

The Green Guilt: A Mother's Dilemma in Sustainable Consumption

R. Sundari, Senior Assistant professor, Xavier Institute of Management & Entrepreneurship, Chennai prepared this case solely as a basis for classroom discussion. This case is not intended to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of either effective or ineffective managerial decision-making. Certain names and other identifying details have been disguised to protect confidentiality

Abstract

This case examines sustainable consumption behaviour in India's rapidly growing Ready-to-Eat (RTE) food market through Abirami, a marketing executive and working mother. Despite strong environmental values, Abirami like millions of urban Indian consumers consistently purchased conventional plastic-packaged products over sustainable alternatives, embodying the well-documented intention-behaviour gap in green consumption.

The case employed the Attribute-Consequence-Value (ACV) framework and means-end chain theory to reveal why consumers' sustainability attitudes failed to translate into purchasing behaviour. Through laddering interviews and ethnographic research, the case uncovered that sustainable products often disrupted rather than supported consumers' core values particularly maternal identity, family harmony, and work-life balance among time-pressed working mothers. This 31% market segment experienced what the case termed "green guilt": feeling inadequate whether choosing conventional (environmental guilt) or sustainable (maternal/financial guilt) products.

The narrative incorporated critical contemporary dynamics: Gen Z's paradoxical role as influential environmental advocates with zero purchasing power but high "nag factor" effectiveness; the urban Indian working mother's invisible "green mental load"; and the challenge of positioning sustainable products to serve 56%+ of the mainstream market rather than just the 8% committed niche. Students must develop a consumer behaviour-grounded strategy that addressed contextual barriers like time poverty, price sensitivity, trust deficits, and habit strength rather than attempting futile attitude change among already-convinced consumers.

The case provided rich data on consumer segmentation, willingness-to-pay gaps, generational household dynamics, and financial viability analysis, culminating in a decision moment requiring integration of multiple consumer behaviour theories into actionable marketing strategy.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, intention-behaviour gap, means-end chain theory, ACV framework, green consumer behaviour, value-action gap, generational influence, household decision-making, working mothers, ready-to-eat food market, India, contextual barriers, greenwashing, Gen Z consumers, environmental guilt

The Dinner Table Confrontation

"Mom, do you even care about my future?"

Srinidhi's voice cut through the quiet of their Bangalore apartment. It was 8 PM on a Tuesday evening in March 2026, and Abirami had just served dinner Nutri Quick's Ready-to-Eat Butter Chicken, microwaved in five minutes.

Abirami looked up from her plate, exhausted from her 12-hour workday. "What do you mean, Beta?"

"This." Srinidhi held up her phone, showing an Instagram reel about microplastics. "You know what this packaging does to the planet? My teacher says by 2050, there'll be more plastic in the ocean than fish. And you work for the company that makes this!"

Abirami felt the familiar knot in her stomach guilt, defensiveness, frustration all mixed together. "Srinidhi, I just got home. I'm tired. This was what I could manage tonight."

"That's what you always say! We could eat fresh food if you cared enough."

"Care enough? I work 60 hours a week to give you a good life! You think I don't care?"

Srinidhi pushed back from the table. "Whatever. I'm not eating this plastic-wrapped processed food." She stormed to her room.

Abirami sat alone at the dinner table, staring at the empty package. The irony wasn't lost on her. She was the Senior Vice President of Marketing at Nutri Quick Foods, one of India's fastest-growing RTE (Ready-to-Eat) companies. She had built her career selling convenience. But lately, convenience felt like a burden.

Her phone buzzed. An email from her CEO: "Board meeting Friday. Need your recommendation on our sustainability strategy. This can't wait."

Abirami had 72 hours to solve a problem she couldn't solve in her own home.

Abirami's World

Abirami, 38, hadn't planned on this life. After her MBA from a premier business school in Bangalore in 2011, she had imagined herself as the classic "having it all" woman successful career, happy family, balanced life.

The reality was messier.

6:15 AM – Wake up, make breakfast (usually packaged cereal or instant oats that Srinidhi ate)

7:30 AM – Drop Srinidhi at school, listen to her talk about her school's "zero waste challenge"

9:00 AM – Arrive at Nutri Quick office after 90-minute commute through Bangalore traffic

6:30 PM – Leave office (guilt for not staying longer)

8:00 PM – Reach home (guilt for being late), heat RTE dinner three to four times a week

9:00 PM – Help Srinidhi with homework while she lectured about carbon footprints

11:00 PM – Collapse into bed, scroll Instagram, see perfectly curated posts of mothers cooking fresh organic meals

Abirami earned ₹2.2 lakhs monthly good money. Her husband Arun, a software engineer, earned similarly. They were solidly upper-middle class. They could afford organic vegetables, sustainable products, the "right" choices.

But time? Time was the real scarcity.

And guilt? Guilt was the constant companion.

Guilt for working long hours. Guilt for not cooking fresh meals. Guilt for using plastic. Guilt for not being the mother she thought she would be. Guilt for not being the environmental citizen she wanted to be.

The Company's Crisis

Nutri Quick Foods had grown from ₹450 crores to ₹2,800 crores in just five years. Their RTE meals curries, biryanis, breakfast items had become staples in urban Indian households. They weren't cheap (₹95-120 per meal), but they weren't premium either. They occupied the middle ground: decent quality, reasonable price, available everywhere.

Abirami had been part of that success story. Her marketing campaigns had positioned Nutri Quick as "Your Partner in Modern Living." The message resonated with working families like hers.

But recently, something had shifted.

Last quarter's numbers told a troubling story:

Market share stuck at 8.2% for three consecutive quarters

Sales growth slowing to 8% (industry average: 22%)

Net Promoter Score among consumers under 30: -12 (negative)

Brand perception among Gen Z: 43% viewed Nutri Quick as "environmentally irresponsible"

Meanwhile, tiny startups like Green Bites with their compostable packaging and organic ingredients were generating buzz on social media despite charging ₹130-160 per meal (35% more than Nutri Quick).

At the last executive meeting, Rajesh Mehta, the CEO, had been blunt: "We're becoming irrelevant to young consumers. If we don't figure out sustainability, we're finished. Abirami, I need a strategy. Not incremental improvements. A real answer."

The challenge: How do you sell sustainability to consumers who said they wanted it but didn't buy it?

The Research Journey

Abirami's team spent three weeks talking to consumers. Not surveys with checkboxes, but real conversations. They visited homes, watched families eat dinner, asked uncomfortable questions.

The research technique was called "laddering" asking "why" repeatedly until you reached the core of what people truly valued.

Conversation with Radha, 35, IT Consultant, Mumbai

Abirami: Tell me about the last time you bought groceries. What did you choose?

Radha: I went to Big Bazaar. Bought Nutri Quick Dal Makhani, some MTR ready-to-eat meals, Maggi...the usual stuff.

Abirami: Did you consider any sustainable or eco-friendly options?

Radha: *laughs* There was this Green Bites brand with fancy packaging. Said "100% compostable." But it was ₹155 for one meal. Nutri Quick was ₹95. Same amount of food.

Abirami: So, price stopped you?

Radha: Partly. But also...I don't know if I trust these claims. Everyone says "eco-friendly" now. How do I know it's real? Last year I bought that "natural" detergent, and it didn't clean properly. Ended up rewashing clothes. Waste of money and water, so much for being eco-friendly!

Abirami: But do you worry about the environment?

Radha: Of course! I see the news. Climate change is real. I feel terrible every time I throw away plastic. My 11-year-old son's school has composting projects. He comes home and asks why we don't compost.

Abirami: So why don't you?

Radha: *pause* Have you tried composting in a Mumbai apartment? Where exactly would I keep rotting food waste? And who has time to maintain it? I leave home at 8 AM, come back at 7 PM. My son is hungry, tired, wants dinner NOW. I can't tell him "Beta, wait while mama composts."

Abirami: What would make you buy sustainable RTE meals regularly?

Radha: They would need to be as easy as regular ones. Maybe ₹10-15 more, not ₹60 more. Available at my regular store, not some specialty shop across town. And I would need to know they work that my kids will eat them, that they taste good, that I'm not sacrificing my family's needs for some abstract environmental benefit.

This was when Radha said something that struck Abirami:

Radha: Here's the thing when I buy the cheap plastic-wrapped meal, I feel guilty about the planet. When I consider the expensive sustainable meal, I feel guilty about spending money my family needs. Either way, I feel bad. I can't win.

Conversation with Meena, 42, School Teacher, Delhi

Abirami: You mentioned you buy organic vegetables. Why?

Meena: For my children's health. No pesticides.

Abirami: That must be expensive.

Meena: It is. Maybe 40% more. But it's worth it. Their health is everything.

Abirami: Do you buy organic RTE meals?

Meena: *laughs* No way. Those are crazy expensive. And it's just packaged food anyway.

Abirami: But you pay extra for organic vegetables?

Meena: That's different. Fresh vegetables go directly into my children's bodies. Organic means cleaner, healthier. I can see the difference better taste; my daughter has fewer allergies. But RTE meals? They're processed either way. A fancy eco-package doesn't make processed food healthy.

Abirami: What if the RTE meal had organic ingredients AND sustainable packaging?

Meena: Then it would probably cost ₹200. That's ₹600 for dinner for three people. We're teachers, not corporate executives. I spend ₹3,000 on groceries weekly. If I bought all sustainable products, it

would be ₹4,500-5,000. That's ₹1,500 more monthly ₹18,000 yearly. That's a vacation, or my daughter's summer camp, or savings for emergencies.

Abirami: So, it's purely about money?

Meena: No, it's about priorities. I prioritize my children's immediate health over abstract future environmental benefits. Maybe that makes me selfish, but it's honest.

The Gen Z Focus Group: Srinidhi and Her Friends

Abirami did something unusual she invited Srinidhi and five of her 14-year-old classmates to participate in research, with parents' permission.

Abirami: How many of you worry about environmental issues?

All six hands went up

Abirami: How many of you have personally bought a sustainable product with your own money in the last month?

No hands

Abirami: Why not?

Arjun, 14: We don't have money. We're students.

Diya, 15: My mom buys everything. I just tell her what we need.

Abirami: But do you influence what she buys?

Srinidhi: I try! I showed her that Netflix documentary about plastic. Now she feels guilty. But she still buys the same stuff because it's "convenient." *air quotes*

Abirami: What would make her change?

Srinidhi: If there were sustainable options that didn't make her life harder. My mom works like 12 hours a day. She's exhausted. I get it. But companies like yours *looking at Abirami* could make it easier for her. Make sustainable the default, not the special effort.

Arjun: Also, you need to prove it's real. My dad says all these eco-claims are just marketing lies. Companies slap a green leaf on the package and charge more. He calls it "greenwashing."

Abirami: What would prove it to you?

Diya: Show us. Like, literally show us where ingredients come from, how packaging breaks down, what your carbon footprint is. With data, not just nice words.

Srinidhi: And don't make my mom feel bad for being tired. That's what I learned today. When I criticize her for using plastic, she just feels guilty but doesn't change. Maybe if products helped her feel good instead of guilty, she would change.

The Breakthrough: Understanding The Value Chains

After weeks of interviews, Abirami had her answer. It wasn't about what products had (organic, compostable, etc.). It was about what consumers were really trying to achieve in their lives.

She drew it out on her whiteboard, connecting the dots:

The "Fulfilled Mother" Value Chain (Abirami's Segment)

What they bought: Quick RTE meals, ₹95-120 range, available everywhere

Why they bought it (surface level): Saved time

Real functional benefit: Got dinner on table in 15 minutes → Prevented mealtime chaos → Ensured kids ate something nutritious

Deeper psychological benefit: Reduced daily stress → Created space for family conversation → Proved "I can be a good mother even though I work"

Core value they were protecting: Maternal identity, family harmony, work-life balance

The sustainability problem: Sustainable products currently threatened these values by:

Adding complexity (where do I even find them?)

Costing more (creating budget stress = bad mother?)

Uncertain quality (will my kids eat it?)

Extra effort (one more thing on her to-do list)

Key insight: Sustainable products made Abirami feel guilty about the planet but didn't resolve her deeper need proving she was a good mother despite working. In fact, they added to her guilt burden.

The "Conscious Consumer" Value Chain (8% of market)

What they bought: Premium sustainable products, ₹150-180 range, sought out specialty stores

Why they bought it (surface level): Environmental concerns

Real functional benefit: Reduced waste, supported ethical farming, minimized carbon footprint

Deeper psychological benefit: Actions aligned with beliefs → Reduced cognitive dissonance → Provided moral satisfaction → Created identity as "ethical person"

Core value: Personal integrity, environmental stewardship, self-actualization

The sustainability opportunity: These people WOULD pay premium and make effort—they just needed to trust it was genuine and impactful.

Key insight: They didn't want convenience; they wanted authenticity and proof of impact.

The "Status Seeker" Value Chain (25% of market)

What they bought: Trendy brands with Instagram-worthy packaging

Why they bought it (surface level): "Looks cool"

Real functional benefit: Provided conversation topics, signalled sophistication

Deeper psychological benefit: Enhanced self-image → Gained social approval → Expressed identity → Built status

Core value: Social belonging, self-expression, achievement

The sustainability angle: They would buy sustainable IF it was cool, visible, and socially rewarded. Environment was secondary to image.

Key insight: Sustainability as fashion statement, not environmental commitment.

Abirami's Personal Reckoning

It was Wednesday night, 48 hours before the board presentation. Abirami sat at her dining table, surrounded by research transcripts.

Srinidhi emerged from her room for water. She saw her mother's work spread across the table.

"Is this about making your products less bad?" Srinidhi asked.

"I'm trying to figure out how to make them actually good for people and the planet."

Srinidhi sat down. "Can I tell you something honestly?"

"Of course."

"I know I give you a hard time. But I see how tired you are. You work so hard. And I know you care about the environment you have reusable bags, you recycle, you try. It's not fair that I make you feel bad."

Abirami felt tears prick her eyes.

"But Mom, here's what I don't get. Your company makes millions of meals. If you made them sustainable, it would matter SO much more than anything I do with my metal straw. Like, you have actual power to change things."

"Beta, it's complicated. Sustainable packaging costs three times more. If we raise prices, people won't buy. If we don't make profit, the company closes and 3,000 people lose jobs."

"So it's impossible?"

"I don't think so. I think...I think we've been thinking about it wrong. We've been trying to sell sustainability as an add-on feature. Like, 'buy our meal AND get a bonus eco-package!' But that's not what people need."

"What do they need?"

Abirami thought about Radha, Meena, all the mothers she had interviewed. "They need sustainability to make their lives easier, not harder. They need to not choose between being a good mother and being a good person. They need someone to solve the problem FOR them, not make them feel guilty about it."

"Can you do that?"

"I don't know yet. But I have 48 hours to figure it out."

THE DECISION

Friday, March 20, 2026. Nutri Quick Foods Headquarters, Bangalore.

Abirami walked into the boardroom where Rajesh Mehta (CEO), Anand Krishnan (CFO), and four board members waited.

"Good morning, everyone. I've spent three weeks understanding why consumers say they want sustainability but don't buy it. The answer surprised me."

She pulled up her first slide: a photo of herself and Srinidhi at the dinner table.

"This is me and my daughter. She's 14. She called me environmentally irresponsible. And she's not wrong I work for a company that generates thousands of tons of plastic waste yearly."

"But I'm also a working mother who gets home at 8 PM with a hungry teenager and zero energy to cook. For years, I thought I had to choose be a good mother OR be an environmental citizen. Our research shows millions of Indian women face this same impossible choice."

"What if the answer isn't making them choose? What if it's removing the choice entirely?"

Rajesh leaned forward. "I'm listening."

"We've been thinking about sustainability wrong. We position it as a premium feature for wealthy conscious consumers who can afford to care. But there's a bigger segment 31% of the market women like me who ALREADY care but can't act on it because we're constrained by time, money, and energy."

"These 'Conflicted Mothers' let's call them what they are don't need attitude change. They don't need guilt. They need someone to make the sustainable choice the EASY choice."

She showed her next slide: "The Attribute-Consequence-Value Map"

"Here's what current RTE products deliver:

Attributes: Quick prep, familiar taste, low price, wide availability

Consequences: Saves time, prevents mealtime stress, stays within budget

Values: Maternal fulfillment, family harmony, financial security

The sustainability disconnect: Eco-products threaten these values by adding cost, effort, and uncertainty."

"So, here's my recommendation: We don't launch a new 'premium sustainable line.' We re-engineer our entire core product line to be sustainable BY DEFAULT while protecting the values mothers actually care about."

Anand interrupted: "Abirami, sustainable packaging costs 3.5 times more. We can't absorb that and maintain margins."

"You're right. Which is why we don't use individual compostable packaging. We partner with Big Basket, Swiggy, and Zepto to launch a reusable container program. Customers pay ₹40 deposit, get steel containers, return them at next delivery. Containers are sanitized and reused."

"The Swiggy pilot in Mumbai showed 67% return rates. Customers will pay ₹10-15 'sustainability fee' per order if the system is easy. That's only 12% premium, not 35%."

"For retail, we shift from individual plastic pouches to larger multi-serve packs with recyclable packaging. Families buy 1kg pack instead of four individual meals same amount, 70% less plastic, only 8% price increase."

"We reformulate with 80% organic ingredients where possible, prioritize local sourcing within 200km to reduce carbon footprint. We're transparent about everything QR code on every package showing where ingredients came from, our carbon impact, how to properly dispose."

Rajesh asked the critical question: "What's our target? Who are we selling to?"

"The 31% 'Conflicted Mothers' segment. Women aged 28-45, household income ₹75,000 - ₹2 lakhs monthly, working professionals with children. They WANT to buy sustainable but currently can't because of constraints."

"We message this as: 'Nutri Quick: Guilt-Free Convenience.' Not guilt about using RTE meals. Not guilt about plastic. Just good food, fast, that happens to be better for the planet."

"We show in our marketing a real working mother, tired, heating dinner, and the voiceover says: 'You don't have to choose between being a good mother and being a good person. We chose for you.'"

She showed financial projections:

Implementation cost: ₹45 crores over 18 months

Price increase needed: 10-12% average (₹105-110 per meal)

Projected market penetration: 23% of target segment (7.1% total market share)

Revenue year 3: ₹3,350 crores (+20% from current)

EBITDA year 3: 16.5% (lower than current 18%, but acceptable)

"The Gen Z element: We don't market to them directly. But we make them our ambassadors. Every package has 'Share Our Impact' QR code. Scan it, see exact environmental metrics, share on social media. We create school partnership programs. Srinidhi's generation gets to tell their friends: 'My family uses the sustainable brand.'"

"That's my recommendation. Make sustainability the default, not the premium choice. Remove the guilt, enable the behaviour, protect the values that actually matter to our customers."

The room was quiet.

Rajesh looked at Anand. "What do you think?"

Anand studied the numbers. "The margins are tighter than I'd like. And it requires massive execution supply chain redesign, partnership coordination, consumer education. It could fail spectacularly."

"But?" Rajesh prompted.

"But I don't see another path forward. Premium positioning gets us 8% of market. Mass market gets us commoditized. This...this could actually work."

Rajesh turned to Abirami. "You're betting that millions of Indian women are like you they care but they're stuck. You're betting they'll pay 10-12% more if we remove their barriers."

"Yes, sir."

"And if they don't?"

Abirami thought of Srinidhi's words: *You have actual power to change things.*

"Then we'll have tried to do the right thing and failed. But if we don't try, we'll slowly become irrelevant. I'd rather fail trying than succeed at something that doesn't matter."

Rajesh smiled. "Let's do it. Abirami, you own this. Eighteen months. Make it happen."

What should Abirami prioritize in her implementation plan?

How can she ensure that the reusable container program and reformulated products actually remove barriers for working mothers rather than adding new ones?

What metrics should she track to measure success beyond traditional sales figures?

EXHIBIT 1: The ACV Framework Analysis

Understanding Consumer Value Chains: Why Do People Buy or Not Buy Sustainable RTE Products?

Consumer Type	Attributes They Notice	Functional Consequences	Psychological Consequences	Core Values	Barrier to Sustainable Purchase
Working Mothers (31%)	Quick prep time, familiar taste, price, availability	Reduces cooking time, prevents chaos, stays in budget	Less stress, enables family time, proves "good mother"	Maternal fulfillment, family harmony	Sustainable products ADD stress/cost/uncertainty
Conscious Citizens (8%)	Organic ingredients, compostable packaging, certifications	Reduces environmental impact, supports ethical farming	Aligns actions with beliefs, moral satisfaction	Environmental stewardship, integrity	Lack of trust in authenticity
Status Seekers (25%)	Trendy packaging, brand story, social media appeal	Provides social currency, expresses identity	Enhances self-image, gains social approval	Social belonging, self-expression	Sustainability not "cool" enough yet
Price Optimizers (36%)	Low price, bulk options, long shelf life	Saves money, reduces shopping frequency	Financial security, control	Family responsibility, risk avoidance	Any price premium unacceptable

Created by the author using primary research data (2026).

Key Insight: Working Mothers were the opportunity—they had positive attitude toward sustainability but faced behavioural barriers. Remove barriers, don't try to strengthen attitudes.

EXHIBIT 2: The Intention-Behaviour Gap

Survey Data: 2,500 Urban Indian Consumers, Ages 25-50, 2026

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree	Actually, Do Regularly	Gap
"Environmental sustainability is important to me"	71%	-	-
"I am willing to pay more for eco-friendly products"	64%	18%	46%
"I actively seek sustainable alternatives when shopping"	58%	22%	36%
"I consider environmental impact before purchasing"	67%	28%	39%

Statement	Agree/Strongly Agree	Actually, Do Regularly	Gap
"I avoid products with excessive plastic packaging"	61%	19%	42%

Created by the author using primary research data (2026).

Barriers Cited (Multiple Selection Allowed):

- Too expensive: 62%
- Hard to find: 51%
- Don't trust the claims: 47%
- Takes too much effort: 43%
- Not sure it makes a difference: 38%
- Family won't accept it: 34%

The Reality: Consumers WANTED to be sustainable but were blocked by context, not attitude.

EXHIBIT 3: Gen Z Influence Without Purchase Power

Research: 850 Families with Children Aged 13-18

Purchase Category	Gen Z Direct Purchase %	Gen Z Influences Parent Purchase %	Parent Independent Decision %
Food Delivery	38%	54%	8%
Packaged Snacks	44%	42%	14%
RTE Meals	6%	67%	27%
Fresh Groceries	2%	39%	59%
Household Cleaners	1%	28%	71%

Created by the author using primary research data (2026).

Influence Mechanisms (% Effectiveness)

- Direct request: "Can we buy X brand?" → 41% effective
- Information sharing: "I learned at school that..." → 56% effective
- Guilt induction: "Why do you support harmful companies?" → **78% effective** (but created family tension)
- Social proof: "Everyone's family uses..." → 49% effective

The Paradox

74% of Gen Z surveyed expressed strong environmental values

Same cohort generated 3.4kg packaging waste weekly from personal consumption

When confronted: "I don't have the money/power yet" (83%)

Marketing Implication: Don't sell to Gen Z. Enable them to advocate for your brand to their parents.

EXHIBIT 4: Financial Comparison – Sustainable Approaches

Per Unit Economics (RTE Meal serving 2 people)

Cost Component	Current NutriQuick	Premium Compostable Packaging	Abirami's Reusable Container System
Raw Materials	₹28	₹35 (+25% for organic)	₹32 (+14% for 80% organic mix)
Packaging	₹11 (plastic pouch)	₹38 (compostable)	₹6 (share of reusable container system)
Processing	₹15	₹15	₹15
Logistics	₹12	₹13	₹14 (includes container pickup)
Marketing	₹8	₹16	₹10
Total Cost	₹74	₹117 (+58%)	₹77 (+4%)
Current Retail Price	₹95	-	-
Required Price (18% EBITDA)	₹95	₹150	₹99
Consumer Premium	Baseline	+58%	+4%

Created by the author using company financial data and market research (2026).

Consumer Willingness to Pay (Revealed Preference – Actual Behaviour):

Working Mothers: 8-12% premium acceptable

Conscious Citizens: 35-45% premium acceptable

Status Seekers: 12-18% premium if trendy

Price Optimizers: 0-3% premium acceptable

Abirami's Insight: The reusable container system made sustainability affordable for the mass market (31% Working Mothers + 25% Status Seekers + potentially some Price Optimizers = 56%+ addressable market).

Note: This case was based on academic theory and synthesized market research. The protagonist "Abirami" and "Nutri Quick Foods" were fictional composites created for pedagogical purposes, drawing on documented patterns in Indian consumer behaviour research. Market statistics and consumer quotes represented aggregated findings from multiple published studies on sustainable consumption in emerging markets (Bansal & Pandey, 2020; Joshi & Rahman, 2015; Kumar & Ghodeswar, 2015; Yadav & Pathak, 2016).

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