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# A Literature Review of Understanding Consumer Behavior in ESG through Stimulus-Response (S-R) Theory

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**Abstract**
As Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) concerns reshape business strategy, understanding how consumers react to ESG practices has become a critical issue in marketing and sustainability research. This literature review synthesizes existing studies on ESG-driven consumer behavior through the lens of Stimulus-Response (S-R) Theory—a foundational model in behavioral psychology. The review conceptualizes ESG practices as stimuli that evoke emotional and behavioral responses in consumers. It explores how different ESG dimensions (environmental, social, governance) serve as triggers, how consumers process these cues internally, and what actions result. This review highlights the potential of S-R Theory to capture direct, affect-driven reactions. Key research gaps are identified, including limited attention to governance signals, framing effects, and emerging consumer behaviors. The paper concludes with theoretical and managerial implications, calling for future research that combines behavioral theory, message design, and evolving consumer expectations in ESG contexts.
**Keywords**: ESG, Consumer Behavior, Stimulus-Response (S-R) Theory

## Introduction

As the global economy undergoes a paradigmatic shift toward sustainable development, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices have emerged as critical dimensions of corporate strategy. Once regarded primarily as criteria for investor evaluation, ESG considerations are now influencing a wide range of stakeholder decisions—including those made by consumers (Lee & Rhee, 2023; Rastogi et al., 2025; Sharma et al., 2024). Increasingly, consumers are not merely passive recipients of marketing messages but active evaluators of corporate behavior, demanding ethical conduct, environmental responsibility, and social accountability (Hasan et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2024). This transformation marks a profound evolution in the marketplace, where purchasing decisions are shaped not only by functional benefits but also by the perceived values and purpose of the brand (Koh et al., 2022).

Understanding how consumers respond to ESG efforts is no longer optional—it is essential. From a theoretical standpoint, investigating ESG's impact on consumer behavior contributes to the advancement of sustainability-focused behavioral research, bridging gaps between environmental psychology, marketing theory, and ethics. From a practical perspective, the insights gained can inform brand managers, corporate strategists, and policy-makers seeking to engage ethically conscious consumers, foster brand trust, and enhance customer loyalty (Bae et al., 2023; Cao, 2023; Su, Zhang, Zhang, et al., 2024). As ESG reporting becomes increasingly standardized and scrutinized, companies face growing pressure not only to "do good" but also to communicate those efforts in ways that drive measurable consumer response (Stewart, 2025). Yet, while interest in ESG branding is growing, there remains limited understanding of the behavioral mechanisms through which ESG initiatives influence consumer decision-making—a gap this study seeks to address.

Despite the expanding interest in ESG marketing, the theoretical underpinnings explaining consumer responses to ESG stimuli remain fragmented. Many studies adopt cognitive or attitudinal theories, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) or Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) Theory, to examine consumer environmental behavior (Lee et al., 2023; Paul et al., 2016). However, these models often overlook the fundamental behavioral mechanisms through which external stimuli translate into observable consumer actions. The S-R Theory, rooted in behavioral psychology, offers a compelling alternative by focusing on the direct link between environmental stimuli and behavioral reactions (Spence, 1950). Unlike models that emphasize internal processing, the S-R Theory provides a parsimonious lens to examine how ESG initiatives, practices, and signals function in company as stimuli capable of eliciting emotional and behavioral responses from consumers.

This literature review aims to bridge the theoretical and empirical gap by systematically exploring consumer behavior in the context of ESG through the lens of the S-R Theory. Specifically, it examines how ESG elements—conceptualized as external stimuli—trigger consumer emotional and behavioral responses. The review also highlights the types of ESG-related stimuli that are most influential, the nature of consumer reactions they elicit, and the boundary conditions under which these effects are amplified or diminished.

By focusing on the stimulus-response paradigm, this paper offers a novel contribution to the ESG-consumer behavior literature. It advances current understanding by introducing a behavioral model that complements existing cognitive theories and provides practical insights for businesses aiming to strengthen consumer engagement through ESG initiatives. In doing so, the paper sets the foundation for a structured discussion of existing findings, theoretical integration, and directions for future research.

*Theoretical Framework: Stimulus-Response (S-R) Theory*

The Stimulus-Response (S-R) Theory is one of the foundational models in behavioral psychology and consumer behavior research. Ivan Pavlov's physiological experiments on classical conditioning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries laid the empirical groundwork for stimulus-response mechanisms (Pavlov, 2010), it was John B. Watson who formally introduced S-R Theory into psychological science in 1913, marking the beginning of behaviourism (Watson, 1913). the S-R Theory posits that observable behavior is primarily shaped by external environmental stimuli, with responses occurring in a linear and predictable fashion. According to Watson (1913), unlike cognitive models that emphasize internal mental processes, the S-R Theory focuses on the direct causality between stimuli and responses, providing a parsimonious yet powerful tool for analyzing consumer behavior.

In marketing and advertising research, the S-R Theory has been widely used to explain how marketing inputs—such as pricing, packaging, messaging, or brand cues—trigger consumer reactions such as attention, affective response, or purchase intention (Abbasi et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2025; Kotler, 2017; Zhang & Benyoucef, 2016). For instance, visual elements in advertisements can act as stimuli that evoke emotional reactions like pleasure or trust, which in turn guide consumer decision-making. Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) extended this framework by incorporating brand affect and brand trust as mediators that link stimuli to behavioral loyalty, reaffirming the applicability of S-R Theory in brand relationship studies.

When applied to sustainability and ESG-related marketing, the S-R Theory provides a relevant explanatory lens. ESG practices—ranging from environmental actions such as carbon neutrality, to social actions like inclusive hiring, to governance-related transparency—serve as external stimuli that can elicit distinct consumer responses. For example, a brand's use of recyclable packaging may stimulate feelings of ethical satisfaction, while transparent reporting on social impact may trigger trust and perceived credibility (Boz et al., 2020; Heinberg et al., 2021; Holloway, 2024; Steenis et al., 2018). These emotional and evaluative reactions then influence subsequent behaviors, such as brand choice, loyalty, or advocacy.

Recent studies in green marketing have also adopted variants of the S-R Theory, such as the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) Theory (Russell & Mehrabian, 1974), which integrates internal affective states as mediators between stimuli and responses. While the S-O-R Theory offers added depth in understanding the role of psychological states, the core S-R Theory remains crucial for examining direct stimulus effects, particularly in situations where ESG messaging serves as a deliberate marketing signal designed to prompt specific behavioral responses (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010).

Despite its relevance, the S-R Theory has been underutilized in ESG-related consumer behavior research. Much of the literature remains anchored in attitudinal frameworks like the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) or the Value-Belief-Norm Theory (Stern et al., 1999), which emphasize cognitive evaluations and intentions. However, ESG communications often function as affective stimuli that do not merely inform but evoke—prompting emotional responses such as pride, guilt, or admiration that can lead to immediate behavioral outcomes (Choi & Choi, 2024; Su, Zhang, & Zhang, 2024). This highlights the need to re-engage with the S-R Theory to better understand the non-cognitive dimensions of consumer engagement with ESG.

Building on the S-R Theory and prior literature, Figure 1 presents a conceptual model illustrating how ESG-related stimuli may trigger internal responses and subsequent consumer behaviors. This framework serves as a structural guide for the subsequent discussion.

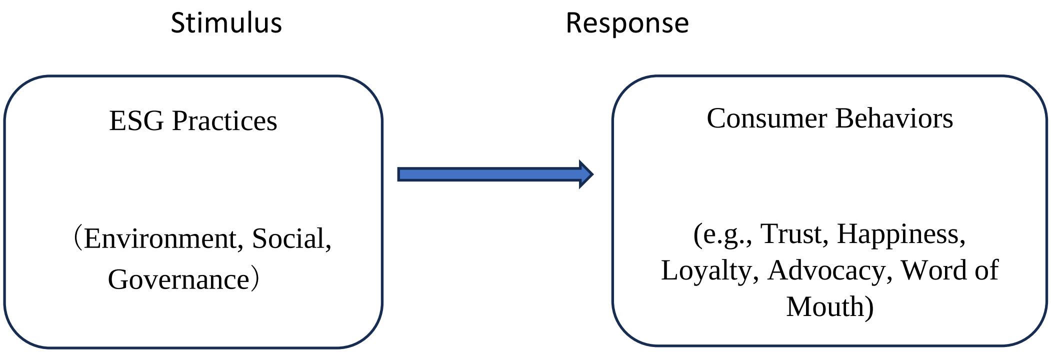


Figure 1 Concept Model of S-R Theory in ESG Context

In summary, the S-R Theory offers a compelling, behaviorally-grounded approach for analyzing how ESG initiatives influence consumer reactions. It underscores the importance of stimulus design—how ESG signals are communicated, framed, and delivered—and provides a framework for examining measurable consumer responses in both emotional and behavioral domains.

*ESG as Stimuli in the Consumer Response Process*

Within the S-R Theory, ESG practices function as external stimuli that influence consumer behavior. ESG refers to three key dimensions—environmental, social, and governance—that collectively guide corporate sustainability practices (Küfeoğlu, 2024). The environmental aspect emphasizes the protection of ecosystems and the responsible use of natural resources. The social component relates to the impact of business activities on stakeholders such as employees, consumers, and local communities. Governance encompasses corporate leadership, ethical decision-making, and regulatory compliance (Del Gesso & Lodhi, 2025; Ijaz et al., 2025; Sharma et al., 2024; Yuanlun, 2024). Companies communicate their environmental efforts, social contributions, and governance standards through various touchpoints—advertising, packaging, public reports, or digital media. These stimuli shape how consumers perceive and respond to brands (Cao, 2023; Cheng et al., 2024; Choi & Choi, 2024).

A growing body of empirical evidence indicates that ESG-driven initiatives elicit positive emotional responses, such as increased trust and satisfaction. Research indicates that ESG efforts significantly shape consumer behavior by reinforcing corporate credibility, enhancing trust, and strengthening brand commitment (Bae et al., 2023; Cao, 2023; Rastogi et al., 2025; Tripopsakul & Puriwat, 2022). According to Lee and Rhee (2023) and Cao (2023), firms with strong ESG performance tend to achieve superior market outcomes, often accompanied by enhanced consumer loyalty. Supporting this, Ajour El Zein et al. (2019) and Lin (2024) conducted a comprehensive meta-analysis revealing that sustainability ESG factors play a pivotal role in elevating brand equity and promoting long-term sustainability.

*Environmental Stimuli*

Environmental practices—such as carbon reduction, eco-friendly packaging, and sustainable sourcing—often serve as powerful signals to environmentally conscious consumers (Boz et al., 2020; Dogra & Grover, 2025; Steenis et al., 2018). Firms that embed ecological values into their brand identity are more likely to earn consumer trust and long-term support. When consumers recognize a company's active involvement in ecological protection—such as carbon reduction, renewable energy adoption, or biodiversity preservation—they often develop favorable emotional reactions (Wang et al., 2023). Green labeling, certifications, and visible sustainability efforts act as direct stimuli that influence consumer responses (Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014; Donato, 2025; Majer et al., 2022). These include feelings of satisfaction, moral pride, and brand-related happiness, which in turn foster deeper emotional and behavior bonds like brand attachment and loyalty (Lee & Rhee, 2023; Purohit & Radia, 2022; Sim & Kim, 2024). Environmental initiatives play a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior by enhancing brand perception, strengthening trust, and increasing the likelihood of sustainable purchase decisions (Bae et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Oh et al., 2024; Tripopsakul & Puriwat, 2022).

Multiple studies confirm the positive association between environmental ESG practices and consumer behavior engagement. For instance, Cheng et al. (2024) and Eom et al. (2024) found that proactive environmental efforts significantly improve consumer assessments of firm value and purchase intention. Likewise, Lee and Rhee (2023) and Guiao and Lacap (2022) demonstrated that strategic green marketing enhances brand loyalty, green purchase intention and positive green brand evangelism. These findings suggest that environmental stimuli not only fulfill corporate ethical responsibilities but also serve as strategic levers for building lasting consumer-brand relationships. Therefore, sustainability awareness grows among consumers, environmental stewardship is increasingly seen as a key differentiator in competitive markets (Hasan et al., 2024; Koh et al., 2022).

*Social Stimuli*

The social dimension of ESG encompasses a company’s actions related to employee welfare, human rights, workplace safety, diversity and inclusion, and community development (Gillan et al., 2021; Lin, 2024). These actions appeal to consumers’ ethical and relational values, enhancing emotional responses such as trust, happiness, warmth, and admiration (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Sehgal et al., 2023; Tosun & Tavşan, 2023). Social credibility often strengthens brand-consumer bonds and increases consumer advocacy (Liaquat et al., 2025; Panda et al., 2020). Firms that demonstrate genuine concern for social well-being—through equitable labor conditions, philanthropic efforts, or engagement in social causes—are more likely to be perceived as trustworthy and value-driven (Cao, 2023). These perceptions act as stimuli that elicit positive emotional reactions such as brand admiration, warmth, and social pride (Park & Kim, 2022; Sehgal et al., 2023; Tosun & Tavşan, 2023). Consumers who perceive a brand as socially responsible often develop stronger emotional bonds, leading to brand happiness, attachment, and long-term loyalty (Lacap et al., 2021; Lee & Rhee, 2023; Mu et al., 2023).

Empirical studies provide robust support for this process. For instance, Kraft et al. (2022) found that companies engaging in visible social initiatives enjoy elevated consumer trust and commitment. Similarly, Tosun and Tavşan (2023) report that perceived corporate social responsibility significantly enhances emotional engagement and strengthens brand-consumer relationships. These emotional responses, in turn, translate into favorable behavioral outcomes, including increased purchase intention, repeated patronage, and positive word-of-mouth (Bae et al., 2023; Huo et al., 2022; Lee & Lee, 2021). Moreover, in the context of green consumerism, socially responsible practices resonate deeply with ethically conscious consumers who seek alignment between their personal values and corporate actions (Ahmad, 2025; Li et al., 2023). Such alignment not only reinforces affective responses but also activates prosocial behaviors such as advocacy, co-creation, and sustainability-oriented consumption (Tripopsakul & Puriwat, 2022). Therefore, the social dimension of ESG serves as a critical stimulus in shaping consumer behavior. By promoting equity, inclusion, and societal well-being, socially responsible brands stimulate both emotional connection and behavioral loyalty.

*Governance Stimuli*

Within the ESG framework, governance refers to the systems, structures, and practices that ensure corporate accountability, transparency, ethical conduct, and compliance with regulatory standards (Claessens & Yurtoglu, 2013; Khan et al., 2022). Though often less visible to consumers compared to environmental or social initiatives, governance practices serve as essential stimuli in shaping consumer perceptions, trust and loyalty (Sharma & Jain, 2019; Tanveer et al., 2021). From a S-R Theory's perspective, strong governance signals provide critical assurance that a company operates responsibly, which in turn triggers affective and behavioral responses from stakeholders. Effective governance includes actions such as transparent reporting, anti-corruption measures, stakeholder accountability, ethical leadership, and board independence (Clément et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2023). These practices function as symbolic cues that signal corporate integrity and long-term orientation (Mamic & Tomic, 2024; Park et al., 2017). When consumers are exposed to such governance-related signals—whether through ESG reports, third-party certifications, or media disclosures—they are more likely to form favorable impressions regarding the firm's credibility and ethical standards (Chen & Xie, 2022; Del Gesso & Lodhi, 2025; Puriwat & Tripopsakul, 2022).

Research supports the role of governance as a trust-building mechanism. For instance, Yu et al. (2018) and Holloway (2024) found that transparency and accountability significantly enhance consumer confidence, especially in markets where institutional trust is fragile. Leonidou and Skarmeas (2017) further demonstrated that ethical governance structures contribute to perceptions of corporate reliability and reduce skepticism toward sustainability claims. These cognitive evaluations are critical in forming emotional responses such as brand trust, admiration, and security, which eventually lead to behaviors like purchase intention, loyalty, and advocacy. Moreover, in industries where product differentiation is limited and ethical risk is high—such as finance, healthcare, and technology—governance cues become even more salient. Consumers increasingly expect brands not only to perform well but to act responsibly, especially amid rising awareness of greenwashing and ESG misinformation (Salomone, 2023; Wu & Liu, 2022). Governance, therefore, serves as a stabilizing stimulus that reinforces the authenticity and consistency of a company's broader sustainability narrative.

In summary, the effectiveness of ESG stimuli depends not only on the action itself but also on how it is communicated. Framing, message credibility, and source authenticity significantly influence consumer perception and response (Hasan et al., 2024; Moisescu, 2015; Nazir & Wani, 2025). Misalignment between brand behavior and ESG claims can result in negative reactions, such as skepticism or backlash (Zervoudi et al., 2025). Therefore, ESG-related cues serve as multi-dimensional stimuli within the S-R model. They trigger both emotional and cognitive responses that shape subsequent consumer behavior.

*Consumer Behavioral Responses to ESG Stimuli*

In the context of the S-R Theory, ESG-related initiatives function as stimuli that directly elicit observable behavioral responses from consumers. These responses are reflected in actions such as brand choice, purchase intention, loyalty, and advocacy. When firms publicly commit to environmental protection, social equity, or ethical governance, such efforts serve as external cues that shape how consumers behave in the marketplace. Consumers tend to reward companies perceived as socially and environmentally responsible through increased engagement and supportive behaviors.

A growing body of research shows that ESG stimuli enhance consumers' brand evaluations and trust, which often translates into stronger purchase intentions and repeated buying behavior (Cao, 2023; Eom et al., 2024). For example, companies that implement visible sustainability practices—like reducing plastic usage or promoting fair labor—can positively influence consumers' willingness to pay a premium for their products (Herrmann et al., 2022; Nazarenko & Saleh, 2024; Valencia-Arias et al., 2025). Similarly, the perception of social responsibility has been linked to increased brand loyalty, particularly among consumers who prioritize ethical consumption (Hamouda & Aissaoui, 2023; Noh et al., 2024). These behavioral patterns align with the S-R model's assumption that well-designed stimuli can lead to predictable and measurable actions.

Beyond purchase behavior, ESG initiatives also influence post-purchase engagement. Consumers who feel aligned with a brand's sustainability values often engage in supportive behaviors such as recommending the brand to others, sharing brand content on social media, or defending the brand against criticism (Guiao & Lacap, 2022; Park & Kim, 2022). This form of green word-of-mouth or brand advocacy is especially powerful in today's digital marketplace, where consumer voices can shape public perception and brand reputation (Jeffrey et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2024). On the other hand, inconsistent or inauthentic ESG messaging may trigger negative responses such as skepticism, resistance, or even boycott behavior, underscoring the importance of credibility and transparency in sustainability communication (Koh et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022; Qiu et al., 2023).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that ESG practices have the capacity to move consumers from passive observers to active participants in brand ecosystems. Through the lens of S-R Theory, ESG actions serve as influential external stimuli that shape not only what consumers feel or think, but also how they behave (Su, Zhang, Zhang, et al., 2024; Xue et al., 2024). This behavioral focus reinforces the strategic relevance of ESG in marketing and brand management, positioning sustainability not merely as a moral imperative but as a driver of tangible consumer action.

*Theoretical Integration and Research Gaps*

Although existing literature increasingly acknowledges the influence of ESG on consumer behavior, the theoretical integration of Stimulus-Response (S-R) Theory within this context remains limited. Most prior research tends to rely on cognitive or attitudinal theories such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) or the Value-Belief-Norm theory (Stern et al., 1999), emphasizing internal deliberation, perceived control, or moral obligation as mediators of behavioral intention. While these perspectives are valuable, they often overlook the direct, observable mechanisms through which ESG stimuli trigger consumer responses—particularly in low-involvement or emotionally driven decision contexts.

By contrast, S-R Theory offers a more parsimonious and behaviorally grounded approach to understanding how ESG communications and actions operate as external stimuli that lead to concrete consumer behaviors such as product choice, loyalty, or advocacy. This review demonstrates that ESG practices can function as meaningful stimuli, especially when perceived as authentic and aligned with consumer values. However, few studies explicitly adopt the S-R Theory to model these effects. As such, there remains an opportunity to more systematically integrate S-R Theory into sustainability-related consumer research.

Several gaps emerge from the synthesis of existing studies. First, the governance dimension of ESG remains underrepresented in consumer-focused research. While environmental and social practices are often visible and emotionally salient, governance practices—such as ethical leadership and transparency—are more abstract and thus underexplored as behavioral stimuli. Future studies could investigate how different forms of governance communication affect consumer trust and brand choice.

Second, there is a lack of clarity around how ESG stimuli vary in their behavioral effectiveness across industries, cultures, and demographic segments (Goncalves, 2024). For example, environmental cues may have stronger effects in the fashion or food sectors, while governance may matter more in financial or tech-related contexts (Bae et al., 2023; Salomone, 2023). Moreover, cultural values may moderate the degree to which ESG actions are perceived as credible or influential (Shin et al., 2023). These variations require deeper empirical exploration.

Third, much of the current literature focuses on positive behavioral outcomes (e.g., loyalty, advocacy) but pays less attention to negative consumer responses such as skepticism, resistance, or backlash in response to perceived greenwashing or inauthentic CSR. From an S-R perspective, these reactions are just as important, as they demonstrate the boundaries and conditions under which stimuli fail to elicit the intended response.

Finally, methodological diversity is needed. Most ESG-consumer studies rely on cross-sectional surveys, which limit causal inference. The S-R model, with its emphasis on stimulus-driven reactions, lends itself well to experimental and longitudinal designs. Future research should incorporate such approaches to more precisely capture how consumers respond to specific ESG stimuli over time and across contexts.

In summary, while ESG practices clearly function as important drivers of consumer behavior, the literature has yet to fully realize the explanatory potential of S-R Theory in this domain. Addressing the identified gaps will enhance theoretical clarity and offer more actionable insights for companies seeking to translate ESG commitments into enduring consumer relationships.

## Conclusion

This literature review explored how ESG practices shape consumer behavior through the lens of S-R Theory. As sustainability becomes an increasingly central concern in both corporate strategy and consumer consciousness, understanding the behavioral implications of ESG initiatives is critical. S-R Theory offers a direct, behaviorally grounded framework for analyzing how ESG stimuli—delivered through branding, communication, and corporate actions—elicit observable consumer responses such as trust, loyalty, purchase, and advocacy.

The review demonstrates that all three dimensions of ESG serve as meaningful external stimuli. Environmental practices, including carbon reduction and sustainable sourcing, generate favorable consumer responses by appealing to ecological values. Social initiatives—such as employee welfare, community engagement, and ethical labor practices—foster emotional connections that strengthen brand attachment. Governance efforts, including transparency, accountability, and ethical leadership, function as credibility signals that reinforce trust and reliability. Each of these dimensions plays a distinct but complementary role in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors.

Importantly, this review highlights that while ESG has received increasing attention in consumer behavior literature, the S-R theoretical framework remains underutilized. Unlike more complex cognitive or attitudinal models, S-R Theory offers a straightforward pathway for understanding how external corporate stimuli provoke behavioral outcomes, especially in emotionally charged or low-involvement decision settings. Integrating S-R Theory more fully into ESG research can clarify stimulus-response mechanisms, strengthen empirical modeling, and expand the theoretical toolkit available to sustainability scholars.

In addition to theoretical contributions, this review offers practical implications for brand managers and sustainability strategists. Firms seeking to build long-term consumer loyalty should treat ESG not merely as a compliance mechanism or investor-oriented metric, but as a direct lever for consumer engagement. Carefully designed ESG stimuli—authentic, transparent, and value-aligned—can drive positive emotional and behavioral responses, contributing to brand equity and competitive advantage in sustainability-conscious markets.

In conclusion, this review positions S-R Theory as a valuable lens for examining consumer responses to ESG initiatives. By conceptualizing ESG dimensions as stimuli and mapping their influence on consumer behavior, it sets the stage for future empirical research and provides actionable guidance for practitioners. As global consumers increasingly demand responsible and ethical business practices, the ability to translate ESG efforts into meaningful consumer action will be essential to achieving both sustainability and commercial success.

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