

The tourist within: A phenomenological inquiry of hotel employees' vacation decision-making process

Hatice Yalvaç ¹ and Serhat Adem Sop ^{2*}

¹ Independent Researcher, M.Sc. in Tourism Management, Türkiye;

² Faculty of Tourism, Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Türkiye. Email: serhatademsop@gmail.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract

This study aims to explain the decision-making process of hotel employees when purchasing a hotel vacation, focusing on the effect of occupational identity on tourist behaviour. Hotel employees represent a remarkably underexplored consumer group whose vacation purchasing behaviours warrant attention. Since they have extensive knowledge, experience, and professional networks within the tourism sector, being a hotel employee was anticipated to influence the vacation decision-making processes for the first time in this study. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach was utilised, and qualitative research data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, and 19 hotel employees with prior experience in hotel vacations were interviewed. Data were analysed through deductive thematic analysis, and findings were evaluated within the five-phase decision-making framework of the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) Model. The results revealed that hotel employees' need for vacations largely stems from work-related fatigue. During the information search phase, they rely on professional networks to identify suitable hotels. In evaluating alternatives, they focus on cleanliness and affordability, often seeking recommendations from colleagues to minimise decision-making efforts. They also prefer direct hotel bookings, which build trust and allow personalised offers. The level of satisfaction with the vacation hotel significantly affects their post-purchase behaviour.

Keywords: Vacation decision-making, tourist behaviour, occupational identity, hotel employees as tourists, hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

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1. Introduction

Consumer decision-making has traditionally been studied through the lens of generic consumer behaviour models, with the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) framework standing out as a foundational one. Its five-stage process, from need recognition to post-purchase behaviour phases (Engel *et al.*, 1968), has been widely applied to explain how consumers make decisions about high-involvement experiences, such as travel (Dimitriou & Abouelgheit, 2019; Kotler *et al.*, 2022; Osei & Abenyin, 2016; Sirakaya & Woodside, 2005). However, recent tourism scholarship has emphasised the need for more context-specific and identity-based applications of such models (McCabe *et al.*, 2016; Smallman & Moore, 2010). In this regard, a consumer identity perspective is particularly relevant, as it highlights how professional roles influence the formation of preferences and decision-making strategies of tourists (Solomon, 2018).

Within this perspective, hotel employees represent a remarkably underexplored consumer group whose vacation purchasing process warrants attention for several reasons. Through frequent interactions with diverse tourists and firsthand observation of tourist behaviour, they can better understand service quality, pricing strategies, and hotel consumer expectations. In other words, their daily professional experiences provide them with an insider's perspective on the sector (Baum, 2007) and in-depth knowledge of operational realities (Shaw & Williams, 2004). Therefore, hotel employees can be more discerning when managing their decision-making processes regarding tourism consumption, parallel to Howard and Sheth's (1969) assumption, which suggests that learned criteria and environmental stimuli shape consumer preferences. As the Information Processing Theory (Bettman, 1979) proposes, they can also simplify their decision-making processes through specific knowledge of the tourism sector.

Furthermore, the nature of hotel employees' work schedules often restricts their ability to vacation during traditional peak seasons (Deery & Jago, 2009; Ladkin, 2011), which may lead to their vacation behaviours, such as travelling in off-peak season (behavioural control) and/or selecting accommodations aligned with their professional standards of quality (subjective norm). These perceived behavioural control and subjective norms can also impact hotel employees' vacation decision-making behaviour, as asserted by the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

Considering these dynamics, the present study posits that the occupational identity of hotel employees influences their development of tourist identity. Following this assumption, the study investigates how hotel employees navigate each phase of the vacation decision-making process. It responds to the following research questions (RQs) developed consistent with the EKB Model (Engel *et al.*, 1968) by taking into account the context of decision-making in tourism (Kotler *et al.*, 2022):

RQ1. What does vacation mean to hotel employees?

RQ2. How do hotel employees recognise their need for a vacation?

RQ3. How do hotel employees manage the information search phase of the decision-making process?

RQ4. How do hotel employees evaluate alternative hotels during the decision-making process?

RQ5. How do hotel employees manage the purchase decision phase of the decision-making process?

RQ6. How do hotel employees behave in the post-purchase evaluation phase of the decision-making process?

Despite their dual role as service providers and consumers, hotel employees have surprisingly received limited attention in the tourist behaviour literature. Prior studies on tourists' decision-making have primarily focused on students, families, or general tourist populations, with limited emphasis on tourism professionals as tourists (Yalvac & Sop, 2021). As McCabe *et al.* (2016) and Smallman and Moore (2010) have argued, a significant gap remains in understanding how identity-based and context-specific factors influence consumer decision-making. This study addresses that gap by examining hotel employees not only as professionals but also as tourism consumers, offering new insights into the influence of occupational identity on the vacation decision-making process.

2. Theoretical framework

The EKB Model, developed by Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1968) by extending John Dewey's (1910) five-phase problem-solving process and adapting it to consumer behaviour (Darley *et al.*, 2010), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding consumer decision-making processes. It explains how consumers navigate five phases of the decision-making process: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behaviour (Engel *et al.*, 1968). Designed to address the complexities of consumer behaviour, it integrates psychological, social, and environmental influences (Howard & Sheth, 1969). As one of the most widely adopted models in consumer behaviour research (Gupta, 2019; Paz *et al.*, 2023), it remains a cornerstone for academic studies and practical applications. Hence, Kotler *et al.* (2022) explain the tourist decision-making process in a manner consistent with the EKB Model.

Theoretically, the consumer decision-making process begins with the consumer recognising a need for a product (Engel *et al.*, 1968). Consumers who realise a need for a product through internal stimuli, such as personal experiences and motivation, or external stimuli, like recommendations and advertisements, start searching for information to determine how to meet the need (Kotler *et al.*, 2022). Based on this information, they identify the products they prefer and then compare the alternatives added to their consideration sets, considering both functional and symbolic features, ultimately deciding to purchase the product they believe is the most suitable (Moutinho, 1987; Kotler *et al.*, 2022).

In the tourism decision-making process, obtaining information and comparing alternatives can be a time-consuming task, and sometimes, the purchase is made as a last-minute decision (Decrop, 2006; Jenkins, 1978; van Raaij, 1986). Tourists conduct thorough research and spend time searching for information and evaluating alternatives to inform their purchasing decisions, focusing on criteria such as attractiveness, appearance, cost, ease of transportation, and the time required to reach the vacation destination (Moutinho, 1987; Solomon, 2018). Travel agencies, other individuals within the household, the individual's education level, previous vacation experiences, budget, and the features and types of the vacation are the determinants of tourists' purchasing decisions (Jenkins, 1978). When tourists are satisfied with the experience of the purchased product, they develop positive attitudes and behaviours, such as repurchasing from the same brand (e.g., a hotel or restaurant) and/or recommending the brand to others (Kotler *et al.*, 2022; Sen Demir *et al.*, 2014).

Under this theoretical framework of the decision-making process, young tourists' decision-making during vacations (Torres, 2015), couple dynamics in the family vacation decision-making process (Rojas-de-Gracia *et al.*, 2018), children's role in families' vacation purchase decisions (Wang & Li, 2021), the influence of risk perception in tourist decision-making process (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2021) were widely investigated so far. Some authors also tested the interrelationship among the phases of the tourist decision-making process (Sen Demir *et al.*, 2014). Despite a robust body of literature on tourist behaviour and decision-making, several authors identified significant criticisms and research gaps within the field (e.g., Cohen *et al.*, 2014; McCabe *et al.*, 2016; Smallman & Moore, 2010). Some highlighted limitations in addressing the diversity of tourist groups and the contextual factors influencing decision-

making processes. Yalvaç and Sop's (2021) review article provided a clear example, pointing out that while extensive research has explored various tourist segments, such as students, families, and international travellers, there has been a notable absence of research examining the vacation decision-making processes of tourism employees, who transit into the role of tourists from service providers and become a niche tourist market.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological design to comprehensively explore how hotel employees perceive the concept of vacation and experience the vacation decision-making process. Phenomenological research focuses on the lived experiences of individuals related to a specific phenomenon, enabling both the identification of commonalities across participants and the interpretation of their subjective meanings from a holistic perspective (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

Specifically, the study employed the hermeneutic phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1990). Unlike descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to bracket the researcher's preconceptions in pursuit of experiential essences (Moustakas, 1994), hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges the researcher's interpretive role and emphasises understanding meanings within social, cultural, and theoretical contexts (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990). This approach was appropriate given the study's aim to explore how hotel employees, as tourism professionals, make sense of their behaviour as tourists. Rather than attempting to distil universal essences, the study focused on uncovering the experiential structures of vacation decision-making through the lens of occupational identity. The pre-established themes, drawn from the EKB model (Engel *et al.*, 1968) and Kotler *et al.*'s (2022) relevant perspective, provided a conceptual background that informed both data collection and thematic interpretation. This alignment between theoretical framing and interpretive methodology reflects the study's adherence to hermeneutic principles.

3.2. Development of the data collection tool

Research data were collected using the interview technique, the most commonly used data collection method in phenomenological research design (Englander, 2012), specifically through a semi-structured interview form. The authors first reviewed the literature on the tourism decision-making process to develop interview questions aligned with the research purpose and methodological design. Subsequently, they created a pool of ten questions based on the five phases of the EKB Model (Engel *et al.*, 1968), taking into account the context of decision-making in tourism (Kotler *et al.*, 2022), to examine the vacation decision-making processes of hotel employees.

To validate the interview questions, expert feedbacks were obtained from three associate professors with published research on consumer decision-making in the context of tourism. Between 13 and 15 December 2021, each expert reviewed the question pool in terms of relevance, clarity, and alignment with the research objectives. Minor revisions were made based on their suggestions before the interview form was finalised. In addition to the ten theory-based questions, five open-ended questions were included to explore participants' general perceptions and behaviours related to vacationing and to help define the phenomenon under investigation. The final version of the interview questions, organised under thematic categories, is presented in Figure 1.

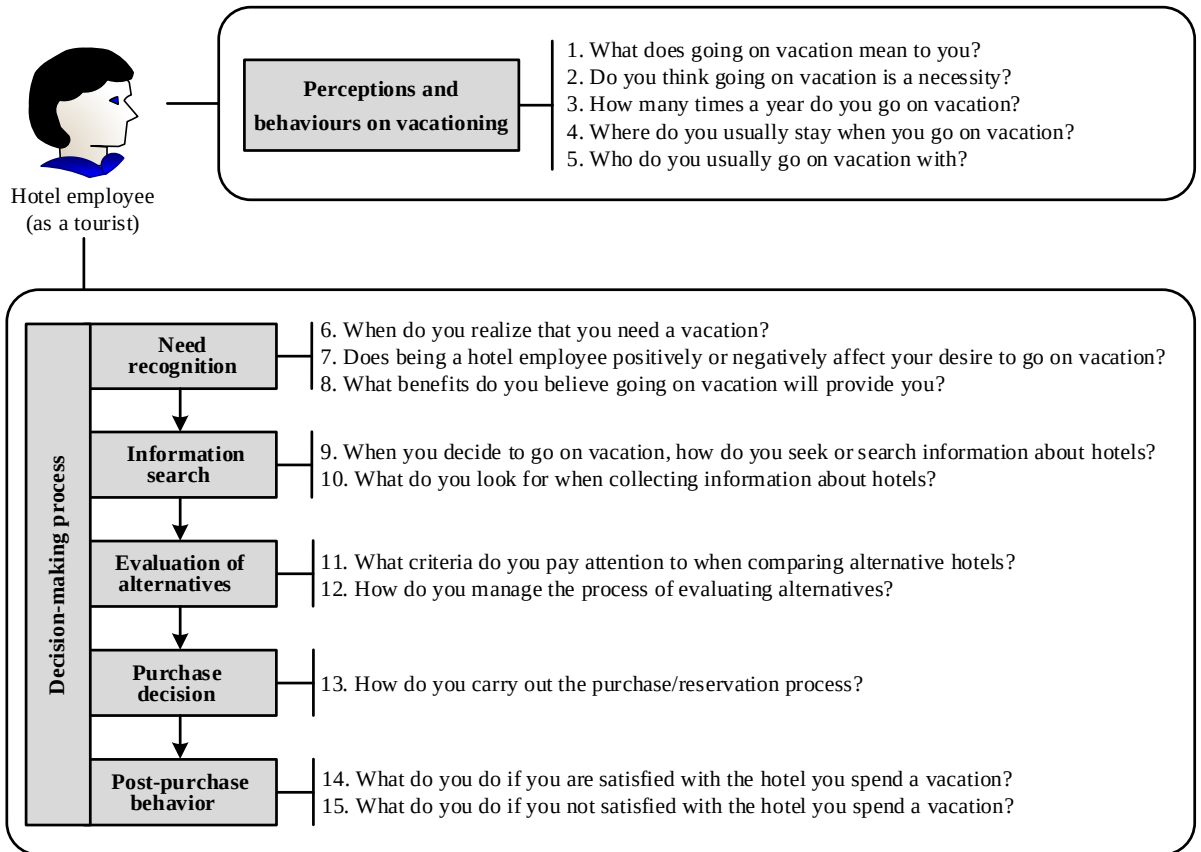


Figure 1. *Thematic illustration of the interview questions*

3.3. Sample and data collection

The research sample was limited to employees working in five-star hotels in Antalya (Türkiye) who had prior vacation experiences. Participants of the research were selected through purposive sampling. Before the primary data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted to assess the clarity and appropriateness of the interview questions. During the pilot study, interviews lasting between 20 and 40 minutes were conducted with six hotel employees (three female and three male), aged between 25 and 40 years old. Each participant was employed in a five-star hotel and represented a different department: food and beverage, accounting, front office, housekeeping, sales and marketing, and human resources.

After the pilot study, the clarity and adequacy of the interview questions were re-evaluated in consultation with the same three experts. It was confirmed that all questions were clearly understood by participants, easily answered within the expected timeframe, and elicited responses directly related to the phenomenon under investigation. Following this satisfactory evaluation, the final data collection phase was conducted in 2022, involving 19 participants.

During the face-to-face interviews, audio recordings were made with the participants' written consent. The interviews lasted between 21 and 67 minutes. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 45; 12 were male, and 11 were married. Their work experience in the tourism sector ranged from 5 to 25 years. Eight participants worked in the food and beverage department, three in accounting, four in the front office, and the remaining four in sales and marketing, security, spa, and animation departments. The

participants held a variety of operational positions, including bartender, waiter, restaurant supervisor, food and beverage chief, front desk receptionist, reservation chief, cost controller, storekeeper, accounting specialist, security officer, spa receptionist, and fitness trainer.

3.4. Data analysis

Prior to analysis, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The data were then analysed using a theoretical (deductive) thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in line with the hermeneutic phenomenological framework adopted in this study. The five stages of the decision-making process outlined in the EKB model (Engel *et al.*, 1968) and Kotler *et al.*'s (2022) relevant perspective served as predefined themes, guiding both the organisation and interpretation of participants' responses.

Participant transcripts were carefully read to identify meaningful units of expression, which were subsequently grouped into subcategories and broader categories under each predefined theme, reflecting the stages of the vacation decision-making process. This coding and categorisation process was facilitated using Microsoft Excel for data management and matrix construction. Throughout the analysis, the researchers engaged in interpretative reflection (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013), taking into account participants' occupational identities and how these shaped their perspectives as tourists. This reflexive and iterative process supported the emergence of contextually grounded insights consistent with the interpretive goals of hermeneutic phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990).

4. Results

4.1. Perceptions and behaviours on vacationing

The results of the semi-structured interview revealed that hotel employees' perceptions of vacation are predominantly associated with relaxation (n = 8), escaping from stress (n = 6), and experiencing peace and happiness (n = 6). To illustrate, participant 15 (P15) mentioned,

"Since I work in the tourism sector, the pace is quite intense. Going on vacation means resting and spending time with my children and family. I seek a peaceful and stress-free vacation environment."

Additionally, all participants consider having a vacation a necessity (n = 19). P7 highlighted that

"Taking a vacation is a necessity. Due to the intensity of my work, my mind becomes overwhelmed after a while, and I want to clear it. When I go on vacation, I feel completely renewed and lighter."

When analysing the timing and frequency of vacations, it was observed that hotel employees mostly take vacations at the end of the tourism season (n = 12) and prefer domestic vacations (n = 11). Vacations taken more than once a year were found to be shared among hotel employees (n = 14), with most vacations being taken with family (n = 10) and friends (n = 9). It was also observed that both 4- and 5-star all-inclusive hotels (n = 9) and small-scale units, such as boutique hotels and bungalows (n = 10), are preferred for accommodation. P18 indicated why she prefers all-inclusive hotels for vacation: *"With only a two- or three-day vacation opportunity, instead of thinking about where to eat, relax, have fun, and drink, doing everything within the hotel is hassle-free and saves time."* P19 introduced the reason for selecting a small-scale accommodation unit:

"I do not prefer five-star ultra-luxury all-inclusive hotels because they fall outside my concept of vacation. Vacationing in a crowded place does not appeal to me. I find it more attractive when the place is quieter, more peaceful, and has fewer people."

4.2. Decision-making process

4.2.1. Need recognition

Table 1 visualises findings related to need recognition, the first phase in the purchasing decision-making process. The results revealed that hotel employees mostly need a vacation due to fatigue caused by the peak tourism season ($n=13$). To illustrate, P2 stated, *"Since I work in the tourism sector, I especially become too busy during the three-month peak season of June, July, and August. Due to the intense workload, I feel exhausted by October or November. It is time that I realise my need for a vacation."* Other drivers of the need for a vacation were identified as escapism ($n=10$), relaxation ($n=9$), and novelty-seeking ($n=6$), which are additional push factors besides fatigue. Additionally, it was found that some participants, such as P1, recognise their need for a vacation due to being influenced by others' social media posts: *"I see on social media that people are travelling to various places during a vacation. Sometimes, those posts influence me, and I think I should go on vacation, too."*

Table 1. Results related to need recognition

Theme	Categories	Subcategories	Participants
Need recognition	Drivers of the need	Fatigue	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P12, P14, P16, P19
		Escapism	P2, P3, P4, P9, P10, P11, P13, P15, P17, P18
		Relaxation	P1, P4, P6, P10, P12, P14, P16, P17, P19
		Novelty-seeking	P7, P8, P9, P14, P15, P16
		Social media	P1, P9, P13
	Impact of being a hotel employee	Neutral	P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P9, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P19
		Positive	P1, P4, P8, P10, P12, P17, P18
	Expected benefits	Productivity	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P12, P13, P14, P15, P18
		Renewal	P2, P5, P6, P7, P9, P12, P13, P14, P17, P18
		Peace	P1, P5, P6, P8, P14, P15, P16, P17, P19
		Reduced stress	P3, P7, P8, P19

It was also observed that being a hotel employee can lead to recognising the need for a vacation ($n=7$). For example, in P18's comment, it is evident that the desire to go on vacation is reinforced by observing other tourists within the hotel: *"Being a hotelier positively affects me in this sense. Seeing that people are vacationing here, relaxing, or observing that people who go on vacation appear happier makes me want to go on vacation as well."* However, most participants were neutral, stating that being a hotelier does not positively or negatively influence recognising the need for a vacation ($n=12$).

In the process of recognising the need for a vacation, the expected benefits of vacation were identified as increased productivity ($n=12$), renewal ($n=10$), peace ($n=9$), and reduced stress ($n=4$). In other words, hotel employees believe that when they go on vacation, they will feel renewed and relaxed, reduce daily stress, and become more productive in their work life upon returning from vacation. R2's comment exemplifies this:

"I want to feel peace and renewed while on vacation. I also expect to learn something by examining the service processes if I visit a hotel. Feeling peace and learning things during a vacation can benefit my work desire and productivity in my job upon returning from vacation."

4.2.2. Information search

Two categories related to the information search phase of the decision-making process have been identified (Table 2). Findings related to the subject of the search category indicate that hotel employees, as tourists, primarily seek location information (n = 18), hygiene and cleanliness (n = 16), and price (n = 11). To illustrate, P1 highlighted that she primarily conducts information searches considering hotel prices: *"Honestly, I first search for information based on price because I do not have a sufficient budget for expensive hotels."* Participants also search for information regarding all-inclusive vacations (n = 10), child-friendly services (n = 7), and qualified and friendly staff (n = 4). For instance, P18 indicated that

"I generally look for all-inclusive hotels. Since there is a two- or three-day vacation opportunity, instead of thinking about where we will eat, sit, have fun, and drink one by one, it saves both time and money to do everything within one hotel. I investigate whether there are differences between the all-inclusive concepts of hotels and which one offers more services."

P8 expressed his search for information about child-friendly services: *"I investigate how children can have fun at the hotel, what the atmosphere is like for children, and whether there is a playground or mini club for them."*

Table 2. Results related to information search

Theme	Categories	Subcategories	Participants
Information search	The subject of the search	Location	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P19
		Hygiene and cleanliness	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15, P17, P18, P19
		Price	P1, P3, P5, P7, P9, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P19
		All-inclusive vacation	P2, P5, P6, P8, P11, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18
		Child-friendly services	P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P15, P16
		Qualified and friendly staff	P1, P13, P14, P18
		Food and beverage quality	P2, P14
		Brand image	P15
		Security	P14
		Adults-only accommodation	P3
		Social responsibility	P1
	Source of information	Online reviews and ratings	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19
		Friends/colleagues	P3, P4, P5, P6, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17, P19
		Social media	P2, P9, P10, P11, P14, P16, P19
		Websites	P2, P8, P15, P16

As seen in Table 2, the information sources utilised during the information search phase can be categorised into four types. Almost all participants (n = 18) reference online reviews and ratings as their primary source, while half (n = 10) seek information from friends and colleagues. For instance, P15 stated that he gathers information from both sources:

"Primarily, I check online sites to gather information on reviews and ratings of hotels. I also try to get information from friends and colleagues in my close circle. As I work in the hospitality sector, I have friends who work as sales representatives. They guide me by responding to my questions about hotels."

It was also discovered that some participants gathered information by visiting social media accounts (n = 7) or the official websites of hotels and travel agencies (n = 4). In this context, P2 highlighted that

"I try to take advantage of digital technology during the information search. I visit the hotel's website and check the websites of travel agencies. I also follow social media accounts of hotels I consider for a vacation."

4.2.3. Evaluation of alternatives

After the information search phase, hotel employees evaluate alternatives, applying both non-compensatory and compensatory criteria strategies. Table 3 displays the 10 elements considered as non-compensatory criteria. The findings revealed that they prioritise the following elements the most: hygiene and cleanliness (n=16), location (n=10), quality of food and beverages [F&B] (n=7), affordability (n=7), and child-friendly services (n=6). For instance, P8 emphasised the importance of hygiene: *"I care a lot about the cleanliness of the accommodation. I pay attention to hotels with positive reviews on cleanliness. It is a non-negotiable subject for me."* He also highlighted the significance of child-friendly services for families with children. He explained why these services and the hotel's location matter:

"Facilities and services for children are important because I take them on vacation to help them have fun and relieve stress. Is the hotel beachfront? Does it have a safe child pool? Are there animations for kids? These are essential criteria for a family holiday at a hotel."

The criteria that participants consider desirable but not essential at the hotels they plan to stay at – referred to as compensatory criteria – were explained through nine elements. The most prominent among these are indoor pools or aquaparks (n = 8), a variety of food and beverage options (n = 6), à la carte services (n = 5), spas (n = 4), and animation (n = 4). These findings indicated that while participants appreciate these amenities, their absence would not prevent them from choosing a hotel. For instance, an indoor pool or aquapark is welcomed as a bonus feature, but its absence is considered tolerable. The following comments of participants support these findings:

P3: *"Since we do not prefer crowded hotels, having 20 different types of food is not important for us— if hygiene is ensured, I can tolerate the lack of food variety or à la carte options. For me, having a pool is not crucial in a place with a seaside location."*

P5: *"What matters to me is spending quality time with my family. That is why the lack of an indoor pool, animation activities, or even places to visit and markets around the hotel does not matter during my hotel selection process."*

Table 3 also presents that nearly half of the participants use limited problem-solving (n = 10) when evaluating alternatives, while the other half apply extensive problem-solving. To illustrate, P4 indicated that he evaluates the alternatives through limited problem-solving: *"I usually choose from hotels that my friends have previously visited and liked. Honestly, I consider the hotels they recommend or prefer before, so I do not put much effort into it."* On the other hand, P2's response reveals how extensive an effort he has made during the evaluation of alternatives:

"I put much effort into comparing hotels because I find certain criteria important, especially for my children. For example, since we go on vacation during the winter, we spend more time at indoor pools."

If I see a pool with one slide, I think, 'Okay, it works.' When I find another hotel with two or three slides, I start thinking this hotel is better. Next, I check the water temperature on the hotel's website. Sometimes, I get overwhelmed trying to investigate all these criteria."

Table 3. Results related to the evaluation of alternatives

Theme	Categories	Subcategories	Participants
Evaluation of alternatives	Non-compensatory criteria	Hygiene and cleanliness	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P15, P17, P18, P19
		Location	P1, P4, P8, P9, P10, P12, P15, P16, P17, P19
		Quality of F&B	P1, P5, P11, P12, P16, P18, P19
		Affordability	P3, P4, P5, P7, P15, P16, P18
		Child-friendly services	P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P15, P16
		Qualified staff	P1, P7, P9, P11, P13, P18
		All-inclusive service	P2, P15, P16, P18
		Animation	P4, P6, P8
		Strong brand image	P8, P14
		Peaceful atmosphere	P3, P7
		Adults-only accommodation	P3
	Compensatory criteria	Indoor pool or aquapark	P3, P7, P9, P11, P12, P14, P17, P19
		Variety of F&B	P3, P9, P10, P14, P15, P17
		À la carte services	P6, P8, P9, P11, P15
		SPA	P13, P14, P17, P18
		Animation	P5, P10, P18, P19
		Luxury accommodation	P1, P4,
		Location	P3, P7
		Room size and view	P2, P6
		Parking lot	P9
	Evaluation process	Limited problem solving	P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P10, P11, P13, P18, P19
		Extensive problem solving	P1, P2, P8, P9, P12, P14, P15, P16, P17

4.2.4. Purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour

Findings related to how hotel employees manage purchase decisions and post-purchase behaviour are presented in Table 4. The purchase decision-related findings revealed that participants use multiple booking channels, with most preferring direct reservations through the hotel (n = 13) over online booking platforms/apps (n = 8) or travel agencies (n = 6). According to P2, the main reason for booking directly with the hotel is its reliability and payment flexibility: *"I prefer calling the hotel directly. This more reliable method offers payment options upon arrival, making things easier."* Similarly, P11 emphasised that direct contact creates a more personal and secure connection: *"I contact the business directly without using agency networks. When you interact with a business directly, you can feel the sincerity and trust more clearly."*

Moreover, P13 highlighted the importance of trust and preferred supporting the hotel by avoiding third-party commissions: *"I search the hotel on online platforms, but I usually manage the reservation process directly with the hotel because I prefer supporting the business by disintermediating the third-party commissions"* Meanwhile, P14 acknowledged occasionally using travel agencies but admitted that direct bookings are often more advantageous:

"As someone working in tourism, I sometimes choose agencies, but since I understand how the purchase process works, I often make the reservation myself by calling the hotel."

Table 4. *Results related to purchase decision and post-purchase behaviour*

Themes	Categories	Subcategories	Participants
Purchase decision	Purchase/booking channel	Direct purchase from the hotel	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P10, P11, P13, P14, P16, P17, P19
		Online/app-based purchase	P3, P4, P7, P9, P12, P13, P15, P16
		Purchase from a travel agency	P1, P2, P8, P12, P14, P18
Post-purchase behaviour	Satisfaction	Writing positive online reviews	P1, P5, P7, P8, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18, P19
		Positive word-of-mouth	P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16
		Expressing satisfaction to the staff	P6, P7, P10, P11, P12, P17, P19
		Revisiting the hotel	P1, P4, P8, P10, P11, P16, P18
		Posting on social media	P6, P14
		Tipping the staff	P1
	Dissatisfaction	Negative word-of-mouth	P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P18, P19
		Writing negative online reviews	P1, P5, P7, P8, P10, P11, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17, P18
		Emailing feedback to the management	P10, P12, P15
		Complaining to the staff	P1, P3, P19
		Providing feedback via survey	P1, P12

Table 4 also demonstrates that participants' post-purchase behaviours are shaped by their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the hotel. The findings indicated that participants who are satisfied with their purchase decision write positive reviews on online platforms, such as TripAdvisor (n=13), and share positive feedback about the hotel with friends and family (n=13). In this context, P8 highlighted, *"I always recommend the hotel I am satisfied with to my friends, family, and people around me. I even write about my positive experiences at the hotel on HolidayCheck so that everyone considers that hotel."* However, the proportion of those who share positive posts about the hotel on social media is relatively low (n = 2). Among the P6 indicated that

"During a vacation, I generally share posts on social media, so my friends see my posts. Naturally, if I experience something positive at the hotel and am satisfied, I immediately share positive posts on my social media accounts."

Some participants mentioned that when they are satisfied with the hotel, they directly express their satisfaction with the staff (n=8) and their intent to revisit the hotel in the future (n=7), but tipping the staff is a notably uncommon behaviour (n=1). In this sense, P₁ remarked,

"When I am satisfied, I express my satisfaction to the staff and their supervisors. I leave a tip within my budget because I am also a tourism worker, and I believe this is a way to show appreciation. Moreover, if I am pleased with a hotel, I revisit it, even a second or third time."

In cases of dissatisfaction after the purchase, most participants either share negative feedback about the hotel with those around them (n = 15) or write negative reviews on online platforms (n = 12). To illustrate, P₁₇ said,

"If I am truly dissatisfied with the hotel, I leave negative reviews on review platforms because I also plan my vacations based on online reviews. I also share the issues about the hotel with those around me and tell them not to choose that hotel."

It was also found that some participants expressed their criticisms by sending emails to the hotel management (n = 3), directly conveying their complaints to the staff (n = 3), or reporting their dissatisfaction to the hotel by responding to its satisfaction survey (n = 2). For example, P₁ stated,

"If I am unsatisfied, I express my dissatisfaction. However, I do this not in a confrontational way or by arguing. Instead, I convey my dissatisfaction through the hotel's satisfaction survey or by contacting the relevant authority, such as the manager."

P₁₀ also indicated,

"If I am not satisfied with the hotel, one of the things I do is write to the hotel's email address or, if available, the managers' email addresses, expressing my negative experiences and complaints."

5. Discussion and implications

5.1. Discussion

This study explored the decision-making behaviour of hotel employees during the hotel vacation purchase process. The research problem was identified based on the assumption that hotel employees' decision-making behaviour during the vacation purchase process may differ from that of individuals in other tourist groups. Since they possess extensive knowledge, experience, and professional networks within the tourism sector, it was anticipated that being a hotel employee would influence their vacation decision-making processes for the first time. Results based on the EKB Model (Engel *et al.*, 1968) and Kotler *et al.*'s (2022) perspective related to tourist decision-making produced notable insights.

Descriptive results related to the research phenomenon revealed that vacation means relaxation, escaping from stress, and peace and happiness for hotel employees. They consider having a vacation a necessity, and going on vacation with family and/or friends more than once a year is a common practice among hotel employees. They also prefer all-inclusive hotels and small-scale accommodations, such as boutique hotels. Hence, this study asserts that hotel employees consider vacations as a family-oriented and well-being-enhancing activity, as consistent with previous tourist research highlighting that vacations serve as an opportunity for families to strengthen their bonds and enhance family cohesion (Bloom *et al.*, 2012; Durko & Petrick, 2013), and foster a sense of belonging and emotional well-being (Bloom *et al.*, 2013; Chen *et al.*, 2017). In this context, RQ₁ (*What does vacation mean to hotel employees?*) can be answered as follows:

For hotel employees, a vacation is an opportunity to spend time with family or friends in accommodation establishments with sufficient functional qualities. It aims to relax, escape daily stress, and achieve a sense of peace and happiness.

When examining how hotel employees experience the phases of the decision-making process in tourism, it became evident that being an individual working in the tourism sector has specific impacts on their decision-making process. For example, results demonstrated that hotel employees recognise the need for a vacation due to fatigue, primarily caused by the peak tourism season. Previous research also indicates that the nature of work in hotels often requires employees to prioritise customer satisfaction above their well-being, which exacerbates feelings of fatigue (Arslaner & Boylu, 2017). Therefore, the need for vacation among hotel employees is closely tied to fatigue, and regular breaks or vacations can mitigate the adverse effects of emotional labour and help restore psychological well-being (Elbaz *et al.*, 2020).

Escapism, relaxation, and novelty-seeking were found to be other push factors correlated with fatigue, indicating that the need recognition phase of the decision-making process is driven by the need for rest and escape from work stress through experiencing new things and places. Therefore, hotel employees believe that taking a vacation will make them feel renewed and relaxed, and the positive impacts persist even after returning to work, as highlighted by Bloom *et al.* (2009) and Kühnel and Sonnentag (2010). Moreover, the results revealed that their desire to go on vacation might also be reinforced by observing other tourists whom they envy within the hotel, indicating that the conspicuous consumption tendency or snobbism effect (Correia *et al.*, 2016) may also shape the need recognition phase of their decision-making process. Considering these results, RQ2 (*How do hotel employees recognise their need for a vacation?*) can be answered as follows:

Hotel employees mainly recognise their need for a vacation due to fatigue caused by the peak tourism season. The fundamental drivers of the need are rest and escape from work routines, and they expect benefits such as renewal and increased productivity after the vacation.

Results related to the information search phase revealed that hotel employees, like other tourists (Ciftci *et al.*, 2020; Ding *et al.*, 2022), primarily seek information on locations, hygiene and cleanliness, prices and service types (e.g., all-inclusive) of the hotels while building a consideration set, which refers to all hotels a tourist is aware of and may be likely to choose (Crompton & Ankomah, 1993). They primarily use external data sources to gather hotel information during the information gathering process. Among these sources, online review and rating platforms are the primary ones, followed by personal networks in the tourism sector. This study also supports previous research, which has revealed the effects of online reviews and ratings (Casaló *et al.*, 2015; Sparks & Browning, 2011; Zhao *et al.*, 2015) and peer recommendations from friends (Yaşın *et al.*, 2017) on tourist decisions during the information search process. In that case, it can be concluded for R3 (*How do hotel employees manage the information search phase of the decision-making process?*):

Hotel employees search for information about the hotels they are likely to choose for vacation through online reviews and rating platforms, and benefit from colleagues who can respond to their questions about hotel services. They primarily seek information on hotels' locations, hygiene and cleanliness, prices and service types.

When hotel employees, as tourists, proceed to the evaluation of alternatives phase, they consider hygiene and cleanliness, location, quality of food and beverage (F&B), and affordability as non-compensatory criteria expected from the desired hotel. Parzych and Brkić-Vejmelka (2020) also confirmed that hotel guests highly value these criteria. Additionally, child-friendly services were found

to be another non-compensatory criterion among those with children, supporting the study by Khoo-Lattimore *et al.* (2015). Indoor pools or aquaparks, a variety of F&B options, à la carte services, a spa, and animation were found to be desirable but not essential criteria – compensatory criteria – considered while evaluating alternative hotels. According to Kotler *et al.*'s (2022) hospitality product levels model, this conclusion suggests that hotel employees prioritise the core product or facilitating product over the supported or extended product when evaluating alternative hotels for a vacation.

Jenkins (1978) and van Raaij (1986) claimed that information search and evaluating alternatives can take a long time for tourists, and sometimes, the purchase is made as a last-minute decision. Nonetheless, the results of this study demonstrated that hotel employees mostly choose the hotel for vacation among the alternatives by applying limited problem-solving behaviour. They receive information about the hotels they included among the alternatives from their friends who are tourism employees, and thus make decisions efficiently and with less effort. Families with children do additional research and evaluate the alternatives by spending a lot of time and effort (extensive problem-solving), as previously highlighted by Bronner and de Hoog (2008) and Khoo-Lattimore *et al.* (2015). Under these circumstances, R4 (*How do hotel employees manage the purchase decision phase of the decision-making process?*) can be answered as:

Hotel employees evaluate alternative hotels, focusing on fundamental functional aspects, such as cleanliness and affordability, and choose the one for vacation, mostly with less effort by consulting their colleagues. If it is a family vacation with children, they put much effort into evaluating alternatives, focusing on the children's expectations.

Results demonstrated that the purchase decision is made primarily through direct reservations by calling the hotel, as personal contact is considered more reliable and advantageous in the payment and reservation processes. This result aligns with the findings of Almeida *et al.* (2012) and Dabas and Manaktola (2007), indicating that direct-contact booking is preferable for tourists during the booking process. It was also understood that hotel employees choose the direct booking channel to support the hotel by avoiding third-party commissions that hotels must pay for online booking platforms or travel agencies. They also benefit from these two purchasing channels if they determine the acceptable prices of online booking platforms/apps or travel agencies. Concerning this result on the purchase decision phase, it can be concluded for RQ5 (*How do hotel employees evaluate the alternative hotels during the decision-making process?*)

After selecting the hotel, they mostly prefer to purchase directly from the hotel by calling the reservation staff to experience the brand trust and receive payment flexibility.

Hotel employees' post-purchase behaviours were shaped by satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the vacationed hotel. Supporting Bravo *et al.*'s (2019) assertion, this study identified common post-purchase behaviours in the case of satisfaction, including writing positive reviews on online tourism platforms, developing an intention to revisit the hotel, and spreading positive word-of-mouth. Expressing gratitude to the hotel staff was revealed as another positive behaviour in terms of satisfaction, but surprisingly, tipping the staff was discovered to be a notably uncommon behaviour, even though they are aware of the value that tourism employees attribute to customer tips (Pala, 2020).

In line with Kim *et al.*'s (2019) study, which indicates that customer dissatisfaction with the hotel reveals specific negative behaviours, this study also demonstrates that negative word-of-mouth and writing negative online reviews are the salient behaviours in cases of dissatisfaction with the hotel. Hotel employees, as tourists, also express their criticisms by emailing the hotel management, directly conveying their complaints to the staff, or responding to the hotel's satisfaction survey to report their

dissatisfaction. Also consistent with Crie's (2003) model on customers' responses to dissatisfaction, these results show that hotel employees exhibit behavioural responses in both the business (through complaints) and the market (through online platforms) when they are not satisfied with the hotel they have vacationed at. So, finally, R6 (*How do hotel employees behave in the post-purchase evaluation phase of the decision-making process?*) can be responded to as follows:

When satisfied with the hotel, they especially thank the staff for the service, write online reviews and develop positive behavioural intentions. However, when dissatisfied, they persistently try to convey their complaints to the hotel management.

5.2. Theoretical implications

This study examines how occupational identity influences tourist behaviour, enabling the refinement of existing theoretical models of decision-making processes that have been criticised for their static nature (McCabe *et al.*, 2016; Smallman & Moore, 2010). Hotel employees were identified as tourists for the first time, and their professional expertise and insider knowledge of the tourism sector were found to be influential in decision-making processes when they become tourists. This pioneering study fills a research gap in the tourist behaviour literature related to tourist identities. It also supports Howard and Sheth's (1969) judgment that occupational experiences serve as a critical filter for decision-making, as well as Solomon's (2018) perspective on consumer identity, arguing that professional roles shape consumer preferences and decision-making strategies.

The preference for travelling in off-peak tourism season and the strategic use of sector discounts exemplify how hotel employees' occupational constraints shape their attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, the study contributes to the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) by illustrating how perceived behavioural control (e.g., travelling during off-peak tourism seasons) and subjective norms (e.g., using sector discounts) impact their vacation decisions. It also proves, based on the Information Processing Theory (Bettman, 1979), that hotel employees rely on sector-specific knowledge to simplify their decision-making processes, favouring trusted hotel brands and familiar service standards.

From a comprehensive perspective, this study extends the EKB model (Engel *et al.*, 1968) by demonstrating that occupational identity functions as a determinant shaping tourist behaviour across its five stages. It provides empirical evidence for an occupational-identity-based approach to the decision-making stages, which has not been systematically addressed in prior applications of the model. When a context-specific and identity-based perspective is incorporated, the model's traditionally static structure becomes more dynamic and better reflects real-world decision-making processes. Consequently, the study provides insights suggesting that the EKB model (Engel *et al.*, 1968) can be further refined and applied across other identity-based contexts, thereby broadening its theoretical foundation.

5.3. Practical implications

This study offers practice-based insights for tourism service providers and hotel operators by revealing how tourism professionals behave when acting as tourists. Although hotel employees are not typically treated as a distinct market segment in tourism and hospitality studies (Yalvac & Sop, 2021), their vacation decision-making patterns provide transferable cues for enhancing service design, communication, and customer experience strategies. The practical implications derived from each phase of their decision-making process are outlined below.

Hotel employees associate vacation with relaxation, renewal, and quality time with family or friends. This evaluation underscores the importance of well-being-oriented travel offerings. In practice, hotels may design short wellness breaks, off-season packages, or family-oriented retreat programs specifically

targeting employees working in the sector. While hotel employees are not explicitly positioned as a target market, their preferences reflect a broader tourist tendency to prioritise functional comfort over luxury. Hospitality providers should place greater emphasis on emotional benefits, such as relaxation, well-being, and simplicity, in their service design and marketing communications. Highlighting these elements can resonate not only with hotel employees on vacation, but also with value-conscious family travellers more generally.

The fact that hotel employees recognise the need for vacation primarily due to workload-related fatigue highlights the importance of actively supporting rest and recovery cycles in tourism employment settings. Hotels could collaborate with industry associations to create discounted vacation programs for employees during the low season, allowing them to rest and recover while also stimulating demand in off-peak periods. Although this study focuses on hotel employees' vacation behaviour, the insights gained suggest that hotel operations could implement restorative days off planning or vacation facilitation programs to help employees manage cumulative fatigue and, in turn, sustain long-term employee performance.

Hotel employees, as tourists, primarily rely on online reviews and personal contacts when searching for hotel information, focusing on concrete attributes such as location, cleanliness, price, and service type. This behaviour highlights the continued importance of maintaining accurate, up-to-date content on review platforms, as well as ensuring transparent presentation of basic service features. For this specific tourist segment, who frequently consult industry colleagues, hotels may also benefit from referral-based strategies, such as employee referral discounts or sector-specific loyalty programs.

Hotel employees primarily evaluate accommodation alternatives based on essential functional features such as hygiene, location, food quality, and affordability, while placing less emphasis on additional or luxury services. For this group, these factors carry heightened significance because their insider knowledge of hotel operations makes them particularly sensitive to hygiene standards and value-for-money assessments. Their tendency to make decisions with limited effort reflects reliance on professional networks and sector-specific familiarity, which reduces the need for extensive decision-making effort. In particular, for employees travelling with their families, clear visibility of hygiene certifications, simplified pricing schemes, and explicitly labelled child-friendly amenities would directly address their priorities and enhance trust in the chosen hotel.

The preference of hotel employees for direct booking via phone, driven by trust in personal communication, payment flexibility, and awareness of commission structures, demonstrates the continued importance of maintaining accessible, transparent, and responsive direct reservation channels. Hospitality managers can further strengthen this preference by ensuring clear price communication, flexible payment arrangements, and prompt, personalised responses during the booking process. For example, employee-specific promotional offers (such as discounts or complimentary room upgrades) can be provided during direct bookings as a customer relationship management strategy specifically targeting employees in the sector, thereby initiating the customer value creation process from the outset of the reservation process.

The post-purchase behaviours of hotel employees indicate that they are highly reflective tourists who actively engage in both positive and negative feedback processes. When satisfied, similar to typical tourist behaviour, they express appreciation through online reviews and direct contact with the serving staff. At the same time, dissatisfaction prompts formal complaints to management and online criticism. Given their professional background, hospitality managers could treat feedback from these sector-insider tourists as a form of insider audit, creating structured channels (e.g., follow-up calls, targeted surveys and interviews) to capture their insights for service improvement. This perspective highlights

the importance of tourism providers actively monitoring and responding to guest feedback across multiple channels, not merely for reputation management but also as a valuable input for service development.

6. Conclusion, limitations and future research directions

6.1. Conclusion

This study investigated how hotel employees, as both insiders to the tourism sector and consumers of its services, navigate the vacation decision-making process. Drawing on the EKB model (Engel *et al.*, 1968) and Kotler *et al.*'s (2022) perspective on decision-making in tourism, the study revealed that while hotel employees follow the same fundamental stages as other tourists, their behaviours are shaped by occupational context, sectoral experience, and professional knowledge. Their approach reflects a blend of general tourist tendencies and insider-informed decision strategies.

Consistent with previous tourist research (Bloom *et al.*, 2012; Durko & Petrick, 2013; Kühnel & Sonnentag, 2010), participants of this study associated vacation with rest, escape, and emotional renewal, and prioritised quality time with family. Their emphasis on location, hygiene, affordability, and service quality also aligned with well-documented tourist expectations (Parzych & Brkić-Vejmelka, 2020). However, their use of professional networks in information search, tendency toward limited problem-solving based on sector familiarity, and preference for direct booking as a trust-based and commission-aware action distinguish them from the general tourist population. Another distinctive behaviour is that when they are not satisfied with the hotel they are vacationing at, they persistently try to convey their complaints to the management through face-to-face contact or email. These nuances do not identify them as a wholly separate tourist segment, but instead indicate that their occupational identity shapes their tourist behaviour.

By interpreting these patterns through phenomenological research, the study offers a more situated understanding of tourist behaviour that considers not only the decisions made but also how and why those decisions take shape in specific professional contexts. The results affirm that while hotel employees behave as tourists, their decisions are influenced by experiences gained through service provision, making them reflective and informed consumers. These insights contribute to a more layered understanding of tourism consumption and reaffirm the value of context-specific and identity-based perspectives in consumer decision-making research (McCabe *et al.*, 2016; Smallman & Moore, 2010).

6.2. Limitations and future research directions

This study has some limitations. Although qualitative research design provides an in-depth understanding, the results are context-specific and may not be generalisable to broader populations or other occupational groups. Future research could incorporate quantitative or mixed-method approaches to validate and extend the results across different contexts and larger sample sizes. In addition, this study focused exclusively on hotel employees within a specific geographical or cultural context. The role of cultural and regional differences in shaping decision-making processes remained unexplored. Therefore, future studies should conduct cross-cultural comparisons to investigate the influence of occupational identity on tourist decision-making.

Exploring cross-departmental differences among hotel employees is also suggested, as the nature of their departmental roles might influence how they evaluate and prioritise factors in the vacation decision-making process. Departmental differences (e.g., accounting, security), which were not examined in this study, may affect the depth of sector-specific knowledge; nevertheless, all participants are likely to possess some degree of insider understanding due to their continuous involvement in hotel operations and social networks within the industry. Moreover, future research could also utilise alternative theoretical frameworks, such as decision-making under uncertainty or heuristic-based

models, instead of the EKB model (Engel *et al.*, 1968), to capture the complexities of real-world scenarios. Lastly, the tourist identity of tourism employees warrants deeper exploration. Longitudinal studies could examine how employees' professional experiences and career trajectories influence their preferences and behaviours.

Ethics approval

The authors received approval from the independent ethics committee of Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University on May 11, 2022, with the document GO2022/664.

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