

Expressive vs. Classical Visual Aesthetics: An Experimental Analysis of Their Effects on Attitude Toward Advertising and Purchase Intention

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Abstract. This study examines the influence of visual aesthetics on attitude toward advertising and purchase intention in the context of graduation photography services promoted through Instagram. Using a quasi-experimental between-subject design, 120 participants were exposed to either classical or expressive visual aesthetic stimuli. Data were analyzed using MANOVA and simple linear regression. The results show that expressive visual aesthetics generate significantly more positive advertising attitudes and stronger purchase intentions compared to classical aesthetics. Furthermore, attitude toward advertising has a significant positive effect on purchase intention. These findings support the S-O-R framework, indicating that aesthetic stimuli shape psychological responses, which in turn drive behavioral intentions. This study contributes to digital marketing and visual communication literature by highlighting the importance of expressive aesthetic design in creative service advertisements.

Keywords: visual aesthetic, attitude toward advertising, purchase intention, Instagram marketing, graduation photography.

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of social media has significantly transformed the way individual communicate, consume information and engage with brands. With more than five billion active users worldwide, social media platforms have become essential tools in contemporary marketing communication. The rise of image-based platforms has also contributed to increasing public participation in (1). Instagram, in particular, has reshaped consumer behaviour by enabling users to upload curated photographs, edit image, apply filter and interact through visual storytelling (2). This platform has been widely adopted across sectors such as tourism (3), food (4), fashion (5), where visual presentation plays a key role in capturing audience attention.

Graduation is a meaningful life milestone, symbolizing the completion of academic studies and personal achievement. Visual documentation, especially in the form of photography helps individual preserve these memorable moments for future reflection (6). According to the data served by Baparekraf RI, (2023) In Indonesia, the photography industry forms part of the growing creative economy sector. This increase was followed by the emergence of more and more photography vendors. This phenomenon has triggered intense competition among vendors offering similar services. Businesses such as “Save moment Project” rely on Instagram as a primary promotional medium to showcase portfolio and attract prospective clients. Given this competitive landscape, developing visually compelling advertising content becomes increasingly important to influence consumer responses.

Visual aesthetics have emerged as a crucial element of digital marketing communication because aesthetically pleasing designs can enhance attention, evoke emotional reactions, and shape consumer evaluations. Visual aesthetics are commonly conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising classical aesthetics—characterized by order, clarity, simplicity, and symmetry—and expressive aesthetics—characterized by creativity, dynamism, colour richness, and originality (8) Prior studies show that expressive aesthetics often generate stronger emotional appeal and higher engagement, particularly in visually rich platforms like Instagram (9). Despite these findings, limited research has examined how visual aesthetics operate specifically in photography service advertising, including graduation photography, an area that remains underexplored.

Instagram is a highly relevant platform for such investigations because the majority of its users in Indonesia consist of young, digitally active individuals, aligning with the target market for graduation photography services. Data indicates that Instagram remains one of the most widely used social media platforms, with more than 122 million users in Indonesia alone (Panggabean, 2024). While previous research demonstrates that visual aesthetics can influence advertising outcomes, the literature shows inconsistencies regarding their impact on attitudes and purchase intention, indicating a need for further empirical exploration.

Guided by the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) theory, this study conceptualizes visual aesthetics as the external stimulus (S), attitude toward advertising as the organismic internal state (O), and purchase intention as the

behavioural response (R). The S-O-R framework posits that external stimuli influence internal psychological processes, which subsequently shape behavioural outcomes. Applying this perspective enables a deeper understanding of how aesthetic features in Instagram advertisements affect both psychological evaluations and consumer decision-making.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the effect of visual aesthetics on attitude toward advertising and purchase intention in the context of graduation photography services promoted through Instagram. By focusing on a service-based creative industry and a visually dominant platform, this research contributes to existing literature on visual communication and social media marketing.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Visual Aesthetic

Visual aesthetics refer to the perceived attractiveness and emotional appeal created by visual elements in an image or design. They play an increasingly important role in digital marketing as consumers rely heavily on visual cues when evaluating products or services online. Aesthetics influence attention, enjoyment, and attitudes toward visual content (8). According to Lavie & Tractinsky (2004), visual aesthetics consist of two key dimensions: classical aesthetics, which emphasize simplicity, balance, clarity, and orderliness; and expressive aesthetics, which represent creativity, originality, complexity, and visual richness.

Classical aesthetics communicate professionalism, neatness, and clarity, making them suitable for designs aiming for elegance and structure. Expressive aesthetics, conversely, evoke stronger emotional responses through vivid colors, dynamic arrangements, and creative compositions (12). Prior studies show that expressive aesthetics generate higher emotional engagement and can enhance overall consumer experience on visual platforms such as Instagram (9). In the context of graduation photography, expressive aesthetics may communicate celebration, joy, and creativity—qualities aligned with the emotional significance of the event. Research suggests that visually appealing designs strengthen consumer perception, increase information credibility, and build positive emotions, which in turn influence attitudes and behavioral intentions (13). Therefore, visual aesthetics are expected to significantly shape consumer evaluations of advertisements for graduation photography services.

H1: Visual aesthetic has a significant effect on attitude toward advertising.

2.2 Attitude Toward Advertising

Attitude toward advertising refers to an individual's favourable or unfavourable evaluation of an advertisement. It encompasses affective reactions, judgments, and emotional responses triggered by exposure to advertising stimuli (14). Positive attitudes toward advertisements are associated with increased trust, emotional connection, and perceived relevance of the advertised product or service. According to MacKenzie & Lutz (1989) attitudes toward advertising serve as a critical psychological mechanism influencing how consumers interpret marketing messages. (16) emphasize that attitude toward advertising is shaped by how informative, entertaining, and credible an advertisement is; when advertisements are perceived as enjoyable and visually appealing, consumers tend to develop more positive attitudes toward them. A positive advertising attitude is also associated with higher levels of trust, emotional engagement, and receptiveness to the message being delivered.

In digital contexts, especially on visual platforms like Instagram, the aesthetic quality of an advertisement strongly contributes to these attitudes. Visually engaging content enhances perceived informativeness, enjoyment, and credibility, thus leading to more positive evaluations (4). Consumers exposed to visually appealing advertisements tend to form stronger emotional bonds with the brand and become more receptive to marketing messages (5).

Given the centrality of aesthetics in shaping consumer emotions and evaluations, it is expected that visual aesthetics influence not only attitudes but also subsequent behavioural intentions.

H2: Visual aesthetic has a significant effect on purchase intention.

2.3 Purchase Intention

Purchase intention is defined as a consumer's tendency or willingness to consider, plan, or engage in the buying of a product or service in the future (17). It is one of the strongest predictors of actual purchase behaviour and is influenced by both cognitive (e.g., information credibility) and emotional (e.g., enjoyment, attraction) responses to advertising stimuli.

Previous studies show that positive attitudes toward advertising strengthen consumer confidence and increase the likelihood of purchase decisions (Sallam & Algammash, 2016). When consumers perceive advertisements as enjoyable, credible, and aesthetically appealing, their purchasing motivation increases. In the case of graduation photography services, aesthetic appeal is particularly important because the product itself (photographs) is inherently visual and emotionally driven.

In this study, purchase intention reflects participants' willingness to use the graduation photography services offered by the vendor “Save Moment Project.”

H3: Attitude toward advertising has a significant effect on purchase intention.

2.4 S-O-R Theory

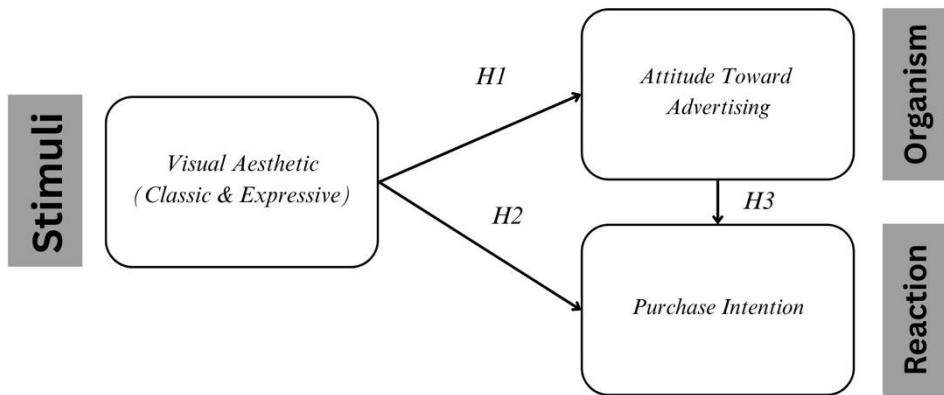


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework explains how environmental stimuli shape internal psychological states, which subsequently influence behavioural outcomes. According to Mehrabian and Russell (1974) in (19), external stimuli (S) first affect the organism's internal processes (O), which then generate a behavioural response (R) . In marketing contexts, this theory is widely applied to explain how visual, environmental, or design-related cues influence consumer emotions, attitudes, and actions (20).

In this study Stimulus (S) = Visual Aesthetic, Organism (O) = Attitude Toward Advertising, Response (R) = Purchase Intention. Consistent with the S-O-R model, visually appealing aesthetic stimuli are expected to evoke favourable psychological responses, which then translate into higher purchase intention.

3 RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Procedure And Sampling

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a quasi-experimental between-subject design. Participants were exposed to one of two manipulated visual aesthetic conditions: classical visual aesthetic or expressive visual aesthetic. Each participant evaluated only one stimulus to avoid carry-over effects. This design allows the comparison of consumer responses based on aesthetic differences in graduation photography advertisements posted on Instagram. The relationships among these variables were analysed using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework. The of conditions resulting from this design are as follows:

Table 1. Stimuli Condition Grouping.

Visual Aesthetic	Classical	Expressive
Participant	Photo Advertisement for graduation photography services with well-arranged lighting and poses	Photo Advertisement for graduation photography services with more complex, colorful, and asymmetrical arrangements

The Data Analysis in this study using Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) with SPSS 27.. All measurements for the construct are presented in Table 2. In this study, participants were selected by identifying people from a pre-selected sample who fulfilled the requirements. The study participants were then given access to the stimuli and the prepared questionnaire via Google Form links. Likert scale from 1 to 5 is used in the measurement of results.

Table 2. Definition And Measurement

Variable	Operation Definition	Variable Measurement	Resources
Attitude Toward Advertising	The tendency of consumers to respond, either positively or negatively, to certain advertisements can be understood as the thoughts and feelings that arise within them in relation to the graduation photo service advertisement on Instagram “Save Moment Project.”	1. The information provided in the graduation photo service advertisement on Instagram is easy to understand. 2. consumer perceptions of advertising for graduation photography services on Instagram 3. Consumers' intentions or actions after seeing advertisements for graduation photography services on Instagram	(Clow & Baack, 2021)
Purchase Intention	The intention to buy is an effort to encourage consumers to make a decision to purchase or take action related to the process of purchasing graduation photo services on Instagram's “Save Moment Project.”	1. the possibility of purchasing graduation photography services 2. desire to purchase graduation photo services 3. considerations for purchasing graduation photography services	(Tih et al., 2016)

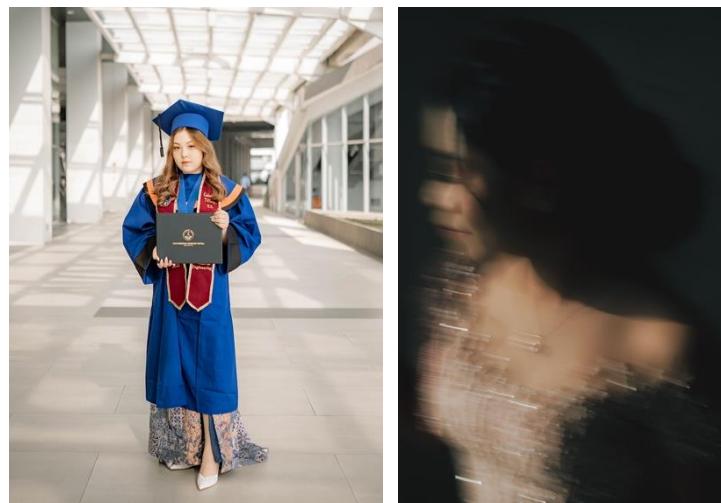
3.2 Experimental Design

Quasi-experimental research is used when certain conditions cannot be fully controlled by the researcher. First, the researcher does not have full authority over when measurements are taken or which participants are included. Second, the researcher is unable to determine the timing of the treatment or assign participants randomly to experimental conditions (21).

This study applies a between-subject design, where participants are divided into separate groups, and each group is exposed to a different version of the stimulus. Every participant evaluates only one experimental stimulus to prevent bias or carry-over effects. Table 1 summarizes the categorization of subsample groups used in the study.

In marketing research, a stimulus refers to a specific element designed to elicit or measure participant responses. In this study, the stimuli consist of Instagram advertisement visuals created specifically for graduation photography services. The visual aesthetic manipulation includes two levels: classical-style graduation photos, characterized by balanced lighting and structured poses, and expressive-style graduation photos, which feature more dynamic, abstract, and asymmetrical visual arrangements.

Figure 2. Classical aesthetic (left) and expressive aesthetic (right) advertisement



3.3 Manipulation Check

A manipulation check is a procedure used in experimental studies to verify whether participants correctly understand the treatment or stimulus presented to them. This step ensures that the manipulation generates the intended perception or reaction in line with the experimental design (22). A manipulation is considered successful when participants respond to the stimulus as expected, typically indicated by a correct interpretation rate of around 75–80% (23). In this study, the manipulation check was carried out on 40 respondents. The results show that more

than 80% of participants correctly recognized the differences in the visual aesthetic conditions presented. This confirms that the manipulation of visual aesthetics was effective, and therefore, the experimental stimuli could be appropriately used in the main study. The detailed manipulation check results are presented in the table below.

Table 3. Manipulation test Result

Stimuli	Variable	Statement	Respond	Conclusion
Stimuli 1	Classical Visual Aesthetic	The previous graduation photo advertisement content featured posts using well-arranged and organized visual elements with a clear structure.	87,5%	Manipulation Accepted
Stimuli 2	Expressive Visual Aesthetic	The graduation photo service advertisement features visual designs that are expressive, abstract, creative, unique, and appear distinctive and different from typical advertisements.	97,5%	Manipulation Accepted

4 Results And Discussion

4.1 Participant Statistic

In this study, a total of 120 university students in Surabaya were selected as participants. This number was adapted from the recommendation of having at least 30 respondents for each experimental condition. Because this research applies a two-group between-subject design (classical vs. expressive visual aesthetic), 60 participants were assigned to each condition.

Participants were allocated to groups using random assignment, ensuring that each individual had an equal chance of entering either aesthetic condition. This procedure helps minimize potential order effects and supports internal validity (21). Consistent with the between-subjects approach, each participant was exposed to only one stimulus and did not participate in other experimental groups. The criteria used to determine the sample characteristics were as follows (1) Active Instagram users, defined as individuals who engage in platform activities—such as posting content, liking, or commenting—at least once per week, as the study focuses on responses to Instagram-based visual aesthetics. (2) Aged 18–25 years, representing the primary demographic for graduation photography services and dominant users of social media. (3) Currently enrolled as university students in Surabaya, aligning with the target market of the photography vendor examined in the study. Further details regarding participant characteristics are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Participant Profile

Profile	Classification	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	52	43%
	Female	68	57%
Age	18 years old	12	10%
	19 years old	24	20%
	20 years old	24	20%
	21 years old	12	10%
	22 years old	35	29%
	23 years old	9	8%
	24 years old	3	3%
	25 years old	1	1%
Instagram Usage	< 1 hour a day	2	2%
	1,5 hour - 3 hour a day	9	8%
	3,5 hour - 5 hour a day	13	11%
	> 5 hour a day	96	80%

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine whether the two dependent variables—attitude toward advertising and purchase intention—differed significantly based on the visual aesthetic condition presented to participants. This analysis was performed using the General Linear Model (GLM) procedure in SPSS 27 with a one-way between-subject design, consisting of two visual aesthetic groups (classical vs. expressive).

The MANOVA tested the overall multivariate effect of visual aesthetic, followed by separate univariate analyses to determine its influence on each dependent variable. All hypotheses related to the effect of visual aesthetic on attitude toward advertising and purchase intention were assessed using this procedure. The detailed results of the MANOVA are presented in the following table.

Table 5. MANOVA

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	.992	6957.463 ^b	2.000	117.000	.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.008	6957.463 ^b	2.000	117.000	.000
	Hotelling's Trace	118.931	6957.463 ^b	2.000	117.000	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	118.931	6957.463 ^b	2.000	117.000	.000
Visual Aesthetic	Pillai's Trace	.126	8.461 ^b	2.000	117.000	.000
	Wilks' Lambda	.874	8.461 ^b	2.000	117.000	.000
	Hotelling's Trace	.145	8.461 ^b	2.000	117.000	.000
	Roy's Largest Root	.145	8.461 ^b	2.000	117.000	.000

From these results, it is known that the visual aesthetic variable has a significant positive influence on the combination of attitude toward advertising and purchase intention with a significance value of less than 0.05. To examine the relationship between the study variables, the researcher compared the two levels of the independent variable, namely classical visual aesthetic and expressive visual aesthetic. The results of this comparison are presented in the following table.

Table 6. Main Effect

Dependent Variable	Visual Aesthetic	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Attitude Toward Advertising	Classical	29.167	.435	28.305	30.028
	Expressive	31.550	.404	30.934	32.533
Purchase Intention	Classical	29.867	.435	28.305	30.028
	Expressive	31.733	.404	30.934	32.533

The Expressive condition yielded the highest scores on both attitude toward advertising ($M = 31.550$) and purchase intention ($M = 31.733$). This finding aligns with Kusumasondjaja (2020) and Natanegara (2021), who argue that expressive and visually dynamic advertisements tend to be more engaging, emotionally stimulating, and persuasive, particularly on visually driven platforms such as Instagram.

Conversely, the Classical condition consistently recorded lower mean values for both outcomes (Attitude: $M = 29.167$; Purchase Intention: $M = 29.867$), indicating that advertisements with simpler or less expressive aesthetics may be less effective in capturing attention and motivating consumer responses.

Table 7. Linear Regression Test Result

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound
	(Constant)	14.861	2.103	7.067	.000	10.697
1	Attitude Toward Advertising – Purchase Intention	.525	.069	.575	.000	.389

The table above shows the results of the Simple Linear Regression Test, obtaining the following regression equation:

$$Y = 14.861 + 0.525X + e$$

$$\begin{array}{llll} Y & = \text{Purchase Intention} & a & = 10.767 \\ X & = \text{Attitude Toward Advertising} & b & = 0.653 \end{array} \quad e = \text{Residual error}$$

Which Y is purchase intention and X is attitude toward advertising. The regression coefficient value shows that every one-unit increase in attitude toward advertising will increase the purchase intention of photography services at the “Save Moment Project” graduation vendor by 0,525 units. This model is also statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

Table 8. Hypothesis Result Summary

Hypothesis	Relationship	Method	Conclusion
H1	VA → ATA	MANOVA	Supported
H2	VA → PI	MANOVA	Supported
H3	ATA → PI	Linear Regression	Supported

Note: VA: Visual Aesthetic (Classical vs Expressive); ATA: Attitude Toward Advertising; PI: Purchase Intention

4.3 Discussion

4.3.1 The relationship between visual aesthetics and attitudes toward advertising

Based on the results of the MANOVA analysis, Hypothesis 1 (H1) was supported, indicating that graduation photo service advertisements created by the “Save Moment Project” with expressive visual aesthetics generated more positive attitudes toward advertising compared to advertisements designed with classical visual aesthetics.

Clay (1908) explains that individuals’ emotional responses to beauty play a central role in their overall experience, suggesting that artistic expression naturally emerges from human desires for aesthetic pleasure. In line with this perspective, Esslinger (2009) emphasizes that businesses should strategically incorporate aesthetic value into their designs. Prior studies have also demonstrated that expressive visual aesthetics enhance the attractiveness of advertisements and evoke stronger psychological responses from consumers (26), particularly when their primary motivation is entertainment (9).

Accordingly, expressive visual aesthetics are perceived as more engaging and are more likely to be selected as effective stimuli in graduation photography advertisements for the “Save Moment Project.”

4.3.2 The relationship between visual aesthetics and purchase intention

The results of the MANOVA indicate that Hypothesis 2 (H2) is supported, meaning that variations in visual aesthetics (VA) significantly influence consumers’ purchase intentions (PI) toward the graduation photo service advertisements offered by “Save Moment Project.” Specifically, advertisements designed with expressive visual aesthetics demonstrate a stronger positive impact on purchase intention compared to those using classical visual aesthetics.

This finding is consistent with the idea that expressive visual aesthetics are more effective in delivering memorable visual experiences and generating emotional resonance with consumers. Natanegara (2021) suggests that visually appealing aesthetics increase the credibility of the presented information as well as consumers' intention to purchase. This conclusion is further supported by Peña-García et al., (2020), who argue that strong visual appeal enhances purchase intention by elevating perceived value. Within the context of Instagram advertisements for "Save Moment Project," expressive visual aesthetics appear to offer a higher perceived value, thereby encouraging stronger purchase intention.

4.3.2 The relationship between attitude toward advertising and purchase intention

The results of the Simple Linear Regression analysis indicate that Hypothesis 3 (H3) is supported, demonstrating that attitude toward advertising significantly affects purchase intention for the graduation photo services promoted by "Save Moment Project." This suggests that the more favourable an individual's attitude toward the advertisement, the higher their likelihood of intending to purchase the service.

These findings are consistent with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, in which visual aesthetics function as the Stimulus, attitude toward advertising represents the Organism, and purchase intention serves as the Response. Within this model, attitude toward advertising operates as an internal psychological mechanism that connects external stimuli to consumer behavioural outcomes (19).

Previous studies reinforce this conclusion. Ho et al., (2020) highlight that positive advertising attitudes enhance trust and favourable perceptions of the promoted product. Sallam & Algammash (2016) similarly report that attitude toward advertising exerts a significant positive effect on purchase intention. Additionally, Gozali et al., (2024) find that positive attitudes toward aesthetically appealing advertisements significantly boost purchase intention, particularly among Gen-Z consumers.

5 CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of findings

This study examines the effect of visual aesthetics—specifically classical versus expressive styles—on advertising perception and purchase intention for graduation photography services on Instagram. Using a quasi-experimental design and MANOVA analysis, the results show that visual aesthetic differences significantly affect both dependent variables.

The findings highlight that: Expressive visual aesthetics generate more positive advertising attitudes and stronger purchase intentions compared to classical aesthetics. Attitude toward advertising demonstrates a significant positive relationship with purchase intention, indicating that more favourable advertising evaluations lead to higher purchase likelihood in Instagram.

5.2 Practical implication

The findings offer meaningful insights for practitioners in the creative service industry, particularly those engaged in promoting graduation photography. Vendors should emphasize expressive and emotionally appealing visual designs to maximize audience engagement and drive purchase intention on Instagram. Marketing content must not only inform but also connect emotionally with the target audience. For the "Save Moment Project," the following recommendations are proposed: When promoting graduation photography services, use expressive visual aesthetics, as these visual styles resonate more strongly with students in Surabaya. Advertising content can be optimized by consistently presenting visually dynamic, creative, and emotionally appealing imagery to encourage positive attitudes toward advertising and increase purchase intention.

5.3 Research limitation

The scope of this study is limited to university students in Surabaya aged 18–25, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other demographic groups, geographical regions, or service categories. In addition, the quasi-experimental approach using controlled stimuli may not fully capture natural user interactions within actual social media environments; therefore, future research could employ a field experiment to enhance external validity.

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