

INVESTIGATING SHOPPING TOURISM ALONG THE BORDERS OF HUNGARY – A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mihály TÖMÖRI

University of Debrecen, Faculty of Science and Technology, Department of Social Geography and Regional Development Planning, 1 Egyetem tér, Debrecen, Hungary, e-mail: tomori.mihaly@gmail.com

Abstract: The complex and interrelated relationship between shopping and travelling is an interesting and current field of study. Mass consumption and tourism have become some of the most important factors of economic growth in many countries of the world. This article attempts to outline the theoretical backgrounds of shopping tourism by introducing the views and results of the most relevant researchers in this field. First, the international literature is reviewed, then the most comprehensive studies in Hungary are introduced, finally the results of cross-border case studies are outlined with a special emphasis on the northeastern borders of Hungary.

Key words: shopping tourism, cross-border shopping, retailing across borders

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest developing industries in the world, its global economic significance is only exceeded by the oil and automotive industries (Aubert, A., 2002). Despite the fact that tourism has been part of human history since antiquity, its dynamic growth started only in the second half of the twentieth century. While in the 1950s around 25 million people (approximately 1% of the world's population at the time) took part in international tourism, in 2009 their number exceeded 800 million (approximately 12% of the world's population at that time) (UNWTO, 2010). This rapid growth of international tourism has, among other things, been due to the improvement of traffic conditions and the introduction of the welfare state model in Western European countries after the Second World War (Kozma, G., 2005).

Shopping and travelling are interconnected in many ways and the relationship between the two phenomena is rather complex. With the increased mobility level of societies shopping often emerges outside the consumers' local trading area. In addition, the traditional notion of shopping as an economic necessity has become a leisure activity for a growing number of people (Friedrich, W. - Sattler, K., 2005; Dridea, C. - Sztruten, G., 2009). The relationship between shopping and tourism is a widely-known and scientifically studied phenomenon virtually all over the world. This article attempts to outline the major characteristic features of this complex field of study primarily from a theoretical perspective.

In our globalizing world economy, global systems of production and consumption have emerged. Both in the industrial sector and in the service economy, including retail

trade, international companies have appeared, which organize their operation at (macro) regional or global level (Bernek, Á., 2002). Meanwhile, it can also be observed that besides production and manufacturing, consumption is also becoming globally organized. The improvement of traffic conditions, the spread of western type consumer culture (consumerism) and the extraordinary growth of (international) tourism provides the conditions for international consumption.

Naturally, consumption across borders appears in many forms regarding both time and space and many differences can be detected in the circumstances and motivations of shopping. For instance, in the western world shopping abroad has for decades embodied the liberty of travelling and the enjoyable activity of shopping, while the phenomenon of shopping tourism for people living on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain equalled the smuggling of unavailable goods across strictly controlled borders. Consequently, the experience of shopping and travelling across borders without any restrictions is a relatively new phenomenon for societies in Central and Eastern Europe. However, it is hoped that with the fall of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s shopping tourism for a growing number of people will not be an economic necessity any more but it will be an everyday activity improving the living standards and the quality of life of people living in this region.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF SHOPPING TOURISM

Although shopping tourism is a phenomenon well known to almost everybody, constructing a scientific framework and definition of shopping tourism is rather complicated. The widely-known and used term ‘shopping tourism’ can be confusing and misleading for many, since it suggests that this phenomenon undoubtedly belongs to the territory of tourism. However, as the corresponding literature proves, shopping or consuming across borders can be interpreted from a number of different perspectives.

The international literature describes this phenomenon in several different ways: in models of border economics (Di Matteo, L., 1999), in studies analysing the differences in taxation and public administration (Lucas, V., 2004), in works by authors focusing on marketing (Christiansen, T. – Snepenger, D. J., 2002), in works concentrating on retailing (Ilbery, B. – Maye, D., 2006), or in research done within the framework of tourism (Timothy, D. J. – Butler, R. W., 1995).

This paper interprets the phenomenon of consumption across borders from the perspective of tourism and geography. Tourism appears in many forms (e.g.: business tourism, sport tourism, conference tourism, etc.), however, this paper concentrates on a special subfield of tourism, called shopping tourism. Shopping is among the most common and enjoyable activities undertaken by people on holiday and, in many cases it provides a major attraction and basic motivation for travel (Timothy, D. J., 2005).

The relationship between shopping and tourism can be divided into two categories. The first one, where the primary purpose of the tourist trip is to shop, is termed ‘shopping tourism’. The second is called ‘tourist shopping’, where shopping is done as a secondary activity during a trip which might be motivated primarily by something other than shopping (e.g. sunbathing, ecotourism, etc.) (Timothy, D. J., 2005).

Shopping as the primary reason for taking a trip is an important factor for millions of travellers each year. According to Timothy (2005) three primary factors stand out most clearly as the driving forces behind shopping as a primary reason for travel: the merchandise being sought, the destination selected, and price advantages. These factors are not mutually exclusive, in fact, they may overlap and work together as reasons for travel.

A unique type of shopping tourism that has received considerable attention during the past decade is shopping in border areas – also known as cross-border shopping. This consumer activity takes place near international boundaries. Economic, legal and social differences on opposite sides of an international border create conditions that appeal to

many types of tourists. As a result, activities such as gambling, prostitution, drinking, and shopping become important tourist activities in border regions. Cross-border shopping, wherein people travel beyond the boundaries of their own nation specifically to shop in a neighbouring country, is common in all parts of the world (Timothy, D. J., 2005).

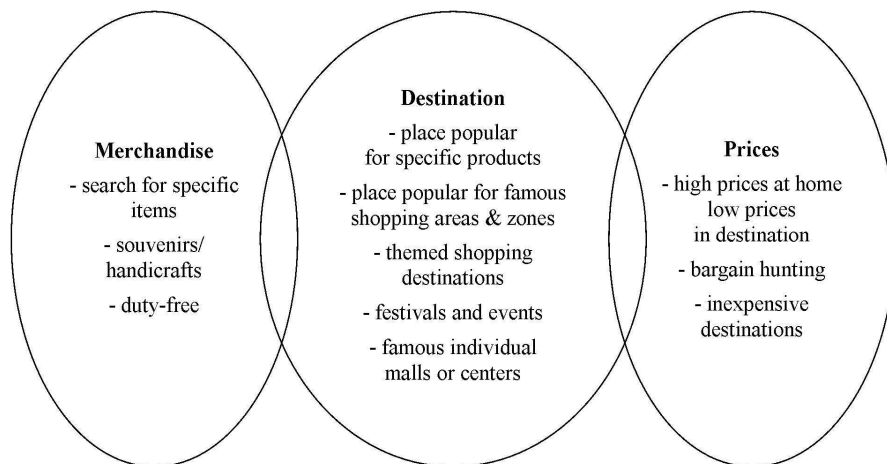


Figure 1. Factors influencing shopping as a motivation for travel
(Source: Timothy, D. J., 2005: 44 p.)

For people who live near a border, the trip may be short, lasting from minutes to hours, but for people who live farther from the border, the trip usually has a longer duration, sometimes lasting days and tends to be more leisure oriented. There are some notable spatial patterns with regard to cross-border shopping. Timothy and Butler (1995) worked out a model representing the general pattern of cross-border shopping. According to this model the more distant shoppers live from the border the less frequently they will cross, but the value of the merchandise they buy will probably be higher.

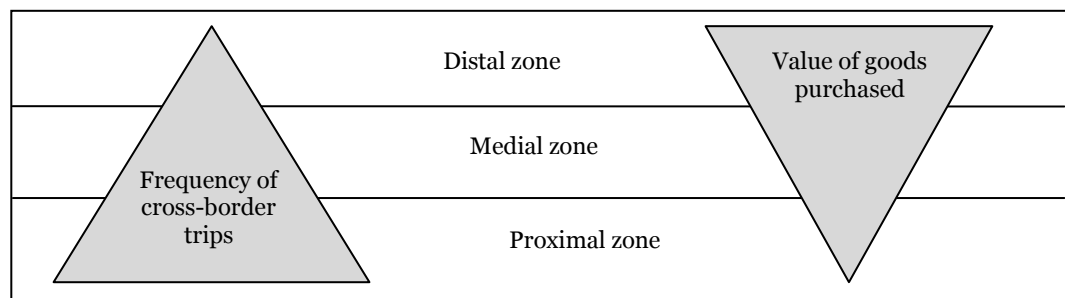


Figure 2. Spatial characteristics of cross-border shopping
(Source: Timothy, D. J. – Butler, R. W., 1995: 28 p.)

Residents of the proximal shopping zone generally cross the border frequently and are willing to go for everyday, small-ticket items like gasoline, groceries, beer, tobacco products, and restaurant meals. Consumers who live in the medial shopping zone cross the border less often and tend to buy higher-value goods. Those people who live farthest from the international boundary, in the distal shopping zone, seldom cross the border on shopping trips, but when they do, they tend to purchase big-ticket items such as clothes, appliances, and electronics (Timothy, D. J. – Butler, R. W., 1995).

Timothy and Butler (1995) worked out a model in order to determine to what extent cross-border consumption can be regarded as an economic or a tourist activity. This hypothetical model is based on the travellers' motivation for travel and length of stay.

Reason / motivation for cross-border shopping	Length of stay	
	one or more nights	same day returns
pleasure	1	3
pleasure and economic	2	4
economic	5	6

Figure 3. Hypothetical model of cross-border shoppers

(Source: Timothy, D. J. – Butler, R. W., 1995: 30 p.)

Square 1 represents those cross-border shoppers who stay at least one night in a foreign country and who are motivated by pleasure. Square 2 also depicts cross-border shoppers who stay at least one night and who are basically motivated by pleasure. However, perceived economic necessity plays a part in their decision to shop across the border. Consumers in square 3 are motivated by pleasure, but they cross the border and return to their home country the same day. Since they do not spend a full day abroad, they fit the definition of 'tourist' to a lesser degree than those in squares one and two. However, they cross an international boundary and are motivated by pleasure; therefore, they should be regarded as tourists. Square 4 includes shoppers whose trips are based on both pleasure and economics, and who return to their home country the same day. Square 5 includes those people who are motivated to travel purely for economic reasons, but who stay abroad at least one night. These shoppers tend to cross the border because they feel it is necessary in order to save money. Square 6 is representative of those cross-border shoppers who are motivated purely by economics and who return to their home country the same day. These people tend to cross the border for basic necessities, such as gasoline, alcohol, groceries, and cigarettes. People in this group should not be considered tourists because they are motivated by economics and they return home the same day (Timothy, D. J. – Butler, R. W., 1995).

Basically, four economic and socio-political conditions can be distinguished that are necessary for cross-border shopping to develop (Leimgruber, 1988 cited by Timothy, D. J., 2005):

- enough contrast on opposite sides of the border (e.g. product quality, price and selection)
- enough information about the circumstances on opposite sides of the border
- shoppers have to be able and willing to make the trip
- borders have to be permeable enough to be crossed with relative ease.

As mentioned earlier, the other relationship between shopping and tourism is termed 'tourist shopping' – i.e. shopping as one of perhaps many activities undertaken by people who travel primarily for other reasons. While shopping may not be the primary or sole allure of most vacation destinations, it is a universal tourist activity that adds to the overall attractiveness of almost every region of the world. The reasons why tourists shop are numerous and complex. Many variables have been identified that influence the 'tourist shopping' phenomenon, such as the desire for keepsakes and memories, the quest for authenticity, the search for novel experiences and products, functional needs, the necessity to kill time, obligations and desires to buy gifts for people at home and cultural traditions or social mores (Timothy, D. J., 2005).

A special type of shopping tourism was developed in Central and Eastern Europe during the socialist era, which was formed in the framework of tourism activities among Soviet bloc countries. The shortage of goods in countries on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain forced citizens to implement a characteristic trading activity. During the decades

preceding the fall of communism, cross-border shopping grew in social and economic importance throughout much of Central and Eastern Europe. In state socialist systems where fixed prices, restricted access to products, and limited merchandise variety reduced buying opportunities, people had few possibilities to spend as much of their income as they desired. This resulted in shopping trips to more liberal nations in the communist bloc where nascent free markets functioned, Hungary and Yugoslavia being the most open and accessible. Cross-border consumption in Central and Eastern Europe has become more widespread since the 1990s, since the fall of communist regimes made it possible to cross borders without strict control (Michalkó, G., 2004; Timothy, D. J., 2005).

COMPREHENSIVE STUDIES ON SHOPPING TOURISM IN HUNGARY

The interpretations of cross-border consumption in the Hungarian literature are as wide-ranging as in the international studies. Sik (1997) introduces the so-called Comecon markets¹ mainly from a sociological perspective, analyzing their international aspects as well. Wessely (2002) also describes shopping tourism during the communist era from a sociological point of view. She points out that shopping tourism became a widespread practice in the Eastern European socialist economies of shortage as soon as travel restrictions, at first among socialist countries and, later, to the West, had been relaxed. Wessely (2002) concludes that shopping tourism was not a form of popular resistance to the political system but rather a set of creative practices of adaptation to the everyday exigencies it created.

Tamás Hardi (2001) investigates border regions and cross-border cooperation in the Carpathian Basin from a geographical perspective. He claims that cooperation in borderlands can be based on five dimensions: political, social, economic, spatial-structural, and institutional. The author says that social relations remain active long even after border changes (such as after the emergence of the new borders created by the Trianon Treaty in 1920). Relatives and ethnic minorities keep social connections from generation to generation for a long time. Consequently, these social relations are activated first when a previously closed border opens again. The other important aspect of the social dimension, claims Hardi, is shopping tourism. Shopping tourism is one of the first (and necessarily occurring) forms of using the borderland together with people living on both sides of the border. With respect to creating a common space, the important effects of shopping tourism are the emergence of a common language (accepting the usage of one or both languages) and the appearance of regular contacts.

According to Hardi (2001) the most common and intensive motivation of cross-border social relations is shopping tourism. At the beginning of the 1990s there was a general tendency among Hungarians to organize shopping trips to neighbouring countries due to price advantages, wider range of products or favourable exchange rates. Nowadays, shopping as a motivation for travel is important rather for travellers from neighbouring countries heading towards Hungary. This provides significant revenue for regions near border crossings.

The basis of this phenomenon is the relatively lower level of prices in Hungary (in the case of tourists coming from Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia). The price level differences (reaching 30-40%) are able to attract customers from a relatively large area. For instance in the case of Lenti (a small town near the Hungarian-Slovenian border) the catchment area reaches even Ljubljana (capital of Slovenia). However, the attractiveness

¹ The COMECON was officially called the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. This inter-governmental organisation covered the Soviet Bloc countries. The main activities were joint planning and the promotion of bi- and multilateral trade, along with co-operation in the specialisation of production, establishing joint enterprises and so on. The so-called COMECON open-air markets, in Hungary and other post Soviet bloc countries, are usually associated with cheap and low quality goods, often of suspicious origin, sold by entrepreneurs with little capital or by local or foreign amateur traders. Market places possess only the absolute minimal necessary infrastructure and are characteristically held in the open air (Czakó, Á. – Sik, E., 1999).

of price advantages is rather a 'fragile' phenomenon. Wider product range (in the case of tourists coming from Serbia, Romania, Ukraine, and Slovakia) provides longer lasting connections (Hardi, T., 2001).

A special case of shopping across borders is when differences in product variety occur because there is no significant town or city on the neighbouring side of the border which could compete with the product range of a city on the Hungarian side of the border. In this case the redevelopment of natural (existed before 1920) catchment areas of Hungarian cities can be detected. Border crossings are partially motivated by shopping, however, the needs of younger generations for entertainment (visiting cinemas, theatres, and shopping malls) are also observable. This phenomenon is probably the most durable opportunity to keep the additional consumer power generated by shopping tourism for a longer period (characteristic examples are Sopron or Győr) (Hardi, T., 2001).

The most comprehensive scientific research in shopping tourism in Hungary has been done by Gábor Michalkó (Michalkó, G., 2004). Michalkó (2004) interprets shopping across borders from the perspective of tourism geography. In everyday terms 'shopping tourism' means trips motivated primarily by shopping. In this case, says Michalkó, the primary motivation and activity of the tourist is shopping, thus travelling fulfils a commercial function as well. Those tourists, he continues, who spend at least half (or more) of their total expenditure on buying goods or services can be regarded as shopping tourists.

Michalkó (2004) distinguishes three basic categories within shopping tourism. The first is called 'business shopping' and 'buying services'. When shopping is motivated by a rational economic transaction, i.e. it provides profit, we speak about 'business shopping'. In this case the goods purchased can serve two basic functions: in the first case the tourist is in a hard economic situation so he resells these items through the informal economy and in this way he receives supplementary income. In the second case the goods purchased are used by the shopper themselves or by their relatives. According to Michalkó (2004) cross-border shopping is motivated by four main factors:

- Due to the shortage of goods or the limited product variety certain goods can only be purchased in areas distant from home.
- There is a significant difference in price levels of goods available between the home country and the destination country.
- Buying high-quality goods or products of famous international brands.
- Differences in the circumstances of shopping.

Trips might be motivated not only by shopping but buying services as well. If tourists make a trip in order to use cheaper, better or unique services, we speak about 'buying services' within the framework of shopping tourism (Michalkó, G., 2004).

The traditional notion of shopping tourism can be detected in the above mentioned forms of consumption. These trips, often across borders, do not include overnight stays in most cases. International travellers usually cross the same border when they travel in or out of a country, so they can be called 'day trippers' or 'excursionists' in terms of border statistics. Generally, these 'tourists' do not use the catering infrastructure (such as restaurants) (Michalkó, G., 2004).

The second category of shopping tourism distinguished by Michalkó is called leisure or spontaneous shopping. In this case shopping can be interpreted as a secondary or complementary activity in addition to the primary motivation of the trip (e.g. sunbathing, skiing, etc.) and it serves as gathering experience and spending leisure time in a pleasant and enjoyable manner. In this case tourists usually buy souvenirs and gifts. Naturally, spontaneous shopping is also possible, for instance when tourists just browse shop windows and they accidentally glimpse goods that they cannot resist purchasing (Michalkó, G., 2004).

Last but not least, the third category of shopping tourism according to Michalkó is termed 'shopping during organized commercial trips'. We speak about 'organized

commercial trips' when a company cooperates with a travel agency in order to promote its products during the trip. These trips are significantly cheaper than conventional tours and tourists (normally) are not forced to buy anything. However, due to enjoyable circumstances and other socio-psychological factors, shopping inclination is higher than under conventional conditions, thus 'commercial trips' remain popular and profitable activities (Michalkó, G., 2004).

EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON CROSS-BORDER CONSUMPTION ALONG THE BORDERS OF HUNGARY

Having introduced the most important comprehensive works on shopping tourism in Hungary, this chapter outlines empirical studies on cross-border shopping with special emphasis on the northeastern borders of Hungary.

Sikos T. and Kovács (2008) have done research in cross-border retailing in the southwestern borderlands of Slovakia from the perspectives of economics, geography and retailing. The authors claim that analyzing the cross-border trade processes in border areas has become especially important, because since the accession of Hungary and Slovakia to the European Union and the Schengen area cross-border trade has been determined instead of administrative conditions by market circumstances as well as geographical and infrastructural conditions. They conclude that the improvement of the retail trade sector in southwestern Slovakia affects not only the local population but cross-border shopping as well. According to their research results, there are notable differences between Hungarian and Slovakian cross-border shoppers concerning the frequency and motivations of their shopping. There is an asymmetrical relationship, since shoppers living on the Slovakian side of the border cross the border more frequently and in greater numbers than do Hungarians. The reason for this, argue the authors, is that Hungarian cities near the border (Győr, Tatabánya, and Budapest) offer a number of retail services that are not available on the Slovakian side of the border (Sikos T. T. – Kovács, A., 2008).

Béla Baranyi and his colleagues (Balsók et al., 2001) conducted research along the Ukrainian and Romanian borders of Hungary. Their study was based on a questionnaire survey filled in by the leaders of local governments. According to their results 14% of local governments regarded the proximity of borders a positive circumstance primarily because of the benefits of shopping tourism. However, the authors conclude that in many cases settlements near border crossings do not profit from shopping tourism, because cross-border shoppers often travel to more distant, but larger commercial centres where product range is much wider such as in Debrecen or Nyíregyháza. Additionally, the significance of tourism in the northeastern borderlands of Hungary is still minimal, since the majority of border-crossers are day-trippers motivated by shopping or smuggling fuel or alcohol, consequently they spend less than 24 hours in Hungary and do not require accommodation.

A number of studies investigate the significance and characteristics of the so-called Comecon market in Nyíregyháza with special emphasis on cross-border trade, smuggling and informal economy in the Hungarian-Ukrainian-Romanian cross-border space. Horváth and Kovách (1999) analyze the illegal fuel trading and the role of the Comecon market in Nyíregyháza primarily from a sociological point of view. The authors claim that a characteristic economic system developed in the region during the ages of transition from socialism to market economy operated by the losers of the transitional period. This economic system proved to be successful, since the government could not offer a workable alternative except for socio-political aids (Horváth Gergely, K. - Kovách, I., 1999).

András Csité and his colleagues (Csité et al., 1995) also observe the sociological aspects of informal trade along the Hungarian-Ukrainian border and the role of the Comecon market in Nyíregyháza. They found that the actors of cross-border trade could be categorized into three groups: the mafia, professional traders, and additional traders. According to their research results the mafia is responsible for setting the rules and

making illegal transactions (such as smuggling guns, drugs and humans). Professional traders specialize on a relatively small range of goods but they buy and sell them in huge quantities. They are typically men between 30-35 years of age and they embody the 'self-made man' idol. Additional traders sell a wide-range of products in relatively small quantities. They are typically women between 25-50 years of age, and usually un- or lower-educated. The study concludes that the elimination of this informal economic system in this region would disadvantage those layers of society who already live in adverse social and economic conditions today.

Sándor Kókai (1995) carried out an empirical study in order to determine the catchment area of the Comecon market in Nyíregyháza. According to the research results three zones of the catchment area are distinguished based on the intensity of the gravity zone. The first zone extends as far as Satu-Mare, Baia Mare, Mukachevo and Uzhgorod. The border of the second zone is to be found on the watersheds of the Carpathian Mountains. Oradea, Cluj Napoca and Târgu Mureş are the most significant cities belonging to this category. The third zone comprises areas beyond the Carpathian Mountains – the most significant being Bucureşti, Târgovişte, Piatra Neamţ, Botoşani, L'viv, Ivano-Frankivsk, and Krakow (Kókai, S., 1995).

Toca and Horga (2008) carried out a questionnaire survey in order to examine public opinion about cross-border cooperation along the Hungarian-Romanian border and between Debrecen and Oradea. The authors found that shopping was one of the major motivations for visiting the neighbouring country or city. 13,6% of respondents in Oradea and 15% in Debrecen said that the primary motivation of their trip was shopping.

Tömöri (2006, 2008) has investigated cross-border shopping tourism in Debrecen. Two empirical surveys were carried out in four large-area shopping malls (Tesco, Cora, Malompark and Metro) in Debrecen in the summer of 2006 and 2007. In order to estimate the number and composition of cross-border shoppers, cars with foreign number-plates were counted in the parking lots of the above shopping malls. Research results prove that the majority of shopping tourists in Debrecen arrive from Romania and within that the neighbouring Bihor county. Results of the study also showed that the proportion of Romanian shopping tourists within the total number of shopping tourists was 59% in 2006 and 77.7% in 2007. In other words, shopping tourists from Romania compose an overall majority within shopping tourists arriving in Debrecen. According to Tömöri (2010) shopping tourism in Debrecen is highly influenced by cross-border factors, since approximately 60% of shoppers arriving from Romania came from the neighbouring Bihor county at the time of the observations. Besides, the catchment area of shopping malls in Debrecen includes counties in Northern Transylvania (Tömöri, M., 2009, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Shopping tourism is a widespread and scientifically studied phenomenon all over the world. Although shopping tourism is known by almost everybody its, scientific study and interpretation is rather complex. This article attempted to introduce the general theoretical background of shopping tourism chiefly from the perspective of tourism geography.

Since the accession of Eastern and Central European countries to the EU and the Schengen area studies of cross-border shopping have become highly important, because shopping and other activities across borders have recently been organized freely on the basis of market conditions in this region, too.

It is hoped that for a growing number of people living in Central and Eastern Europe shopping tourism will not be an economic necessity any more, but it will be part of everyday life providing a pleasant way of spending leisure time and an enjoyable activity during holidays.

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