

The European consumer

- his preoccupations**
- his aspirations**
- his information**

1976

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*'*The European consumer,*'*

- "* — his preoccupations
- his aspirations
- his information*"*

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Two hundred and sixty-five million Europeans in the nine countries of the Community make two hundred and sixty-five million consumers. What do they think ? How do they behave ? For guidance about this, and for publication, an extensive sample investigation was ordered by the European Commission, and carried out in October/November 1975, covering the general public aged 15 and over, in the nine countries of the Community.

Interviews were carried out with some 9 500 persons (divided into representative national samples) by researchers from eight specialised institutes on the basis of a questionnaire containing some sixty questions.

This was not a general survey of consumption in all its aspects and the development of consumer protection organizations. It was an initial study of Europeans' attitudes and preoccupations in certain aspects of their daily lives : shopping, using public services, obtaining information from mass media (by advertising or otherwise), scientific tests and comparisons...

The results of the survey will be used by Commission departments to implement the "preliminary programme of the European Economic Community for a consumer protection and information policy" adopted by the Council of Ministers of the European Communities in April 1975 (1).

While it was being designed the survey was submitted in April 1975 to the Steering Committee of the Consumers Consultative Committee of the Commission of the European Communities.

(1) OJ No C 92 of 25 April 1975.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the following factors must be taken into account when commenting on and interpreting the results, particularly the tables :

- most of the figures given are national and Community averages which cannot reflect regional or local peculiarities;
- in many cases, the structures of trade and the working and extent of public services vary from one E.E.C. country to another;
- incomes and consumer habits, too, vary quite widely from one country to another;
- national legislation and regulation on consumer protection is at various stages, reflecting the institutions of each country, and its political and social life.

This brochure is divided into three parts :

- 1) an analysis of the results,
- 2) consumer typology,
- 3) some replies in figures.

PART ONE

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

1. The consumer and inflation.-- Not surprisingly, the majority of consumers questioned (66% for the Community as a whole) considered that in the twelve months preceding the survey prices had risen faster than their income. The countries where the effect of inflation was most strongly felt were Italy and Belgium. Denmark was the only country where the bulk of the population felt that it was holding its own or doing fairly well against inflation.

(see tables N° 1 and N° 2)

As one might have expected, families with the largest numbers of members of the household and those with the lowest incomes were more aware than other households of the drop in their purchasing power.

The adjustments in behaviour most often selected in the event of prices continuing to rise over the next few months were :

- a. shop around for cheaper goods 82%
- b. for the time being, give up the idea of major purchases (furniture, household appliances, television, car, etc) 78%
- c. go for special offers or sale goods 75%

2. The dissatisfied consumer or user.-- European consumers have fairly often thought they were cheated when, buying something or noticed, as users, a mistake or error made by a public service: the mean proportions were 41% and 40%, respectively. In both cases the proportion was considerably higher in Italy than in the other countries. As analyses later in the report show, this feeling seems to have a connexion with general dissatisfaction with society. Be that as it may, people who said they had been dissatisfied as customers mentioned the following action taken:

- a) where goods purchased were involved, in four cases out of ten they either complained to the shop or

asked for the goods to be replaced or the money refunded;

- b) where a public service was involved, seven out of ten of them complained verbally or made representations in writing.

(see tables N° 3, N° 4, N° 5 and N° 6)

3. Consumer "rationality".-- In the Community as a whole eight people out of ten (83%) said that they often checked their change; two-thirds often checked the bill (66%), the unit price (66%) or the indications on the label or packing (65%); only four people out of ten (42%) often checked the amount weighed.

(see tables N° 7 and N° 8)

4. Consumer information.-- 43% of the respondents felt that they had sufficient information to make major purchases (furniture, household appliances, etc) and 51% felt sufficiently informed when shopping for food.

The differences between countries were much more marked than the differences between social classes in any one country. The German and Danish consumers seemed to be most aware of having sufficient information, whereas the Belgian and Italian consumers came appreciably below the mean for the Community.

5. Attitudes to advertising.-- On the whole, European consumer opinion was fairly critical of advertising:

- a) only 50% of the public considered that advertising "provides consumers with useful information";
- b) nearly eight out of ten people thought that "advertising often makes consumers buy goods which they do not really want" (77%) or that "advertising often misleads consumers as to the quality of products" (76%);
- c) moreover, 62% of the respondents believed that "brands which are heavily advertised are more expensive than those which are less advertised or are not advertised at all".

(see tables N° 9 and N° 10)

A breakdown of the answers shows that the replies of men and of women were very much in line with each other for all these questions. There was little variation according to age, but on the whole the younger people (especially among the women) tended to express an unfavourable view of advertising. So did the better-off people. But the level of formal education was the most important variable: more education tended to make people more critical of advertising.

6. Attitudes to information media.- In the Community as a whole, the medium most often regarded as providing useful consumer information was television, followed by radio and the daily newspapers. Weekly magazines and periodicals came in the fourth, and last, place.

People with a high level of formal education were more critical of each of the main information media.

The Danish, German and British respondents in general expressed a more favourable opinion of these means of information than did the French, Belgians and Italians.

The importance of television is again reflected in the fact that an average of eight people out of ten favoured the introduction or increase of television broadcasts specifically designed to give consumers objective information.

Specialised consumer information publications were not well-known: in the Community as a whole half the sample had not heard of them. Ignorance of their existence ranged from 37% of the respondents in the United Kingdom to 71% in Italy.

(see tables N° 11, N° 12 and N° 13)

7. Attitudes to consumer organizations.- There was no country where even four people in ten had precise knowledge of at least one consumer organization; the mean was lower than one person in four; by far the lowest level of awareness of such organizations was found in Italy.

Membership of these organizations was very small: about 2% of the respondents; but a sizeable section of the public would agree to pay a subscription equivalent to 7 dollars a year to receive a publication as a member of such an organization: 15% "definitely" and 32% "perhaps". Consumer protection organizations indubitably have an untapped reserve of potential "customers". (see tables N° 14 and N° 15)

People were reluctant to say anything as to the value of organizations which they knew little about but among those who did give an opinion the balance was in favour in the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Luxembourg. However, nearly six out of ten people thought that consumer organizations had little or no influence on Government decisions.

8. Attitudes to product comparison tests.- In the Community as a whole more people have heard of product comparison tests than of consumer protection organizations: 52% of the respondents had heard of the former, compared with only 44% for the latter. Moreover, the great majority of the people who had heard of the tests had a degree of trust in the results and it was even found that more than half the people who had heard of the comparative tests said that knowledge of results of such tests had affected their buying habits.

(see tables N° 16 and N° 17)

9. The consumer and public authorities.- Overall, the idea of direct subsidies to consumer organizations obtained little support but the bulk of the European public came out in favour of increased publication of the results of product comparison test and the setting up of local centres to deal with consumers' enquiries and complaints.

10. The consumer and political parties.- Over the Community as a whole 62% of the respondents felt affinities with a particular political party. Only one in ten of them thought that party defended consumers "very well"; the reply most often chosen was "fairly well"

11. The consumer and the Common Market.- The "Euro-Barometer" opinion polls carried out every six months have shown increasing interest in consumer protection among the European public. In the survey reported here, membership of the Common Market was regarded as "a good thing" by between six and eight people in ten in all the countries except the United Kingdom (50%) and Denmark (41%). Public opinion in Britain has become more favourable to membership than two years ago.

One of the most important impressions of the Common Market found among the public was that it enabled consumers to have a wider range of products (67% of the respondents). However, the idea that it helped to hold back price increases obtained only 38% of agreement.

PART TWO

CONSUMER TYPOLOGY

The questions put to about 9500 individuals in the nine countries of the Community included twenty-eight on consumer attitudes and behaviour.

In addition to examining the answers to each of the questions obtained from the sample (or from a category of respondents), it seemed useful to try to pick out the questions which were most helpful or informative for the purpose of classifying the respondents in a limited number of statistically discernible types possessing the maximum of similarity among individuals of any one type, with the maximum of differentiation between types.

Eight types were finally selected as necessary and sufficient. Their main traits are described below.

Type I : "the indifferent"

This group constituted 8% of the total sample (after weighting to make the sampling fractions representative of the population aged 15 years and over in the nine countries of the Community).

It is characterized by a high proportion of non-response to a majority of the questions and, among people assignable to this group, 63% were women, 50% were people aged 50 years or over and 70% were people with little formal education; it was also the group containing the highest numbers of people with low income and of people living in rural areas. Individuals of this type considered that the purpose of the survey had no relevance for them and they might well feel that their attitude to most social and political matters "doesn't make any difference". These are "non-leaders" - and, no doubt, usually non-voters.

This group is particularly large in Belgium (20% of the sample in that country).

Type II : "careless shoppers"

8.5% of the European population came into this group. The main characteristic was the relatively low level of positive answers to the set of questions on behaviour when shopping for food : checking the change, the final bill, the unit price, indications on the label or the amount weighed. High proportions of this group were men (64%) and fairly young people. No correlation with the level of family income was found but fewer of these people than in other groups considered that prices had risen faster than their income and fewer expressed the intention of "tightening their belt". In addition, most of these people are not much involved in politics and do not go to religious services or find religion important to them.

Type III : "sensible people"

This section of the public (8.5% of the total) regarded itself as well-informed, both for making major purchases and to shop for food. For the most part, the attitude to advertising was rather uncritical: in this group there was least agreement with the opinion that advertising often misleads people as to the quality of products.

The proportion of women (58%) was slightly higher than in the population as a whole but people aged 50 or over and people with little formal education predominated. This group contained people well satisfied with their present life and those most attached to their religion and most often attending religious services.

Socially, several traits of this group bring it close to the "indifferents", but the levels of awareness, knowledge and participation are distinctly higher. These people believe what they read in the newspapers or what they hear on the radio or television. They are well-adjusted to "the system".

Type IV : "consumers who take an interest"

This group (9% of the total) is not easily distinguishable in the general population, except that it has

rather more women than men (60% women and 40% men). Its main feature is that, although people who fall into the group did not have a critical attitude to advertising and did not feel short of information, the great majority of them (73%, compared with 48% in the public as a whole) said that if inflation continued they would "get together with other consumers to obtain more information and defend their interests". Political and religious feelings are no stronger among these people than the average for the public but they are fairly confident in consumer protection on the part of the political party which they prefer. In favouring the idea of consumers getting together they may be rather confused and not very earnest; however, they certainly do not feel that they already have plenty of information and they seem to be inclined to obtain greater knowledge of the rights of consumers. Consumer organizations would be well-advised to take note of the wishes of this group and to pay close attention to what happens to it.

Type V : "well-informed but independent-minded consumers"

At first sight it is rather surprising to discover such a sizeable group of people of this type (19%). The people who fall into this group consider that they have sufficient information and, in fact, they do : more of them than in any of the other groups have heard of consumer organizations and product comparison tests, also they know about television broadcasts designed for consumers; they think the organizations have influence and they have a degree of trust in the results of product tests; they are not highly critical of the part played by advertising but they are more than averagely inclined to think that it makes goods more expensive. Are then these people militants? No, because they have very little inclination to get together with other consumers. Many of them have an average level of formal education. Satisfaction with their present life was highest in this group; they had relatively definite political feelings and trusted the party of their choice to protect consumers but were not strongly involved with that party.

Except in level of education this fraction of the public was distributed throughout the social categories, but it was the biggest group of all in Germany (31%), Denmark and Great Britain (24%) and the Netherlands (20%).

Type VI : "consumers who are hard to please"

Type VI consumers were almost as numerous (18%) as Type V and were clearly distinguishable. The great majority of them claimed recent experience of buying something unsatisfactory or of a mistake or error as a user a public service; eight in ten had acted to assert their rights. They felt better-informed than the rest of the public, were inclined to get together with other consumers and had heard of consumer organizations (but did not think any too highly of their effectiveness) and product comparison tests (and claimed to be influenced by these in their buying habits); they would be fairly willing to become a member of a consumer organization.

A relatively high proportion of young people came into this group and it was much larger in Italy than elsewhere (26%).

Although distributed throughout the income levels, with a slight bias towards incomes above the average, this was a noticeably dissatisfied section of the public and the great majority of people of this type considered that prices had risen faster than their income. These people had definite political feelings (affinity with a particular political party and membership of that party) but had no great confidence in parties as to consumer protection; their religious feelings were scarcely any stronger than the average. But the most important feature is that these are the people with the highest score for "leadership", namely political involvement and the feeling that they influence others.

Types VII and VIII : "critics and hostile critics of the system"

These last two types, which together made up 29% of the population, were fairly alike. Both came from the section of the public most hostile to the information

media and to advertising. However, it seems worthwhile to distinguish between them.

Type VII consumers (17%) were especially critical of the information media and hostile to them, taking the view that they provided poor information or no information at all for consumers. This group contained a high proportion of younger people, there were rather more men than women and the levels of formal education and income tended to be high. In some respects this type was fairly close to the one preceding it in the list ("consumers who are hard to please"): low level of general satisfaction, a fair proportion of people in the group were politically active and high "leadership" score. This fraction of the public would be rather inclined to belong to a consumer organization: however, its criticism of or hostility to the system, chiefly expressed in the survey in attitudes to the main information media, doubtlessly extended to society as a whole and "the system" which those media reflect and perpetuate.

Again, this type was found most often in Italy (23%).

Type VIII (12%) was distributed in the same way as the overall sample between the sexes, the age groups and the levels of education and of income. Its salient feature was strong hostility to advertising.

This group had an average score for general satisfaction and few of these people were politically active (which did not prevent those who felt affinities with a particular party from feeling fairly involved with it, without much confidence). The group seemed to be poorly integrated into present-day society and to be almost instinctively oriented towards criticism and hostility in connexion with a major institution in our society, namely advertising. Nor did consumer organizations escape this radical criticism.

This type was distributed more or less uniformly between the countries.

A summary of this European consumer typology appears in Tables 62, 63 and 64.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of this survey provide material for study and action by all concerned in consumer information and protection, whether in European or national official bodies or as executives or campaigners belonging to consumer organizations.

Naturally, everyone who has taken part in work on this survey would be glad to receive critical reactions from such sources.

It is impossible to investigate such an important and complex set of themes in a preliminary survey, which must necessarily be regarded as experimental. We recognize that it has limitations as well as merits. Any exploration of a particular sphere of social life uncovers the existence of a deeper layer of attitudes, of certain less obvious cultural traits carried over from earlier times and of sets of values that have not been adequately studied. So far as we can tell, considerations of such kind can be applied validly to this survey.

A suitable method of making the work more complete would be further research at national level, followed by comparison of the results at European level.

PART THREE

SOME REPLIES IN FIGURES

Table 1

QUESTION :

"If you compare your own or your family's finances now and twelve months ago, would you say that prices have risen faster/less fast/at about the same rate as your income?"

ANSWER :

percent

	Prices have risen			Don't know or didn't reply	Total
	Faster	at the same rate	not so fast		
Italy	80	15	2	3	100
Belgium	79	13	2	6	100
France	72	21	4	3	100
Ireland	71	22	4	3	100
Luxembourg	71	22	4	3	100
United Kingdom	64	23	5	8	100
Netherlands	58	28	5	9	100
Germany	52	35	10	3	100
Denmark	42	44	6	8	100
Community	66	24	5	5	100

Table 2

QUESTION :

"If prices continue to rise at the same rate in the next few months, which of the following things will you certainly or probably do or not do?"

ANSWER :

percent

	certain-ly/pro-bably do	certain-ly/pro-bably not do	don't know
1. Go to a different, less expensive shop	82	15	3
2. Postpone major purchases (furniture, household appliances, television, car, etc.)	78	17	5
3. Preferably buy goods on special offer or in a sale	75	20	5
4. Cut down spending on ordinary clothing	64	32	4
5. Cut down spending on entertainment	63	29	8
6. Cut down holiday spending	56	35	9
7. Cook less expensive meals	55	39	6
8. Organize for buyers' defence and information	48	40	12
9. Spend your savings	44	46	10
10. Do overtime or try to find a second job	41	48	11
11. Give up saving	33	55	12

Tabel 3

QUESTION :

"You sometimes hear people say they feel they have been deceived when buying something. Can you remember you, or your husband/wife, buying something-either this or last year - with which you were not satisfied? If so, can you remember what kind of thing it was that you bought?"

ANSWER :

percent

	Y E S
Belgium	22
Denmark	25
Germany	28
Luxembourg	37
Ireland	38
France	41
Netherlands	45
United Kingdom	47
Italy	53
Community	41

Tabel 4

QUESTION :

"Have you, or your husband/wife, had to complain as a customer - either this year or last year - about a mistake or shortcoming in/by one or other of the following public services?
(SHOW CARD). If so, do you remember what kind of service it was?"

ANSWER :

percent

	Y E S
Denmark	19
Belgium	20
Luxembourg	22
Netherlands	30
Ireland	31
Germany	34
France	34
United Kingdom	41
Italy	60
Community	40

Tabel 5

QUESTION :

After each of the two preceding questions interviewees who admitted that they had been deceived when buying something or using a public service were asked the following question : "Did you do something about? If so, what?"

ANSWER : after making a purchase (1) percent
of interviewees covered

	Did no-thing or can't re-member the ac-tion taken	Complained to seller or asked for repla-cement or money back	Complai-ned to a consumer- protec-tion orga-nization or publica-tion	Took legal action
Belgium	45	40	1	.
Denmark	31	54	3	2
Germany	32	42	1	2
Luxembourg	37	42	5	.
Ireland	44	38	1	1
France	24	50	2	1
Netherlands	70	27	1	.
United Kingdom	32	53	4	1
Italy	35	33	1	1
Community	33	44	2	1

(1) This and the following table indicate the percentage of interviewees covered returning the most significant answers, some returning more than one answer under different heads.

Table 6

QUESTION :

After each of the two preceding questions interviewees who admitted that they had been deceived when buying something or using a public service were asked the following question : "Did you do something about? If so, what?"

ANSWER : after using a public service (1) percent

	Did nothing or can't remember the action taken	Com-plained verbal-ly	Com-plained in writing	Com-plained to an organi-zation or pu-blica-tion	Took legal ac-tion
Denmark	28	60	15	1	2
Belgium	29	43	32	3	1
Luxembourg	16	54	25	3	3
Netherlands	67	27	11	.	1
Ireland	27	57	24	.	.
Germany	51	30	18	2	2
France	22	51	32	1	1
United Kingdom	22	57	30	2	1
Italy	36	55	8	2	1
Community	34	48	20	2	1

(1) See note to table 5.

Table 7

QUESTION :

"When you buy food do you often/rarely/never check :
the unit price, the true weight, your bill, your change,
the package or label particulars (ingredients, "use by"
date, etc...)?

ANSWER :

percent

	Often	Rarely	Never	Don't know/ Didn't reply	Total
Check :					
A. the unit price	66	16	14	4	100
B. the true weight	42	25	29	4	100
C. the bill	66	18	12	4	100
D. the change	83	9	5	3	100
E. particulars on the label or package	65	20	11	4	100

Table 8

ANSWER : (see question on previous page)

percent

	B	DK	D	F	IRL	I	L	N	UK	CE/EC
A. <u>Unit price</u>										
Often	54	57	75	69	47	63	64	51	62	66
Rarely	17	18	16	13	21	19	19	21	14	16
Never	23	22	6	14	26	14	8	24	16	14
Don't know/ Didn't reply	6	3	3	4	6	4	9	4	8	4
B. <u>True weight</u>										
Often	30	33	31	41	30	58	37	17	48	42
Rarely	22	19	35	22	22	24	27	20	18	25
Never	43	45	30	33	43	15	25	60	26	29
Don't know/ Didn't reply	5	3	4	4	5	3	11	3	8	4
C. <u>The bill</u>										
Often	67	50	66	64	66	74	70	60	65	66
Rarely	13	23	23	19	15	16	13	20	16	18
Never	15	24	8	14	15	8	9	17	13	12
Don't know/ Didn't reply	5	3	3	3	4	2	8	3	6	4
D. <u>The change</u>										
Often	86	86	86	83	77	81	78	87	82	83
Rarely	5	8	9	9	10	10	14	6	7	9
Never	5	4	2	5	9	6	3	5	6	5
Don't know/ Didn't reply	4	2	3	3	4	3	5	2	5	3
E. <u>Label or package particulars</u>										
Often	62	67	62	80	47	55	71	59	66	65
Rarely	19	17	27	11	18	24	18	22	16	20
Never	14	12	8	6	29	17	6	16	11	11
Don't know/ Didn't reply	5	4	3	3	6	4	5	3	7	4

Table 9

QUESTION :

"From your experience do you fully agree/ agree "in general"/ disagree "in general"/ utterly disagree with each of the following opinions?"

ANSWER :

percent

	Fully agree	Agree "in general"	Disagree "in general"	Utterly disagree	Don't know/ Didn't reply	Total
A. Advertising is a useful source of information to consumers	10	40	29	17	4	100
B. Advertising often makes you buy things you don't really need	38	39	14	6	3	100
C. Advertising often deceives people about product quality	38	38	15	3	6	100

Table 10

QUESTION :

"In your opinion, are heavily advertised brands more or less expensive than those which are advertised only scantily or not at all?"

ANSWER : percent

Heavily advertised brands :	
- are more expensive	62
- are less expensive	6
- no difference	20
- don't know or didn't reply	12
	—
Total	100

Table 11

QUESTION :

"Do you regard the following media as providing good/ bad/ or no information for consumers? Daily papers; weekly papers and magazines; radio; television."

ANSWER :

percent

	Information provided			Don't know/ Didn't reply	Total
	Good	Bad	None		
Daily papers	38	30	17	15	100
Weekly papers and magazines	31	28	16	25	100
Radio	42	25	15	18	100
Television	50	26	12	12	100

Table 12

QUESTION :

"Do you know of any television programmes in your country, other than advertising spots, which are especially designed to provide consumers with objective information?"

ANSWER :

percent

	Yes	No	Don't know/ Didn't reply	Total
Denmark	69	26	5	100
Netherlands	59	9	32	100
Belgium	50	29	21	100
France	48	37	15	100
Germany	48	42	10	100
United Kingdom	48	43	9	100
Italy	31	32	37	100
Luxembourg	28	53	19	100
Ireland	22	72	6	100
Community	45	37	18	100

Table 13

QUESTION :

"Do you want such programmes to be introduced (or extended)?"

ANSWER :

percent

	Yes	No	Don't know/ Didn't reply	Total
Ireland	85	7	8	100
Italy	84	4	12	100
France	82	9	9	100
Luxembourg	80	9	11	100
Germany	78	9	13	100
Belgium	75	10	15	100
United Kingdom	69	16	15	100
Denmark	60	20	20	100
Netherlands	52	24	24	100
Community	77	10	13	100

Table 14

QUESTION :

"Have you heard of organizations (independent of manufacturers and traders) which specialize in consumer information and protection?"

"Can you name one such organization (in your own country)?"

ANSWER :

percent

	Have heard :			Have not heard (b)	Don't know Didn't reply (c)	Total (a)+ (b)+ (c)
	Total (a)	Can name one	Can't name one			
Luxembourg	56	37	19	35	9	100
United Kingdom	48	36	12	46	6	100
Germany	55	25	30	30	15	100
Denmark	52	24	28	40	8	100
France	44	24	20	53	3	100
Belgium	32	22	10	59	9	100
Ireland	31	19	12	58	11	100
Netherlands	58	16	42	30	12	100
Italy	24	8	16	67	9	100
Community	44	23	21	48	8	100

Table 15

QUESTION :

"If the occasion arose, would you pay \$ 7 (US) or equivalent a year for a subscription to a consumer information and protection organization or publication?"

ANSWER :

percent

	Would pay			Don't know/ Didn't reply	Total
	Yes, certainly	Per- haps	Certain- ly not		
Luxembourg	28	32	30	10	100
France	27	30	39	4	100
Netherlands	21	25	42	12	100
Italy	17	35	35	13	100
Belgium	14	27	46	13	100
Ireland	13	29	43	15	100
Denmark	9	21	54	16	100
Germany	8	39	46	7	100
United Kingdom	7	27	59	7	100
Community	15	32	45	8	100

Table 16

QUESTION :

"Have you heard of tests carried out under laboratory conditions to compare the prices and quality of the various brands on the market?"

ANSWER :

percent

	Have heard of	Haven't heard of or didn't reply	Total
Germany	65	35	100
Netherlands	64	36	100
Denmark	63	37	100
France	51	49	100
United Kingdom	49	51	100
Luxembourg	48	52	100
Belgium	47	53	100
Italy	39	61	100
Ireland	25	75	100
Community	52	48	100

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