



ARE YOU LOOKING FOR BETTER QUALITY, CHEAPER, LOCAL FOOD DIRECTLY FROM THE PRODUCERS? VISIT THE FARMERS' MARKET.

The perception of visitors to the farmers' market in Bratislava

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Abstract

Alternative food networks continue to get more and more attention from consumers who have been traditionally oriented on conventional retail environments. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the perceptions of consumers shopping at the Piac Market farmers' market in Bratislava (Slovakia). Data was collected through a questionnaire (n=268) and perceptions were analysed using the Mann-Whitney U test in association with their classification by attendance (regular vs occasional) and by their attitudes towards shopping (hedonists vs utilitarians). The results show that there are statistically significant differences between the perceptions of regular and only occasional farmers' market visitors, while no statistically significant differences were found in the perceptions between hedonists and utilitarians. It seems that the different perceptions of farmers' market visitors depend more on the frequency of their visits rather than on their attitudes towards shopping. These findings provide a new perspective on research into consumer shopping behaviour in alternative food networks.


Key words

Alternative food networks, attendance, Bratislava, farmers' markets, hedonism and utilitarianism, perception

INTRODUCTION


Three decades ago, an international retail chains began operating in Slovakia, and with their concept of large-scale supermarket and hypermarket stores they significantly altered consumption and consumer shopping behaviour patterns (Pawlusiński 2015, Križan et al. 2016, Trembošová et al. 2020, Mitríková et al. 2021,

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Đurček et al. 2022). Conventional retail stores in the form of supermarkets and hypermarkets became the most common type of stores for the purchase of food, drugstore items and daily consumer goods (Najdený et al. 2019, Križan et al. 2020). However, the trend in Slovakia can be seen not only in consumer society patterns, but also in the search for alternatives in the form of alternative food networks (AFN) in recent years.

The AFNs are focused on the support for local food systems in an effort to minimise the number of subsystems between producers and consumers, i.e. to decrease distances between producers and consumers (Papaoikonomou and Ginieis 2017, Némethová 2020, Tolmáči and Tolmáči 2020). The local concept, placing emphasis on the consumption of food as close as possible to its place of production, is an important starting point for AFN and a significant geographical characteristic of them (Syróvátková 2016). In this way, a local approach is necessary in the local food system – ensuring the largest possible share of food consumption from local sources at the local level. Therefore, the demand for fresh and high quality products (Buman et al. 2015) has conditioned the development of AFN. Alternative food networks continue to get more and more attention among consumers, who have traditionally been oriented on the conventional retail environment. Their productive function in the food system is often complemented by a no less important social function in the consumer community (Sage 2012, Spilková 2016). AFN include a wide range of initiatives, such as farmers' markets, community gardens, box systems, yard sales, food cooperatives that sell products and community-supported agriculture (Dansero and Puttilli 2014, Tregear 2011, Spilková 2016, Michel-Villarreal et al. 2019). The development of different forms of AFN reflects the demand for unconventional retail and various policies of local significance (Spilková 2016).

Farmers' markets can be characterised as modern consumption sites that offer fresh and local products, often through direct interaction between consumers and producers (Benedek et al. 2018, Crawford et al. 2018, Fendrychová and Jehlička 2018, Spilková 2018). Farmers' markets in general support local food production, the sustainability of local agriculture and a healthy lifestyle and nutrition for consumers (Byker et al. 2012). They are an important part of the food system; they enable the sharing of knowledge and the raising of awareness of (seasonal) foods and, last but not least, they bring together different actors to discuss the challenges of reducing distances and distribution (Albrecht and Smithers 2018). Curtis and Cowee (2011) report that increased consumer demand for foods of local origin is a result of consumer concerns about food safety and health. Spilková et al. (2013) state that consumer confidence in local products is being restored thanks to farmers' markets. The socially empowering topic of farmers' markets has been a component of European geographical contributions with regard to quality turnover and care economics, where trust, social interaction and responsibility are key elements of



the local system (Kirwan 2006, Moore 2006). Typical consumers at farmers' markets are most often characterised as highly educated, higher-income women who have more free time (Byker et al. 2012, Garner and Ayala 2018). Research has shown that consumers taking part in AFN have higher income levels (Thøgersen 2014). The research of Zepeda and Carroll (2018) confirms the notion of farmers' markets not only as places of purchase but also as places of social gatherings, where most study participants shop in groups of two or three people. The social contact of farmers' markets, for example, producer-consumer conversations about seasonal products or a family trip to farmers' market, is a motivation to take part in the market (Alonso and O'Neill 2011; Hunt 2007). Marino et al. (2013) point out that consumer motivation is associated with meeting one's own needs or those of the family.

The authors focused on selected consumer segments. Consumers may be categorized on the frequency of their visits to farmers' markets and also their attitudes towards shopping. The first is the identification of regular and occasional visitors to farmers' markets. The frequency of visits to the AFN may affect people's quality of life or community relationships, though this is not a given (Hencelová et al. 2021b). Therefore, the authors' intention is to study the perception of consumers in relation to their (ir)regular visits to the farmers' market. Consumers at farmers' markets can typically be described as regular customers (Spilková et al. 2013). The geodemographic characteristics of consumers in farmers' markets, however, are different from other consumers in the sense of "tell me where you shop, I'll tell you who you are" (Spilková 2018). At the same time, however, growth in the popularity of farmers' markets among consumers can be observed, as can their general acceptance for the purchase of food across all consumers (Hencelová et al. 2021a).

Consumers can be also characterized by their attitude to shopping. Such segmentation is preferred particularly in marketing research (Kita et al. 2017) and distinguishes two groups of consumers, the first represented by so-called hedonists, who are characterised by the attitude of "shopping for pleasure", and the second represented by so-called utilitarians, with the view of "shopping as an inconvenient obligation" (Babin et al. 1994). Hedonists seek gratification and enjoyment when shopping; shopping is a pleasant way to spend leisure time for them (they shop because they want to). Utilitarian consumers obtain information about products out of necessity, not for fun and enjoyment (they therefore shop because they have to). The contrast between these two approaches points to the heterogeneity of consumers and the importance of studying their behaviour (Westad et al. 2004). Shopping has long been considered a utilitarian activity, a rational and functional activity necessary for life (Batra and Ahtola 1991). Such a statement is linked more with purchases in large (international) food stores (Križan et al. 2020), which consumers in Slovakia prefer as their most frequent location for food purchases. However, a certain group of consumers is gradually



building a (consumer) relationship with local foods linked to alternative food networks, especially in the form of farmers' markets (Spilková 2018), and their attitude towards shopping is characterised more as hedonistic.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the perceptions of consumers shopping at the Piac Markt farmers' market in Bratislava (Slovakia), to identify the consumers categorized on the basis of the frequency of their visits to farmers' markets and what are the perceptions of hedonistic and utilitarian consumers shopping at farmers' market. The paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: Farmers' markets offer better quality products compared with other grocery retailers.
- RQ2: Farmers' markets offer better priced products compared with other grocery retailers.
- RQ3: Is distance (accessibility) the most important factor in choosing the place where you most often buy food?
- RQ4: Are you interested in where the food you buy comes from?
- RQ5: Direct contact with farmers (producers) is the main factor for shopping at a farmers' market.
- RQ6: Farmers' markets strengthen the local economy.

DATA AND METHODS

To answer the research questions we employed a survey research design (fig. 1) that provided quantitative and qualitative approaches.

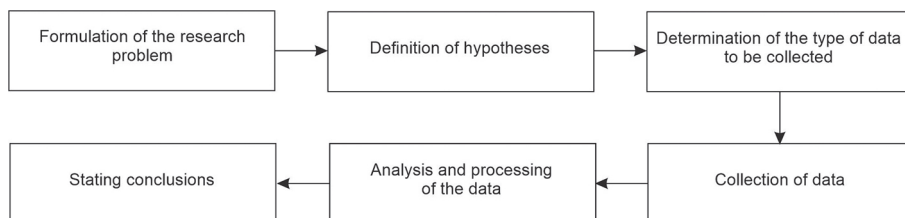


Fig. 1. Research design

Source: according to Clifford et al. (2016)

The primary data collection methods were a questionnaire survey, non-probability selection of respondents (Wolf et al. 2016) and occurred in two phases (March 2020 and October 2021). Both questionnaire surveys were conducted with consumers older than 18 years at the local food (farmers') market – Piac Markt in Bratislava. A total of 268 respondents took part in the research ($n_{2020}=150$, $n_{2021}=118$), and all the respondents were also consumers shopping at the market (Table 1). Therefore, in the article (unless stated otherwise) the terms respondent/



visitor/consumer are understood as synonyms. Both questionnaire surveys offered the same questions and had the same structure.

Women predominate (55%) among the visitors to the Piac Markt farmers' market. Even though the average age of visitors is 38.5 years, visitors over the age of 60 years old have more than 10% representation. The educational structure of Piac Markt visitors is dominated by those with a university education (71.6%), while visitors with only a primary education (2.3%) comprised the smallest share. More than half of visitors (60%) come from one- or two-member households, while larger families more than three members represent less than 5% of the visitors. The specific composition of farmers' market visitors was also reflected in the structure according to marital status. As many as 56% of visitors are single, and a third are in marriages. Students made up a relatively large proportion (14%) of visitors, while employed (or self-employed) visitors predominate. Pensioners comprised about one-tenth of visitors, and about 5% of visitors are on parental leave. Nearly half of the visitors (48%) to Piac Markt come from households with an approximate net monthly income of more than 2,000 euros. A net monthly household income up to 500 euros was recorded in 5% of visitors, cumulatively up to 1,500 euros for 16% of visitors.

Tab. 1. Basic characteristics of respondents (n=268)

Characteristics of respondents	Share of respondents (%)
<i>Gender</i>	
Woman	54.9
Man	45.1
<i>Average age</i>	38.5 year
<i>Range of age</i>	18–90
<i>Education</i>	
University	71.6
Secondary	26.1
Primary	2.3
<i>Status</i>	
Employed	54.2
Self-employed	14.9
Student	13.8
Pensioner	10.8
Parental leave	5.2
Unemployed	1.1

Source: own research



Methods of data analysis and interpretation are based on the testing of statistical hypotheses based on consumer segmentation, with the intention of identifying a statistically significant dependence ($\alpha=0.05$). Differences between selected consumer groups (regular vs occasional, hedonists vs utilitarians) were tested using the Mann-Whitney U test in the SPSS program (Gaur and Gaur 2006). Respondents expressed their perception using Likert scale (1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree) to answer the research questions.

The perceptions were confronted by testing hypotheses on the basis of the above-discussed consumer segmentation with the intention of identifying a statistically significant dependence ($\alpha=0.05$). Two hypotheses were tested for each research question, and the null hypothesis had a general basis: H0: There is no difference between the answer/perception of respondents to the research question/statement (RQ1-RQ6) and consumer's segmentation according to the periodicity of the market visit (H01) and according to their attitude towards shopping (H02).

STUDY AREA

Bratislava is situated in the south-western part of Slovakia adjacent to the state border with Hungary and Austria, on both sides of the Danube river. Bratislava (430,000 inhabitants) has become the major centre for employment and economic activity in the most dynamically developing region in Slovakia (Šveda & Barlík 2018).

Farmers' markets are one of the newest elements of urban Bratislava. There were 11 farmers' markets in the city in 2021 (Fig. 2). The Piac Market is one of the oldest and one of the most popular because of location in the city centre. It is located in the Old Market Square in the city of Bratislava and is a continuation of building's tradition of being a market space. There are two floors where local farmers and producers sell their products, complemented by foreign specialties and natural cosmetics. About 40 of them are regulars. A food court and a rest area are located in front of the market. The atmosphere of the Saturday's market is complemented by various accompanying activities for children and adults, such as a children's theatre, a children's corner, a book exchange or a community kitchen, in which representatives of foreign communities living in Bratislava cook.

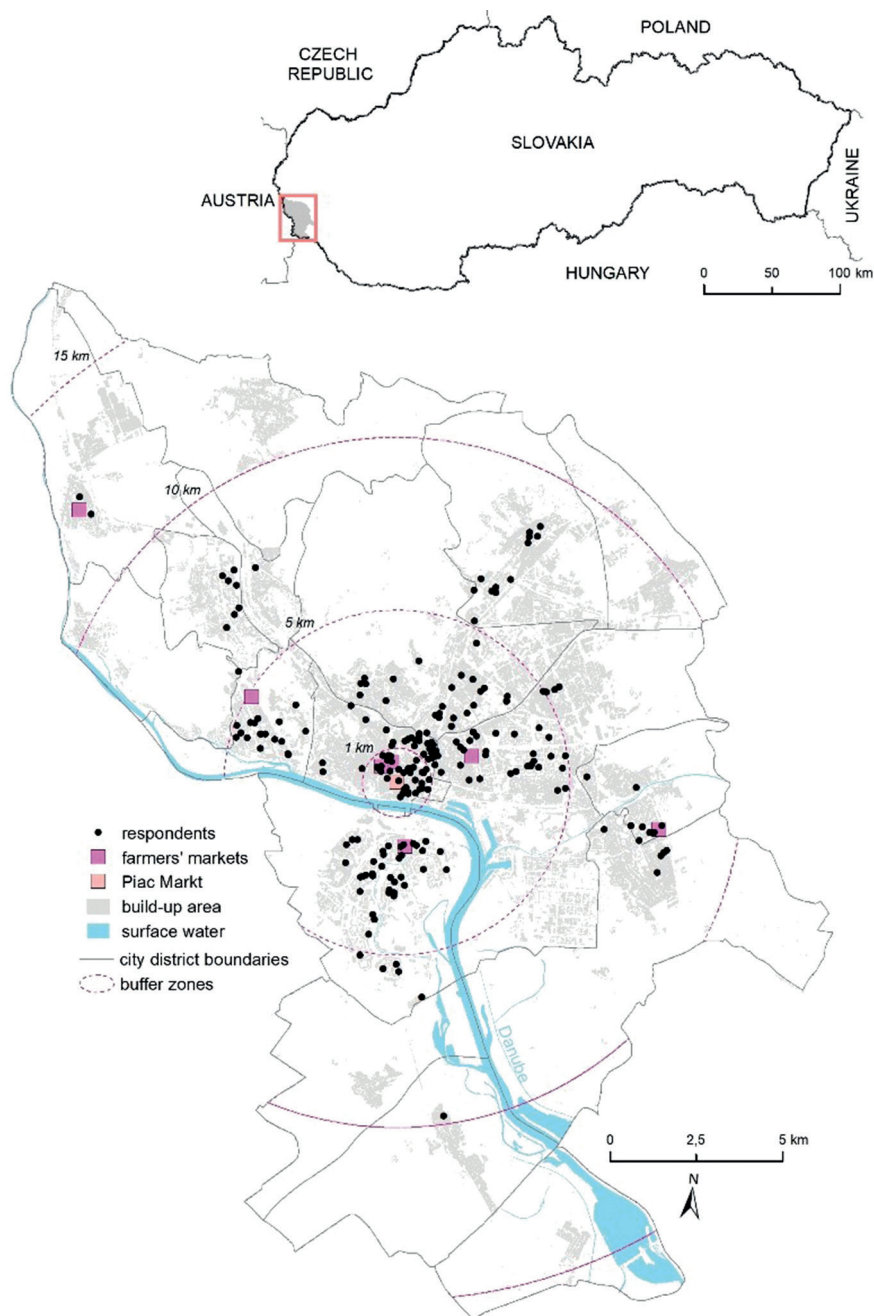


Fig. 2. Study area
Source: own processing



The Piac Markt market organisers follow the so-called Food Markets Code. When selecting the marketers, the organisers consider the following (staratrznica.sk):

- we prioritize small farmers, family farms and small local manufacturers active in our region;
- when it comes to food re-sellers, we consider whether their products are grow-able or manufacture-able in the local environment – in Slovakia. This type of assortment is only sold by its farmers or producers;
- when it comes to gastronomy, we consider the origin and quality of the input goods and favor those, who at least partially use products from local farmers and manufacturers;
- when it comes to re-sellers, who offer foreign products, we consider the origins of the goods and favor those, that are exceptional due to their quality, as well as traditional specialties, handmade goods or products in bio quality or fair trade. At the same time, we prioritize small importers, who only specialize in one specific product/selection of products or country/region;
- the majority of the sellers on our markets are farmers or small local food manufacturers (at least 70%) against (max. 30%) grocery re-sellers;
- cosmetic products must not create more than 5% of the absolute number of marketers and we favor Slovak manufacturers of quality natural cosmetics.

The organisers give priority to, consider, verify and select foods and products of local origin of exceptional quality, producible in the conditions of Slovakia, handcrafted in organic quality and fair trade (Fig. 3). For traders offering foreign products, organisers prefer small importers who specialise in a particular region and a specific product.



Fig. 3. The Piac Markt farmers' market in Bratislava

Source: Petra Hencelová



In Slovakia, the number of farmers' markets continue to grow (Hencelová et al. 2021c). Furthermore, local residents have made efforts to improve neighbourhood life and environment through community projects. These efforts seem to be the 'manifesto' of the residents' individualism through the transformation of public space and social inclusion (Blazek & Šuška 2017).

RESULTS OF HYPOTHESIS TESTING

A majority of consumers at the Piac Markt market are regular visitors (56.7%). For all visitors, the perception of full or partial agreement with the answer to RQ1 dominates: Farmers' markets offer better quality products compared to grocery stores (an average response score of 1.59). Testing the hypothesis (Table 2) showed that similarly to Hypothesis 1, we reject the hypothesis at the significance level of 0.05% ($p=0.011$), but we do not reject Hypothesis 2 ($p=0.264$). This means that with more than 95% probability the perceptions of consumers regarding the quality of products offered at farmers' markets depends on the segmentation of consumers into regular and occasional visitors. Nevertheless, the perceptions of occasional visitors achieve higher average scores on the responses (fewer positive responses), though with a smaller standard deviation. At the same time, we see that there is no statistically significant relationship between consumer perceptions of the quality of products offered at farmers' markets and the segmentation of shoppers into utilitarians and hedonists.

Products are sold at higher prices at farmers' markets (Carpio and Isengildina-Massa 2009, Louriero and Hine 2002, Varner and Otto 2008, Weatherell et al. 2003), evidence of which is consumer perceptions in the Piac Markt market (the average RQ2 response score is 3.45). Testing the hypothesis showed that there is no statistical dependence between regular and occasional market visitors and their perception of food from the market at better prices ($p=0.649$); however, there is a statistically significant relationship between the given perception and consumer segmentation by attitude towards shopping ($p=0.020$). Hedonists increasingly agreed with this statement (average score 3.36) and their real evaluation was more positive (more consenting) in the context of the expected values.

Consumers typically shop at the closest stores (Abelló et al. 2014, Bond et al. 2009, Brown 2002, Lehman et al. 1998), but differences were identified between the consumer segments analysed (average score 2.53). Statistically significant differences in the perceptions for RQ3 were confirmed in the case of regular and occasional market visitors ($p=0.008$). Regular visitors had to an increasing measure a more dissenting perception than occasional visitors. A similar statement cannot be made, however, for the hedonists and utilitarians segments, in whom there is no statistically significant relationship between the perceptions of RQ3 ($p=0.931$).

Consumers declare food origin to be one of their main reasons for visiting farmers' markets (Curtis and Cowee 2011, Gumirakiza et al. 2017, Hu et al. 2012,



Li et al. 2007). The research at the Piac Markt in Bratislava shows that the perception of food origin (RQ4) is different in the case of regular and occasional market visitors ($p=0.016$), but a statistically significant difference was confirmed between hedonists and utilitarians (the average score for both was 1.58).

Direct contact with farmers (producers) is also considered one of the primary factors that bring consumers to farmers' markets (Govindasamy et al. 2002, Hunt 2007). The shortening the supply chain in the food system is the advantage and the goal of AFN (Renting et al. 2003, Spilková et al. 2013; Tolmáči and Tolmáči 2020), which brings consumers closer to producers. We also focused our attention on the perception of consumers to RQ5. Testing the hypotheses showed that both Hypothesis 1 ($p=0.001$) and Hypothesis 2 ($p=0.012$) are rejected at the given level of significance. This means that the answer to the statement "Direct contact with farmers (producers) is the main factor for shopping at a farmers' market" depends on whether the respondent is a regular or occasional market visitor. Regular visitors and hedonists achieve lower average scores than occasional visitors and utilitarians.

AFN in general have a positive impact on the local economy (Borowiak et al. 2018, Larsen and Gilliland 2009, Nigh and González Cabañas 2015, Pettygrove and Ghose 2018, Tregear 2011). However, as follows from testing the hypotheses, there are statistically significant differences in the perceptions of such claims (RQ6) between farmers' market visitors. A dependence of different perceptions for RQ6 was identified between regular and occasional market visitors ($p=0.009$). Regular

Tab. 2. Results of testing the hypotheses*

Research question/statement	H01	H02
RQ1: Farmers' markets offer better quality products compared with other grocery retailers:	0.011	0.264
RQ2: Farmers' markets offer better priced products compared with other grocery retailers:	0.649	0.020
RQ3: Is distance (accessibility) the most important factor in choosing the place where you most often buy food?	0.008	0.931
RQ4: Are you interested in where the food you buy comes from?	0.016	0.282
RQ5: Direct contact with farmers (producers) is the main factor for shopping at a farmers' market:	0.001	0.012
RQ6: Farmers' markets strengthen the local economy:	0.009	0.886

Source: own processing

*H01: There is no difference between the answer/perception of respondents to the question/statement (RQ1-RQ6) and their segmentation to regular and occasional market visitors. H02: There is no difference between the answer/perception of respondents to the question/statement (RQ1-RQ6) and their segmentation into hedonists and utilitarians.



visitors usually scaled their responses more positively (average score 1.47) than occasional visitors (average score 1.72). In the case of the perception of hedonists and utilitarians, no statistically significant dependence for the RQ6 statement was confirmed.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of AFN is also something new in a country where over more than three decades retail has been transformed, and the concept of farmers' markets is still seeking its place in a wide spectrum of consumers. The example of the Piac Markt farmers' market in Bratislava also leads to this evidence, whose visitors are not a general sample of consumers (e.g. Aprile et al. 2016, Govindasamy et al. 2002, Wolf et al. 2005).

The paper assessed and statistically evaluated two segments of consumers in connection with their perceptions of visitors to farmers' markets. The results from Bratislava indicate that in the case of segmentation based on the frequency of visits (regular vs occasional visitors) there are significant differences in most perceptions. In contrast, in the case of segmentation according to attitude towards shopping in general (hedonist vs utilitarian), a dependence was expressed only exceptionally. These findings also point to the importance of building loyalty in the seller-customer or producer-consumer relationship (Carey et al. 2011, Gao et al. 2012). The experience of shopping at farmers' markets is unique, as the atmosphere is friendlier and more personal, which is particularly in line with the hedonistic consumers. Nevertheless, utilitarians represent more than one-third of the visitors to the farmers' market in Bratislava. The important finding is that their perception of farmers' markets is not significantly different than those of hedonist shoppers. The perception of farmers' markets in Bratislava thus depends only exceptionally on the attitude towards shopping, which makes them a universally acceptable place for purchases.

Statistically significant differences between the two consumer segments were identified in the analysed questions/statements only in the case of the statement that direct contact with farmers (producers) is the primary factor for shopping at a farmers' market. Furthermore, consumers at this Slovak farmers' market did not show clear agreement with this statement, with an average score of 2.55. Thus, consumers shopping at the Piac Markt differ from foreign shoppers, in whom direct contact with producers is associated with a sense of local identity. This offers the potential to a better understanding of social interactions, which can support the economic and environmental sustainability of local agriculture (Hunt 2007).

Our study provides an interesting insight for the academic community in researching consumer behaviour at farmers' markets. We provide useful information for market organizers as well. Organizers can make the farmers' market



more than just a place to shop, but also a place to interactions through cultural and entertainment activities, workshops, etc., not only concentrating on the choice of food retailers. Organizers can choose the right marketing for potential visitors to get higher market attendance. Piac Markt farmers' market seems to be an appropriate object for research on consumer behaviour, and the results of the research can be applied to organizing similar events aimed at supporting and developing the local food system. By analysing the behaviour of visitors on the market, the missing general code for Slovakian farmers' markets can be formulated.

The conclusions of this study also have some limitations. This is a sample of respondents (visitors) from a single farmers' market. Further, the period of data collection coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though no significant restrictions (other than wearing respirator masks) were in place at the time of the survey, consumers' concerns about the possibility of infectious disease could have affected the resulting sample of respondents.

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