and ensure visibility as the organization grows globally.
- Lack of understanding of customer needs. Management of high uncertainty. Lack of talent with a technical profile that understands business problems.
- Mobilize citizens, contribute to the organization's reputation, and connect with a new, more digital, and pro-environmental society.

Very interesting were the responses of the interviewees to the question: “How do you think the role of sustainability in the marketing sector in Spain could be improved? Among the responses we would like to highlight are the following:

- Marketing must be used to improve sustainability.
- Honest marketing with a focus on sustainability.
- Through legislation with specific measures in different aspects (packaging, CO2 footprint, etc.).
- Clearer information on sustainability. Today it seems more to be a "buzz word" more than anything else.
- Education and continuous training. More than marketing, it is a cultural and educational issue. Investing in global education is investing in sustainability. It doesn't matter whether you are a CEO, a manager, a worker. You have to create awareness in society, and it is constant and hard work; but absolutely necessary.
- Greater communication. Promoting social awareness and respect for nature.
- Integrating sustainability into the company's strategic objectives. That it effectively becomes a pillar for the business and not just a nice phrase in a corporate presentation/web page. That it is something that cannot be neglected, even when it often implies greater investments and higher costs.
- Promoting the sustainability actions of companies as a means of relating to society beyond just a commercial relationship.
- Creative initiatives to involve leading companies that excite many people

Next, the results obtained from Part 2 of the questionnaire are described here below.

Most of the managers interviewed were in favour (48.3%) or very much in favour (31.7%) of continuous training for the company's employees. In addition, almost all of them believed that staff turnover should be minimal (71.7%) and that internal promotions within the organization should be prioritized (96.7%). Despite the broad agreement on this last point, it ought to be

noted that 55% of the same respondents replied that they neither agree nor disagree with the following statement: "In general, I tend to hire people from outside the organization".

The above results demonstrate the interest that marketing managers have for the wellbeing of employees. 98.4% of those surveyed said that they were concerned about the well-being of employees and the majority (73.3%) considered that the company's human resources should not be considered as mere costs, giving this department relevance also in this style of leadership.

Regarding the figure of the CEO in the company, in most cases (71.6%), the managers interviewed perceived that they are key workers in the company and decision makers; CEOs are, then, people who inspired the rest of the organization, thus having a strategic vision of the company (75%). In this sense, 96.7% think that teamwork should be promoted and empowered, so that it should not be limited and be organized only by the company manager (81.7%).

To the statement "I believe that the company's culture can be shared/open/transparent to meet the short-term objectives of the company", 83.3% responded affirmatively. In addition, it is considered that the exchange of knowledge is important and must be disseminated within the organization (100%). Therefore, communication was shown to be key regarding executing effective leadership.

According to the respondents it was also important to have a high degree of trust with workers and maintain a good relationship with them (85%).

98.3% of the managers surveyed affirmed that they highly value the personnel that show work commitment to the company; but they believed that financial rewards are enough to motivate staff, without the need to expect an emotional commitment from them to the company (85%). As far as the business itself is concerned, there was a general view that sustainability was more important than mere profit (83.4%). 68.4% of the managers surveyed stated that they take the environment into account among their commercial objectives, in addition to considering that it did not exist only to be exploited (95%).

Regarding the social aspect, managers (91.7%) highlighted that people, and the community must be considered and cared for, since the business depends on their collaboration. The latter includes all stakeholders, not just shareholders (90%). It is important to emphasize that they agreed that having a shared vision of the future was an important strategic tool (98.3%).

Innovation is another key point in this style of leadership, and 81.7% of those interviewed considered strategic innovation to be key for the organization. Furthermore, 91.7% of those interviewed wanted to extend the possibility of innovating beyond management.

Discussion

According to Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) organizations that are 100% "pure" in nature regarding honeybee or locust leadership elements are rare to find. According to both authors, we are more likely to find companies that encompass a mixture of sustainable leadership elements.

The results of this study seemed to show that there was a tendency towards bee leadership, rather than locust leadership.

These results deviate slightly from those obtained in other areas such as insurance or logistics. Regarding the insurance sector, Kalkavan (2015) aimed to assess the level of sustainable leadership in the Turkish insurance industry. Using Avery and Bergsteiner's model of sustainable leadership, the author obtained data that showed that the Turkish insurance company seemed to comprise a mixture of the two diametrically opposed bee and locust leadership philosophies

The study by Bulmer and Riera (2021) is aligned with those of Kalkavan. The two authors researched the level of sustainable leadership that existed among managers in the logistics sector in Spain and they found that there was no clear preference towards bee or locust leadership, and that leadership in logistics companies in Spain entailed elements of both leadership types.

Theoretically, bee leadership in companies is ideal. In organizations with this leadership model, the participation of stakeholders, such as customers, employees, and suppliers, is key. In this context, managers must act as stewards for future generations, "plan for the long term and protect the company's reputation through the implementation of ethical practices (caring for the environment and local communities)" (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011: 31). There is a preference to meet the long-term objectives of the organization, prioritizing sustainability over mere economic benefit.

Although from the results obtained from our study there seems to be a clear trend towards bee-type leadership, there remains a need for companies in the marketing sector to continue to work harder towards becoming more sustainable. Despite the good results, in this sense, the marketing managers interviewed considered that work must continue to achieve sustainable leadership at its fullest. Encouraging policies are in place now, but further progress is needed. If we focus on the environmental aspect, brands can use their most sustainable aspect to generate a competitive advantage, differentiating themselves from the competition, thereby reaching those consumers that really care for and value sustainability. According to Landor Associates, Newsweek, and Penn Shoen Berland, there are four groups of "green" brands:

- **Unsung heroes:** brands that carry out strong green practices, but do not have public recognition
- **Free Passers:** brands that carry out a limited green practice but that generate high media coverage.
- **Losers:** brands carrying out limited green practices, with limited public recognition
- **Winners:** brands that carry out sound green practices and are publicly recognized

The process is the following. Once we have defined the "ecological" target audience (i.e., the audience with a more sustainable mentality), we will need to determine the objectives and the strategies and consequently implement the latter. The first of these is to develop products that will satisfy the needs, preferences, and desires of consumers. The classic model of product development includes the stages of ideation, testing, validation, and market launch, to subsequently carry out marketing tests: marketing, sales monitoring, sales analysis, and decision making (Trott, 2017).

Coopers and Edgett's study (2008) includes as a first stage of product development and prior to, the ideation stage, a process that takes into consideration the ecological and sustainable

aspects of the product development. This entails the analysis of the design, the materials to be used, the components of the product, etc. (Luchs et al., 2012).

Once the product has been developed, what we subsequently need to do is to give it a price. There is a general idea in society that the most sustainable products are more expensive than those that are not. The reasoning behind this is that for companies to maintain their commercial margins, they will need to increase the selling price to the public. Studies by Tamayo and Vicente (2007) support the latter reasoning and have shown that prices are significantly more expensive, between 15 and 20%.

Faced with this situation, the marketing departments need to communicate to the consumer the existence of a “fair price”, to create a positive attitude towards this type of product and ensure that the price is fully based on a fair and differential value as compared to products that are not ecological or sustainable. These departments need to ensure that the consumer is aware of all of the production processes and how the product’s price is fully justified (Maxwell and Van der Vorst, 2003).

At this point in the discussion, we must highlight the importance of packaging and labelling. Companies use it as a means of communication with the customer at the point of sale, although it is believed that consumers do not read the label when they buy products. Several studies show that consumers do take labelling into account and that it also helps them decide on the product they are going to buy, considering its sustainability attributes, as well as the value it provides them and its social and environmental implications, among others (Catlin et al., 2017).

Conclusion

We focused this study on the analysis of sustainable leadership among managers of the marketing sector in Spain. Over the past few years, several authors have studied the concept in different fields such as that of education, insurance, or logistics. In this paper the framework that was used to study this phenomenon at the organizational level was that of Avery and Bergsteiner (2011) which is based on the analysis of locust and bee-type leadership philosophies.

From the results it appears that bee-type leadership was the most prominent in the marketing sector in Spain. The bee leadership philosophy is a type of leadership that is more social and more stakeholder oriented. The existence of a bee leadership implies that a company can be considered sustainable only if the basic needs of all stakeholders are considered. In this context, managers must act as stewards for future generations, "plan for the long term and protect the company's reputation through the implementation of ethical practices (caring for the environment and local communities)" (Avery and Bergsteiner, 2011: 31).

Today, companies use their commitment to sustainability as a competitive advantage, broadly speaking. They want to continue differentiating themselves from the competition, just as they did previously with the incorporation of corporate social responsibility into their organizational strategy. However, in both cases, it is difficult for this commitment to become rooted within an organization, and not be limited to a simple brand communication tactic to reach the consumer's top of mind.

The key to success is to integrate sustainability into the company's business strategy and initiatives. In this respect, the marketing managers interviewed highlighted the importance of meeting the long-term objectives of the organization, thus prioritizing sustainability over mere economic benefit.

Beyond continuing analysing the impact of sustainable leadership in the different sectors, we believe it is necessary to see how it will develop over the next few years; and, in this sense, to see how recent events, of international significance, impact on its implementation.

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