

Not Just Luck: Uncovering the Secret Skills and Expertise of Second-hand Shoppers

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Abstract: In this paper, we study second-hand shopping as an expertise that can be practiced. While second-hand markets are rapidly growing, consumers still find it difficult and challenging to purchase second-hand, as the shopping experience is messier, complex and unpredictable. We investigate the process of skill acquisition to understand the skill development of shopping second-hand. Based on 14 interviews, this research illustrates a progression in second-hand shopping behaviors as individuals gain experience. This study categorises second-hand shopping expertise into six levels, highlighting distinct behaviors and strategies. We find: 1) *Novices* are overwhelmed, lack confidence, and rely entirely on others to assess quality and price. 2) *Initiates* show a narrow focus on specific products and apply external expertise but struggle to broaden their scope. 3) *Apprentices* use structured strategies, targeting pre-researched items and avoiding unstructured second-hand environments. 4) *Journeyman*s demonstrate proficiency within selected product categories, researching brands and quality indicators to compare items with nuanced criteria. 5) *Experts* possess deep but abstract knowledge of product quality and durability, allowing them to identify high-resale potential items without prior research while maintaining frequent, informed engagement with second-hand markets. 6) *Masters* showcase comprehensive expertise, relying on intuition, ingrained knowledge, and fast-browsing techniques to navigate diverse product categories effortlessly. These findings offer a framework for improving second-hand shopping skills across expertise levels.

Introduction

Second-hand consumption is one way to achieve a circular economy in a 'throwaway society' (Cooper, 2005). Despite the remarkable expansion of second-hand markets over the past years (Kim & Woo, 2021; Smith, 2023), scholarly inquiries consistently underscore the problems and challenges encountered by consumers in purchasing second-hand (Frahm, Boks, et al., 2024; Gregson & Crewe, 2003).

Scholars have several motivational drivers and barriers influencing both the propensity and frequency of second-hand shopping (Bohlin, 2019; Cervellon et al., 2012; Steward, 2020; Zaman et al., 2019). Past research has also outlined diverse strategies employed in second-hand sales (Frahm et al., 2023; Gregson & Crewe, 2003; Parsons, 2002, 2005).

The challenges inherent in the second-hand shopping experience, such as clutter, disorganization, and information gaps, contrast with conventional retail stores' more structured

and uniform environments. While some second-hand establishments actively strive to emulate the ambience of first-cycle retail outlets, others diverge from this model, often influenced by market dynamics and constraints (Frahm, Laursen, et al., 2024; Gregson et al., 2002; Gregson & Crewe, 2003).

Hence, in this paper, we suggest that second-hand shopping requires knowledge, practice and the development of skills. We propose investigating this skill acquisition process. To do so, we use a skill acquisition framework to investigate second-hand shopping as an expertise that can be practiced and developed. Thus, we strive to identify the different skills and strategies used by second-hand consumers at different expertise levels.

Theory

Difficulties in second-hand shopping

Navigating second-hand markets requires work and knowledge, regardless of whether you are selling or purchasing items. Second-hand retailers handle uncertain streams of diverse

products, revalorize them, and support a shopping experience that suits the buyer. This requires knowledge of, e.g., maintenance, cleaning, economic value, advertisement, and store designs to increase the chances of a sale (Frahm et al., 2023; Frahm, Laursen, et al., 2024; Parsons, 2002).

Likewise, from a consumer perspective, numerous obstacles complicate second-hand shopping. This includes irregular or unavailable product information (Guiot & Roux, 2010), and cluttered store designs (Bardhi, 2003; Frahm, Laursen, et al., 2024; Hur, 2020). This may lead to other issues, such as extensive requirements of time and effort put into finding the desired items (Frahm, Boks, et al., 2024; Henseling et al., 2010; Mugge et al., 2017). Besides this are some more structural issues, such as the lack of exchange services or warranty, which may strengthen concerns about product obsolescence and wear and tear (Edbring et al., 2016; Mugge et al., 2018; van den Berge et al., 2021). As such, consumers need to overcome several problems and barriers to shop second-hand.

The current scientific literature provides very limited information about the development of skills and competencies needed to overcome the challenges of second-hand markets. To address this gap, we turn to the literature on expertise, as we propose that shopping second-hand is a skill that can be achieved through experience and practice.

Skill acquisition and expertise

We categorise expertise into different levels to better understand how consumers acquire knowledge on how to purchase second-hand items. Following Chi (2013), we define expertise as a skill set or level of proficiency that beginners can attain through practice.

Expertise is often depicted as a hierarchy of five or six skill levels, ranging from beginners who are new to the field or have minimal exposure to it to masters who understand the standard ways of working within a field. Beginners are new to the field; to cope, they tend to follow strict rules provided by more skilled people in the field, but are incapable or unaware of independent decision-making. Whereas a master at the other end of the spectrum does not see these methods as set in stone but rather as adaptable, context-dependent, and open to

questioning or reinvention. In other words, they can “freestyle”. They are regarded as the experts of experts and are skilled enough to teach others at a lower level. They are considered the top authority, especially in a specific area of knowledge (Chi, 2013; Lawson & Dorst, 2009).

Methodology

Theoretical framework: Skill acquisition in second-hand shopping

To investigate the strategies employed at various levels of expertise, we translate the skill levels identified above into the context of second-hand shopping. Consequently, during the interviews, the informants were asked to assess their position on a scale of second-hand shopping expertise. The scale contained several quotes on a line going from ‘beginner’ to ‘master’, e.g., “I hardly know anything about purchasing products second-hand” to “I have a lot of knowledge and experience with purchasing almost any products/product categories second-hand – and I would be able to teach others on how to do it” (Figure 1). This aimed to investigate whether the informants who assess themselves as belonging to the same level of expertise align in their second-hand shopping strategies.

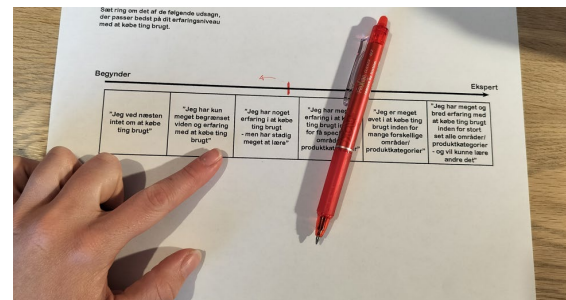


Figure 1. Self-assessment of second-hand shopping skills.

Informant selection: purposive sampling

The study's informants were deliberately chosen to contain a wide range of experiences with and frequency of second-hand shopping. Purposive sampling (Acharya et al., 2013) was used to select the informants, ensuring a diverse pool of informants. Thus, the informants are purposefully selected to contain people with limited experience with second-hand shopping, people who primarily purchase second-hand items and make a living from them, and those in between the two. Secondly, the informants were selected to ensure diversity in gender,

age, and economic background. All interviews were conducted in Denmark, audio-recorded, and lasted an average of 60 minutes.

Data collection: Applied Cognitive Task Analysis (ACTA)

Expertise can be hard to investigate, as experts typically do not excel in expressing their knowledge, as it has become an intuition. Hence, the Applied Cognitive Task Analysis (ACTA) method (Militello & Hutton, 1998) is used to study this. ACTA is a method comprised of three types of interviews (Figure 2), which together extract information about the skills and cognitive demands required for a specific task – in this case, purchasing second-hand products.



Figure 2. Overview of interview types included in the ACTA method.

For this study, the ACTA method is focused on a single second-hand product bought by the informant, which the informant selected for the interview. The product had to comply with two criteria: 1) the informant had to have paid money for the product (hence no heirlooms, exchanged, or otherwise free products were allowed), and 2) the product must be an item typical/well-known to purchase second-hand by the informant. This was to ensure that the informants had a monetary investment when acquiring the product and had some level of expertise in purchasing the specific product type.

Before each interview, the informants had to find such a product and take at least five pictures to showcase the product in detail during the interview. Furthermore, the informants were asked to do a self-assessment of their second-hand shopping skills on a qualitative scale (see Figure 1). Hereafter, the ACTA method was used to gain insight into their second-hand shopping skills.

The ACTA method contains three complementary interview techniques: 1) The *task diagram*, which aims to create a broad overview of the performed task (in this case, purchasing a specific second-hand product)

and the required skills. Hence, it highlights complex cognitive demands, which will be further investigated using the following techniques. 2) The *knowledge audit* aims to clarify the aspects of expertise required for the task. Hence, this included a series of questions related to investigating the knowledge depth (e.g., whether they were specialists in purchasing a particular product type) and knowledge width (e.g., whether they generally excelled at purchasing a product category second-hand). Furthermore, it uncovers concrete strategies used for searching, evaluating, and purchasing the specific second-hand product and its category. As a part of this, challenges for inexperienced people are also uncovered. 3) The *simulation interview* is used to probe the cognitive processes of the informant in the specific context and scenario of purchasing the selected second-hand product. This technique allows for additional exploration of surrounding issues, e.g., assessment of the situation and how this impacts the course of action. Furthermore, it uncovers the context-specific issues that can be hard for novices to handle and how the informant's actions have changed with the development of their current level of second-hand purchasing skills (Militello & Hutton, 1998).

Data analysis: Affinity diagramming

Affinity diagramming was used to analyze the data, allowing for a comprehensive examination and categorization of second-hand shopping skills. The 14 interviews were transcribed for the qualitative analysis to identify examples of second-hand shopping strategies. The quotes were coded using affinity diagramming (Hanington & Martin, 2019; Harboe & Huang, 2015) on each expertise level. This method aims to group many items (in this case, quotes related to second-hand shopping skills) based on their natural connections.

Analysis and Discussion

Our analysis reveals a spectrum of purchasing strategies and approaches to second-hand shopping that correspond to six levels of expertise. We name these: Novice, Initiate, Apprentice, Journeyman, Expert, and Master (Figure 3), adapted from (Chi, 2013). Each level is characterized by distinct behaviours and attitudes toward second-hand shopping, indicating how increasing expertise transforms the consumer's strategy, confidence, and market awareness.



Figure 3. Six levels of second-hand shopping expertise.

Novices: Participants categorized as Novices demonstrate significant confusion and lack a coherent purchasing strategy in second-hand environments. Even when accompanied by a knowledgeable shopper, Novices are overwhelmed by the selection and organization of second-hand items and do not demonstrate strategic decision-making in their purchases (Figure 4).

Novices entering second-hand markets feel like the 'good' products are hidden in plain sight. They rely heavily on guidance from others and completely lack confidence in navigating second-hand markets independently. They cannot judge whether a product has the right price or quality to classify it as a bargain.

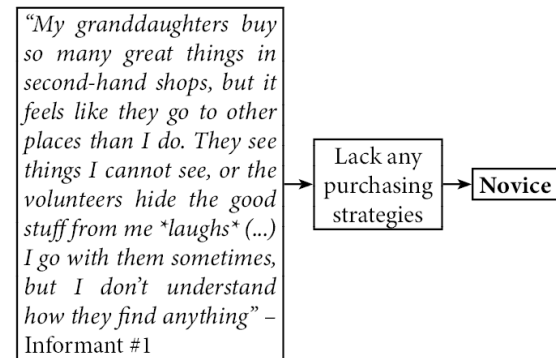


Figure 4. Example of data coding for Novices.

Initiates: Initiates show early signs of strategic decision-making, primarily by adapting expertise from other areas of life. For instance, an Initiate who is a carpenter may focus exclusively on wooden items, such as wooden toys, but does not broaden this interest to other types of wooden products or toys of other materials (Figure 5). Despite some focus, Initiates continue to rely on external guidance from others in second-hand markets and often experience confusion or difficulty distinguishing value. Their approach remains highly selective and narrow, focusing only on specific types of items rather than expanding their expertise to a wider range of products.

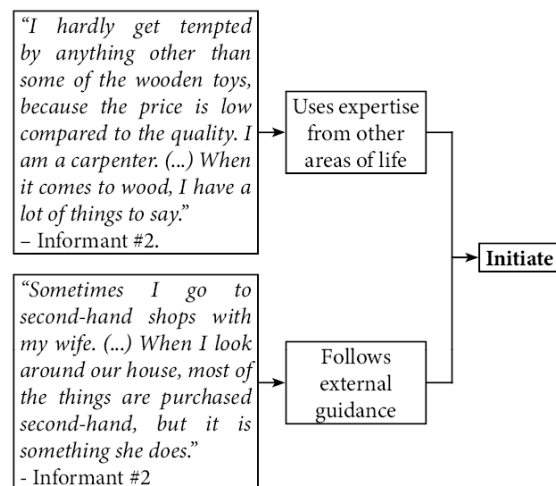


Figure 5. Example of data coding for Initiates.

Apprentices: Apprentices exhibit a more structured approach to second-hand shopping. They employ a specific search strategy, usually beginning by identifying desired products elsewhere before searching for those exact items second-hand to save money, e.g., on a sofa. Other examples found are parents of small children, who purchase children's clothing

second-hand, often from a few very familiar brands, while rejecting all other second-hand product categories.

For Apprentices, the preferred second-hand outlets are limited to physical shops with very few product categories and online shops that allow for filtration like regular web shops, supporting easy comparison of price and quality of identical products. This process emphasizes precision and control, as Apprentices typically look for exact copies of specific products they have already evaluated elsewhere (Figure 6). Their second-hand purchases are limited to known products rather than exploring new categories or brands, and they seek to avoid the time-consuming shopping experiences of unspecific second-hand markets (e.g., charity shops with multiple and shifting product categories). This strategy represents a shift towards more independent decision-making and cost-efficiency, though the approach remains narrow in focus.

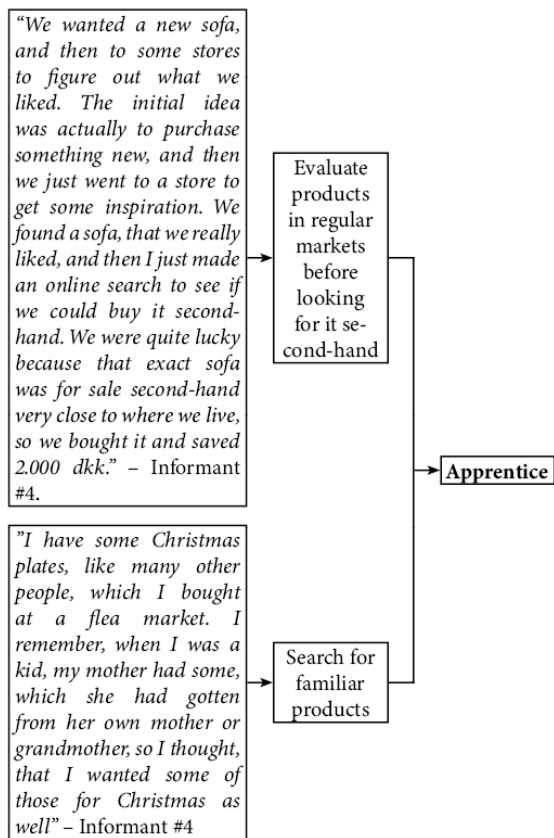


Figure 6. Example of data coding for Apprentices.

Journeyman: Journeymen exhibit significant expertise within a few product categories, e.g.,

related to personal interests like home décor, interior design, or hobbies like mountain biking. When seeking a new category of items, they thoroughly research brands, designs, and quality indicators (often online) to understand the value of second-hand options (Figure 7).

While Apprentices would start off by identifying a specific product in first-hand markets and afterwards look for it second-hand, the Journeymen have a broader perspective which begins directly in the second-hand market; their initial research process includes learning about brand markers, design features, and price indicators as well as exploring and comparing the available second-hand options. Within their narrow field, a Journeyman would have a qualified guess on where to go and which quality indicators to look for, to find a bargain. While an Apprentice would compare identical products, Journeymen begin to develop a more nuanced perspective, allowing them to compare products with similar yet different features.

Journeymen shop both online and in physical second-hand markets but typically visit only when searching for a specific item, suggesting a focused yet cautious approach. Additionally, they demonstrate a willingness to pay higher prices for quality but continue to weigh price considerations carefully.

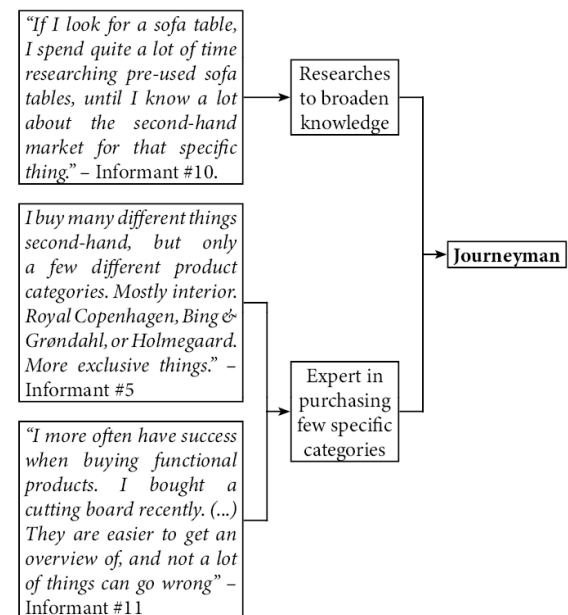


Figure 7. Example of data coding for Journeymen.

Expert: Experts show an advanced understanding of quality indicators, selecting items with high resale potential and may consider second-hand purchases as temporary acquisitions. In other words, they consider the timeline and afterlife of their second-hand purchases, while the lower expertise levels focus on how the product solves a problem here and now. This perspective reflects a deep familiarity with product categories and materials rather than, e.g., pure brand preferences.

Their knowledge and expertise in recognising materials, manufacturing, or particularly well-made products allow them to purchase a broader range of second-hand products without initial research, unlike the Journeymen, who rely on this. Consequently, the Experts have only a few product categories, which they will not be capable or willing to purchase second-hand (Figure 8). They are willing to spend more time finding bargains and make frequent visits to both physical and online second-hand shops, maintaining a consistent engagement with the second-hand market.

While Experts are selective, their criteria are highly informed. They focus on durable, high-quality materials and products that fit well into the second-hand cycle.

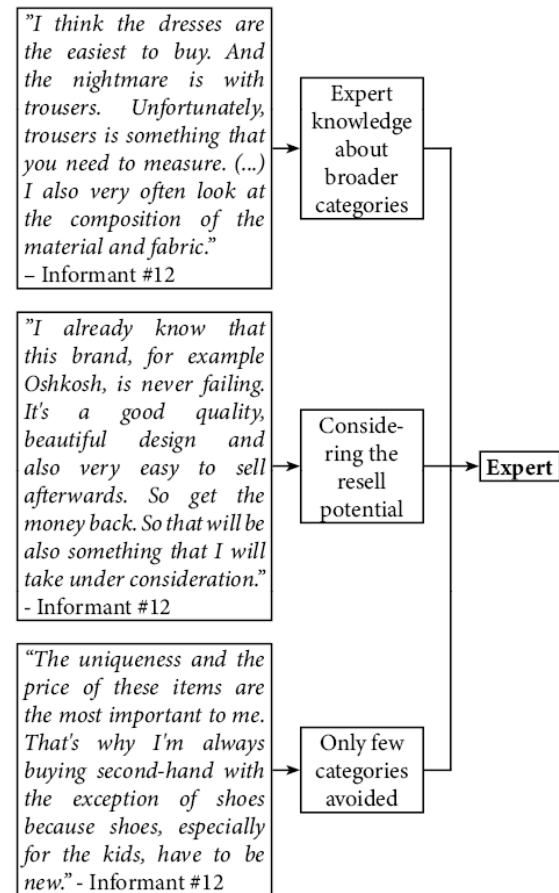


Figure 8. Example of data coding for Experts.

Master: Masters display the highest level of second-hand shopping expertise, having developed a general yet comprehensive strategy that includes browsing every item within a shop and relying on extensive knowledge acquired over time. Their expertise spans multiple product categories, which is also informed by their professional backgrounds. Masters know of reliable second-hand shops, visit them frequently, and take any opportunity to explore new markets. Thus, their expertise includes knowledge of what constitutes 'good' second-hand products, as well as a mental map of trustworthy and valuable second-hand outlets.

Unlike less experienced levels, they do not rely on prior research before shopping; instead, they operate on ingrained knowledge and intuition and can tell the 'good' markets from the 'bad' ones. Their search strategies become more general, as they have become fast browsers willing to spend time turning over every item while recognizing product quality just by briefly touching a product. They have a

broader understanding of the second-hand market and mention areas (e.g., a part of a town) as ‘second-hand hotspots’ rather than thinking about the individual stores (Figure 9). They perceive second-hand markets as their primary shopping market and develop their own mental map of which stores/markets to go to for specific items, even though the stores sell a broader range of products.

Like Experts, Masters also actively participate in the second-hand market as sellers and donors, reinforcing their understanding of item value across market roles. During the interviews, Masters also began to advise the interviewer on navigating second-hand markets.

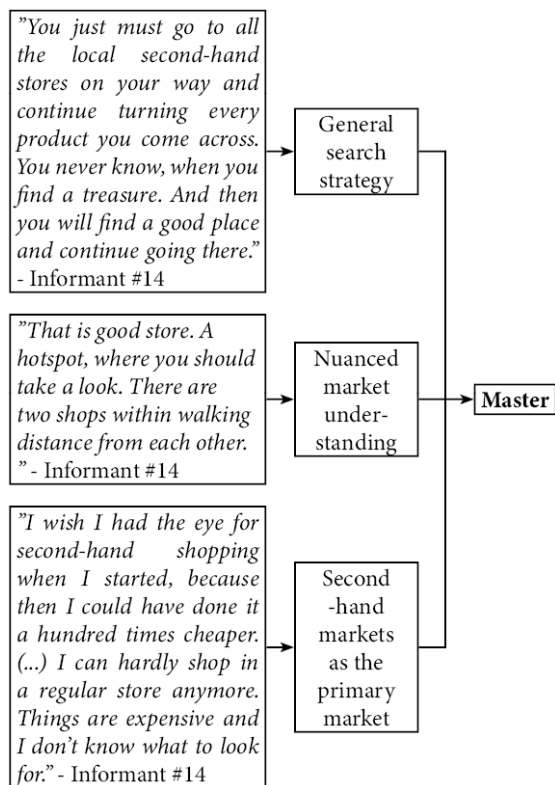


Figure 9. Example of data coding for Masters.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature on circular consumer behaviour by showing how expertise in a second-hand market develops.

Our research demonstrates the progression of six levels of second-hand shopping expertise, going from uncertainty and reliance on external guidance to showcasing an advanced

understanding and approach to second-hand shopping.

Novices experience significant confusion, overwhelmed by the variety and organization of second-hand markets. They lack confidence and decision-making skills, are unable to assess price or quality, and rely entirely on others for guidance.

Initiates show emerging focus by applying expertise from other areas of their lives (e.g., a carpenter prioritizing wooden toys) but struggle to expand beyond narrow interests or identify value independently.

Apprentices develop targeted strategies, typically searching for specific products already evaluated elsewhere (e.g., a sofa or children's clothing from known brands). They prefer structured environments like filtered online shops and avoid broad, time-intensive exploration of diverse second-hand markets.

Journeymen demonstrate proficiency within select categories tied to personal interests (e.g., home décor or hobbies). They research brands and quality indicators beforehand, allowing them to evaluate a wider range of similar products directly in online and physical second-hand markets while maintaining a cautious, value-conscious approach.

Experts are deeply familiar with quality indicators and identify durable, high-resale potential items across diverse product categories. Unlike Journeymen, they rely on ingrained knowledge rather than prior research, embracing frequent engagement with second-hand markets and valuing the product lifecycle.

Finally, **Masters** exhibits a comprehensive, intuitive approach, browsing entire shops efficiently and relying on extensive knowledge spanning multiple categories. They map second-hand hotspots, navigate markets effortlessly, and participate actively as buyers, sellers, and donors, making second-hand shopping their primary marketplace while advising others on navigating the system.

Hence, our study shows consumers developing their ability to navigate second-hand markets, going from complete confusion to seeking second-hand markets that mimic regular retail, and eventually being able to filter cluttered

second-hand shops containing multiple and shifting product categories. We furthermore see an advancement in the understanding of product quality going from only purchasing one single product category in a selected material (e.g., wooden toys) to primitive comparisons of price and quality of identical products, to comparison of similar products, to comparisons of more abstract product quality indicators such as materials and manufacturing.

This contributes valuable knowledge for second-hand consumers, as they can adopt strategies from higher expertise levels if they aim to improve their shopping for pre-owned items. Moreover, to foster a more circular economy, we must lower the barriers to entry in second-hand markets. By recognising what successful second-hand shoppers do and what challenges less experienced shoppers face, second-hand markets can adapt more readily to various skill levels and reduce these entry barriers. We suggest further studies of the challenges that second-hand consumers at different expertise levels face, and whether more expertise levels exist.

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