

INSTAGRAM CONTENT FORMATS THAT PERFORM EFFECTIVELY FOR CLEAN-LABEL FOOD BRANDS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON CONSUMER TRUST AND PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of clean-label food brands reflects a broader shift toward transparency, health awareness, and ethical consumption. Because clean-label attributes—natural ingredients, minimal processing, and the absence of artificial additives—are credence qualities that consumers cannot verify independently, trust becomes the central currency of clean-label marketing. Instagram has emerged as a primary channel through which these brands communicate, educate, and build credibility with consumers. This paper condenses a larger dissertation examining which Instagram content formats are most effective for clean-label food brands and how they shape consumer trust and perception. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines qualitative content analysis of four Indian clean-label brands—Epigamia, Yoga Bar, The Whole Truth, and Slurrrp Farm—with a quantitative survey of 301 Instagram users, analysed through descriptive statistics, reliability testing, correlation, and regression in SPSS. The study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework combining Signaling Theory, Social Proof Theory, Media Representation Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. Findings show that transparency-oriented content is significantly and positively associated with consumer trust ($r = .216, p < .01$), while engagement metrics such as likes and comments show no significant relationship with trust, and none of the perceptual variables significantly predict purchase intention. Content analysis reveals four distinct trust-building architectures—functional, social, cognitive, and emotional—each aligned with a different content format and theoretical mechanism. The study concludes that Instagram functions less as a sales channel and more as a trust-building ecosystem for clean-label brands, offering theoretical and practical implications for media researchers, marketers, and clean-label entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Clean-label food brands, Instagram marketing, content formats, consumer trust, brand perception.

INTRODUCTION

Rising health consciousness, distrust of industrially processed food, and greater access to product information have reshaped how consumers evaluate what they eat (Asioli et al., 2017). This shift has given rise to "clean-label" foods—products marketed around recognisable, minimally processed ingredients and the absence of artificial additives. Unlike certifications such as "organic," clean-label has no single legal definition; it is a consumer-driven concept built through brand storytelling rather than regulation (Asioli et al., 2017).

Because clean-label attributes are credence qualities—features that cannot be verified even after consumption—clean-label brands are unusually dependent on communication to establish credibility (Asioli et al., 2017). Instagram has become one of the most influential channels for this communication. Its visual, interactive format allows brands to present food not merely as a product but as part of a lifestyle, using reels, carousels, stories, and captions to translate technical information—ingredient origin, sourcing, health benefits—into accessible, aesthetically engaging content (Blanc, 2019; Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Unlike traditional advertising, Instagram enables two-way communication through comments, shares, and saves, which is foundational to trust-building (Blanc, 2019). Indian clean-label brands such as Yoga Bar, Slurp Farm, The Whole Truth, and Epigamia have used ingredient disclosure, founder narratives, user-generated content, and influencer partnerships to distinguish themselves from mass-market competitors, reflecting a broader shift from persuasive to informational, trust-based advertising. Despite the growing academic interest in social media marketing, there is limited sector-specific research on how clean-label food brands specifically use Instagram content formats to build trust, as opposed to social media use in general (Durbul et al., 2024).

This gap is significant because the credence nature of clean-label claims makes brands especially reliant on communication strategies that convey transparency and authenticity effectively (Asioli et al., 2017). This study addresses that gap by focusing specifically on Instagram content formats—rather than overall platform usage—and examining their effect on consumer trust and perception within the clean-label food category.

Objectives

The study aims to (1) investigate how clean-label brands use Instagram content to convey transparency and authenticity; (2) examine how trust-building elements—influencers, interactivity, and transparency cues—contribute to consumer trust; and (3) assess how Instagram communication shapes consumer perceptions of brand credibility, healthfulness, and reliability.

Research Questions

- Which Instagram content formats do clean-label brands rely on most to communicate their products and values?
- How do different content types affect consumer trust and perception of clean-label brands?
- What Instagram content is perceived by consumers as most credible when evaluating clean-label brands?

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses on four Indian clean-label brands across dairy, snack, and children's food categories, and treats trust and perception—not purchase behaviour—as the primary outcomes, keeping the research within media and communication studies rather than consumer economics. Limitations include reliance on self-reported survey data susceptible to response bias, a cross-sectional design that precludes causal claims, and a single-platform focus that limits generalisability beyond Instagram.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The study integrates five complementary theories to explain how Instagram content shapes consumer trust in a credence-good category.

Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) explains how parties reduce information asymmetry by sending costly, hard-to-fake signals. Clean-label attributes are credence qualities that cannot be verified post-purchase, making brands reliant on signaling—detailed ingredient disclosures, sourcing information, and myth-busting content—to demonstrate confidence in product quality. Signals lose credibility when inconsistent with observable brand behaviour, which is why perceived authenticity is central to trust formation.

Social Proof Theory (Cialdini, 2007) holds that people look to others' behaviour to guide their own decisions under uncertainty, an effect strengthened by similarity, uncertainty, and the number of others engaging in a behaviour. On Instagram, influencer endorsements, user-generated content, and visible engagement metrics function as social validation cues. However, this effect is conditional: influencer credibility depends on perceived authenticity and product-content fit rather than follower count alone (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017).

Media Representation Theory (Hall, 1997) frames media as an active constructor of meaning rather than a neutral mirror of reality, through processes of encoding and decoding. Clean-label brands construct meaning through repeated visual codes—minimalist design, earthy colour palettes, imagery of raw ingredients—that come to signify purity, health, and ethical living, independent of whether the underlying claims are substantiated (Blanc, 2019). This raises the possibility of a "transparency illusion," in which the aesthetic performance of openness substitutes for substantive disclosure (Beverland, 2005).

Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) proposes that behavioural intention is shaped by attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Instagram communication primarily shapes attitude; it does little to influence offline social norms or structural barriers such as price and availability. This suggests Instagram content can shift trust and perception without necessarily translating into purchase intention.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) distinguishes central-route processing—based on argument quality, producing durable attitudes—from peripheral-route processing, based on heuristic cues such as source attractiveness or consensus. Detailed, informational content (ingredient breakdowns, scientific explanations) is more likely to prompt central-route processing and cognitive trust, while influencer content and aesthetic imagery are more likely to work through peripheral cues, producing affective trust.

Together, these theories suggest that Instagram trust formation is not a single mechanism but a combination of credibility signaling, social validation, symbolic representation, and differentiated cognitive processing. No single framework is sufficient on its own: Signaling Theory explains why detailed disclosure is persuasive but says little about emotional resonance; Social Proof Theory explains the power of influencers and user content but does not specify when such cues fail to translate into durable trust; Media Representation Theory explains how repeated visual and narrative codes construct brand meaning over time but does not distinguish informative from purely aesthetic transparency; and the Theory of Planned Behavior, paired with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, explains why attitudinal shifts produced by Instagram content may or may not culminate in purchase behaviour. Their integration therefore offers a more complete account of how consumer trust is assembled from multiple, sometimes independent, communicative mechanisms operating simultaneously on the same platform.

Related Studies

Empirical work on clean-label perception confirms that clean-label attributes function as credence qualities shaped more by brand storytelling than formal regulation, with younger and more health-conscious consumers showing the strongest preference for natural, minimally processed products (Asioli et al., 2017). Detailed ingredient and sourcing information has been shown to increase consumer trust more than abstract "natural" claims, consistent with Signaling Theory's prediction that costly, verifiable signals are more credible than cheap talk.

At the same time, repeated exposure to vague or unsubstantiated clean claims can produce "transparency fatigue," eroding rather than building trust, underscoring the importance of substantive over symbolic transparency (Rawlins, 2008). Research on social media and trust more broadly finds that engagement—cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment in brand content—can foster brand advocacy and peer-driven credibility (Brodie et al., 2013). Studies of electronic word-of-mouth show that source credibility and argument quality are the strongest predictors of consumers' willingness to adopt online opinions, positioning peer-generated content as a supplement to, or substitute for, formal brand communication (Cheung et al., 2009, as cited in the source study). Work specifically on organic food marketing finds that social media interaction—particularly electronic word-of-mouth and transparency-oriented content—significantly predicts consumer trust, exceeding the credibility of traditional advertising (Durbul et al., 2024). Influencer marketing research complicates simple assumptions about reach and credibility. (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017) found that influencers with very large followings are not necessarily more persuasive than those with moderate followings, because mega-influencers can seem less relatable; a mismatch between an influencer's niche and the promoted product also damages brand attitude. This nuance is directly relevant to clean-label brands, whose positioning depends heavily on perceived authenticity. Content-format research on Instagram specifically finds that video content generates more engagement than static images, and that posts featuring people outperform product-only posts, while informational content proves just as engaging as entertainment content—challenging assumptions that entertainment dominates social platforms (Tafesse & Wood, 2021). Studies of platform-level engagement further show that Instagram elicits more aesthetic and affective engagement than more text-driven platforms, reinforcing its suitability for identity-based, lifestyle-oriented food branding (Blanc, 2019). Brand authenticity research, drawing on ethnographic work with luxury producers, identifies authenticity as a strategic communicative achievement—built through consistency, sincerity, heritage, and non-commercial framing—rather than an inherent brand trait (Beverland, 2005). This work also cautions that authenticity signals are themselves mediated performances, a tension directly relevant to Instagram's aestheticised communication. Relationship-marketing research frames trust and commitment as central mediators of successful exchange relationships, with shared values, honest communication, and the absence of opportunistic behaviour as key antecedents of trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Indian-context studies remain comparatively scarce. Available work suggests that Instagram is regarded by emerging Indian food brands as the most effective medium for building trust, owing to its visual and narrative affordances, though Indian clean-label brands vary considerably in how much ingredient detail they disclose versus relying on aesthetic signaling. Content analyses of Indian clean-label Instagram accounts identify ingredient disclosure, educational posts, and influencer collaboration as the most common recurring content themes, but also note substantial variation in transparency depth between brands, with some offering granular ingredient information and others relying primarily on aesthetic imagery to imply openness. This variation mirrors patterns observed in Western clean-label markets, suggesting that the tension between substantive and symbolic transparency is not culturally bound but a structural feature of credence-good marketing on visually oriented

platforms. Studies of parasocial interaction further deepen the understanding of why certain influencer relationships are more persuasive than others: consumers who perceive an imagined, ongoing relationship with an influencer tend to view that influencer's recommendations as more credible and are more willing to act on them, extending Social Proof Theory into the specific psychological mechanism through which peer validation is internalised. Similarly, research on brand authenticity scales identifies consistency, continuity, and credibility as measurable dimensions that consumers use—often intuitively—to judge whether a brand's Instagram presence reflects genuine practice or strategic performance, reinforcing Beverland's (2005) observation that authenticity itself is a communicative accomplishment rather than a default state.

Research Gaps

Existing literature leaves several gaps this study addresses: most social media marketing research treats platforms and product categories generically, without sector-specific attention to clean-label food; prior work rarely differentiates content *formats* (ingredient disclosure, educational carousels, influencer content, founder narratives) in relation to trust outcomes; purchase intention is frequently treated as the primary outcome, overshadowing the communicative processes of trust and perception formation that precede it; Signaling, Social Proof, and Media Representation theories are rarely integrated into a single analytic framework; and clean-label research remains concentrated in Western markets, with little attention to India despite its rapidly growing digitally native clean-label sector. The resulting conceptual framework organises Instagram content into five formats—transparency-oriented, social-proof, emotional-storytelling, educational, and aesthetic/lifestyle content—theorised to shape three trust dimensions (cognitive, affective, social trust), which in turn inform five perception outcomes (perceived transparency, authenticity, credibility, healthfulness, and overall brand image), moderated by consumer characteristics such as health consciousness and Instagram usage intensity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive, analytical, mixed-methods research design combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative survey research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The qualitative strand examines how clean-label brands construct Instagram communication; the quantitative strand measures how consumers perceive and respond to that communication.

Qualitative sampling Using purposive sampling, four Indian clean-label brands—Epigamia, Yoga Bar, The Whole Truth, and Slurrp Farm—were selected for their established Instagram presence and their coverage of distinct clean-label categories (dairy, snack bars, and children's nutrition). Their official Instagram accounts were monitored over a three-month period and coded thematically, following (Braun & Clarke's, 2006) approach: posts were first categorised by format (reels, carousels, static images, stories), then coded for communicative intent (ingredient disclosure, influencer partnership, founder messaging, emotional storytelling, and so on), and finally analysed for their dominant trust-building mechanism.

Quantitative sampling A structured questionnaire, distributed online to Instagram users familiar with clean-label brands, yielded 301 valid responses. Respondents skewed young (53% aged 18–25), were near-evenly split by gender (47.7% male, 47.0% female), predominantly urban (66% Tier-1 cities), highly educated (76% undergraduate or postgraduate), and heavy Instagram users (87% using the platform more than one hour daily)—a profile well suited to studying Instagram-based brand communication.

Instrument The questionnaire measured five constructs on a five-point Likert scale:

Information Quality, Transparency, Engagement, Trust, and Purchase Intention. Items were adapted from established frameworks—argument quality in electronic word-of-mouth research, organisational transparency theory (Rawlins, 2008), and commitment-trust theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994)—and refined through a pilot study confirming their suitability without requiring revision.

Analysis Quantitative data were analysed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha for reliability, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression. Qualitative data were analysed thematically, with findings from both strands integrated through methodological triangulation.

Ethics All participants gave informed consent, participation was voluntary and anonymous, and no personally identifying information was collected. Brand content analysed was drawn entirely from publicly available Instagram posts, interpreted for academic research purposes only.

Content Analysis Findings

Across the three-month analysis, Instagram reels were the most frequently used format overall, though brands deployed them very differently, reflecting distinct trust-building strategies rather than uniform platform behaviour. Carousel posts served primarily as vehicles for transparency and education, since their sequential, multi-slide structure reduces cognitive load when conveying complex ingredient or sourcing information. Static images maintained visual and aesthetic consistency, while stories sustained real-time interactivity and behind-the-scenes access, fostering parasocial connection.

Analysis of the four brands revealed four distinct trust-building architectures:

Epigamia built *functional trust* through aesthetic consistency and product desirability. Its Instagram feed favoured polished, café-style lifestyle imagery over detailed ingredient disclosure, with only moderate, selectively framed transparency (e.g., protein content, absence of preservatives) and lifestyle-aligned rather than expertise-driven influencer partnerships. Credibility here functioned largely as a signal carried by visual investment rather than informational depth.

Yoga Bar built *social trust* through influencer validation and community identification. Fitness influencers regularly and organically integrated products into workout content, generating authenticity through niche fit rather than reach. Ingredient disclosure was present but secondary to the brand's positioning within an active-lifestyle community, consistent with Social Proof Theory's prediction that social validation is most persuasive under uncertainty and perceived similarity.

The Whole Truth built *cognitive trust* through what can be described as radical transparency. Its content was dominated by carousel-based ingredient breakdowns, myth-busting comparisons, and founder-led educational messaging, with minimal reliance on influencers or lifestyle imagery. This strategy exemplifies costly, hard-to-falsify signaling: by inviting direct comparison with competitors, the brand signals confidence that competing on transparency benefits it.

Slurrp Farm built *emotional trust* through narrative identification, particularly around parenting and child nutrition. Family-centred storytelling, parental testimonials, and accessible (rather than technical) educational content combined affective and informational appeals, illustrating how emotional and cognitive trust pathways can be blended rather than treated as mutually exclusive.

These architectures also differed in transparency depth—ranging from The Whole Truth's *substantive* transparency (detailed, verifiable disclosure) to Slurrp Farm's *accessible* transparency (simplified, emotionally framed) to Epigamia's and Yoga Bar's more *selective*

disclosure (highlighting select advantages without full ingredient transparency)—echoing the distinction between disclosure, clarity, and accuracy as separate dimensions of organisational transparency (Rawlins, 2008). This variation raises an important critical question: aesthetic minimalism and natural imagery can function as a "transparency illusion," conveying openness without substantive informational depth, and potentially leaving less nutritionally literate consumers more vulnerable to symbolic rather than substantive trust cues (Beverland, 2005).

Influencer dependence also varied systematically with each brand's trust architecture rather than randomly. Yoga Bar showed the heaviest reliance on influencers, consistent with a social-trust strategy in which validation is outsourced to relatable, niche-aligned voices. Slurrp Farm showed moderate reliance, concentrated among parenting-focused creators whose credibility rested on shared lived experience rather than technical expertise. Epigamia was selective, prioritising aesthetic fit over subject-matter authority, while The Whole Truth was comparatively independent of influencer marketing altogether, instead anchoring credibility in founder voice and informational authority. This patterning is consistent with the proposition that influencer effectiveness depends on perceived authenticity and product-content congruence rather than reach (De Veirman, Cauberghe & Hudders, 2017), and it suggests that brands calibrate their use of social proof according to which trust dimension they are primarily trying to build.

Emotional storytelling intensity followed a similar brand-specific logic: Slurrp Farm's content was the most narratively rich, built around family and caregiving; Epigamia and Yoga Bar showed moderate emotional register anchored in lifestyle aspiration and fitness identity; and The Whole Truth's content remained the most documentary and fact-oriented, with minimal emotional appeal. Read together, these patterns support the view that Instagram credibility in the clean-label category is not a single outcome but is assembled from at least four distinguishable pathways—functional, social, cognitive, and emotional trust—each activated by a different combination of format, disclosure depth, and narrative register, and each best supported by a different content format: carousels for cognitive trust, reels for emotional and social trust, static images for functional trust, and stories for relational, real-time trust.

Data Analysis and Findings

Reliability analysis confirmed strong internal consistency across all constructs (Cronbach's alpha ranging from .785 for Engagement to .902 for Purchase Intention), supporting the psychometric soundness of the survey instrument. Descriptive statistics showed moderate-to-moderately-high agreement across constructs (means between 3.31 and 3.51 on a five-point scale), with Purchase Intention highest and Engagement lowest, suggesting a broadly positive but not uncritical consumer view of clean-label Instagram communication.

Correlation analysis produced the study's central empirical finding: Transparency was significantly and positively correlated with Trust ($r = .216$, $p < .01$), supporting Signaling Theory's prediction that voluntary, detailed disclosure reduces uncertainty and builds credibility in a credence-good category. Transparency was also positively associated with Information Quality ($r = .156$, $p < .05$) and Engagement ($r = .143$, $p < .05$). By contrast, Engagement showed no significant relationship with Trust ($r = .093$, $p > .05$), and Information Quality was only weakly and non-significantly related to Trust ($r = .108$, $p > .05$). None of the four constructs—Information Quality, Transparency, Engagement, or Trust—was significantly correlated with Purchase Intention (all r values between .018 and .056, $p > .05$).

Regression analysis testing whether Information Quality, Transparency, Engagement, and Trust predicted Purchase Intention produced a non-significant model ($R^2 = .008$, adjusted $R^2 = -.005$; $F(4, 296) = .591$, $p = .670$), with none of the individual predictors reaching significance (all $p > .21$). This indicates that perceptual variables shaped by Instagram content,

while meaningfully related to one another, explain almost none of the variance in stated purchase intention.

Hypothesis testing based on these results shows partial support for the study's expectations. The hypothesis that transparency-oriented content is positively associated with trust and authenticity (H1) was supported by the significant transparency–trust correlation. The hypothesis that engagement, influencer content, and responsiveness independently build trust (H2) was not supported, given the non-significant engagement–trust relationship—suggesting that visible interactivity alone does not confer credibility without perceived authenticity. The hypothesis that Instagram communication favourably shapes perception via trust (H3) was only partially supported: while transparency reliably predicted trust, trust did not significantly predict purchase intention, consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior's separation of attitude from behavioural intention, which also depends on subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen, 1991).

Taken together, these findings suggest that substantive transparency, not general interactivity or emotional appeal, is the strongest Instagram-based driver of consumer trust in clean-label food brands, while trust itself operates as a necessary but insufficient condition for purchase behaviour.

These results also carry clear theoretical implications. The strength of the transparency–trust relationship extends Signaling Theory into the social media environment, confirming that digital disclosure cues function analogously to traditional costly signals in reducing information asymmetry (Spence, 1973). The null engagement–trust relationship, meanwhile, qualifies rather than contradicts Social Proof Theory: it suggests that social validation cues such as likes, comments, and testimonials influence trust only when they are perceived as authentic and congruent with brand identity, not simply by virtue of being visible or numerous. And the absence of a significant trust–purchase-intention link reinforces the Theory of Planned Behavior's core claim that attitude, however favourable, is only one of several inputs into behavioural intention, alongside subjective norms and perceived behavioural control that Instagram content alone cannot fully address. Methodologically, these findings caution against research designs that treat engagement metrics as proxies for either trust or purchase readiness, and they support the use of direct, multi-item measures of perceived transparency and credibility as more diagnostic indicators of communicative effectiveness than platform-native engagement statistics.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to identify which Instagram content formats work for clean-label food brands and how they shape consumer trust and perception. Content analysis of four Indian clean-label brands—Epigamia, Yoga Bar, The Whole Truth, and Slurp Farm—revealed four distinct trust-building architectures: functional trust through aesthetic consistency, social trust through influencer and community validation, cognitive trust through radical transparency, and emotional trust through narrative identification. Each architecture aligns with a different content format (static images, reels, carousels, and blended emotional-educational content respectively) and a different theoretical mechanism (Signaling Theory, Social Proof Theory, Media Representation Theory, and combined cognitive-affective processing).

The survey component adds crucial empirical texture to this picture. Transparency-oriented content is significantly linked to consumer trust, affirming that voluntary, detailed disclosure functions as a credible signal in a market defined by information asymmetry. However, engagement metrics commonly treated as proxies for brand success—likes, comments, shares—show no significant independent relationship with trust, challenging the

assumption that visible popularity equates to credibility. Similarly, the absence of a significant link between trust and purchase intention affirms that attitudinal outcomes like trust, while valuable in themselves, do not automatically translate into behavioural intention without the presence of enabling structural conditions such as price, availability, and social norms.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The study demonstrates the value of integrating Signaling Theory, Social Proof Theory, Media Representation Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior into a single explanatory framework for digital trust formation in a credence-good category, and it introduces a useful distinction between *substantive* transparency (verifiable, detailed disclosure) and *symbolic* transparency (aesthetic representation of openness without informational depth)—a distinction with both theoretical and ethical implications.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For clean-label brand managers, the findings recommend investing in substantive, verifiable transparency content—detailed ingredient sourcing, explicit statements of what products exclude, and process explanations—rather than aesthetic transparency signals alone. Content strategy should be matched to the desired trust dimension: carousels for cognitive trust, reels and narrative content for emotional and social trust, and consistent visual identity for functional trust. Engagement metrics should not be treated as proxies for trust in performance evaluation; direct measurement of perceived transparency and credibility offers a more meaningful gauge of communicative effectiveness. Marketers should also manage expectations around the limited direct link between trust and purchase behaviour, recognising that offline barriers—affordability, availability, and social influence—remain decisive.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As a cross-sectional, self-report study limited to Instagram and four Indian brands, the findings cannot establish causality or generalise beyond this context. Future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to test causal relationships between transparency depth and trust over time, incorporate additional Theory of Planned Behavior constructs (subjective norms, perceived behavioural control) to better explain the attitude–behaviour gap, and extend cross-cultural comparison to understand how clean-label communication should be adapted across markets.

Ultimately, this research suggests that Instagram operates less as a conventional marketing channel and more as a layered trust-building ecosystem for clean-label food brands—one in which brand identity, transparency signals, social validation, and symbolic representation interact to shape consumer perception. The brands most likely to sustain long-term credibility are those whose Instagram communication is not merely performed transparency, but a genuine extension of verifiable practice.

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