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Gen Z on circularity and sustainable consumption

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UWL Fashion Industry: Marketing, Buying & Promotion

Students on Circularity and Sustainable Consumption:

How can Gen Z be encouraged to emotionally connect to the life cycle of fashion product, through their engagement with DPPs?

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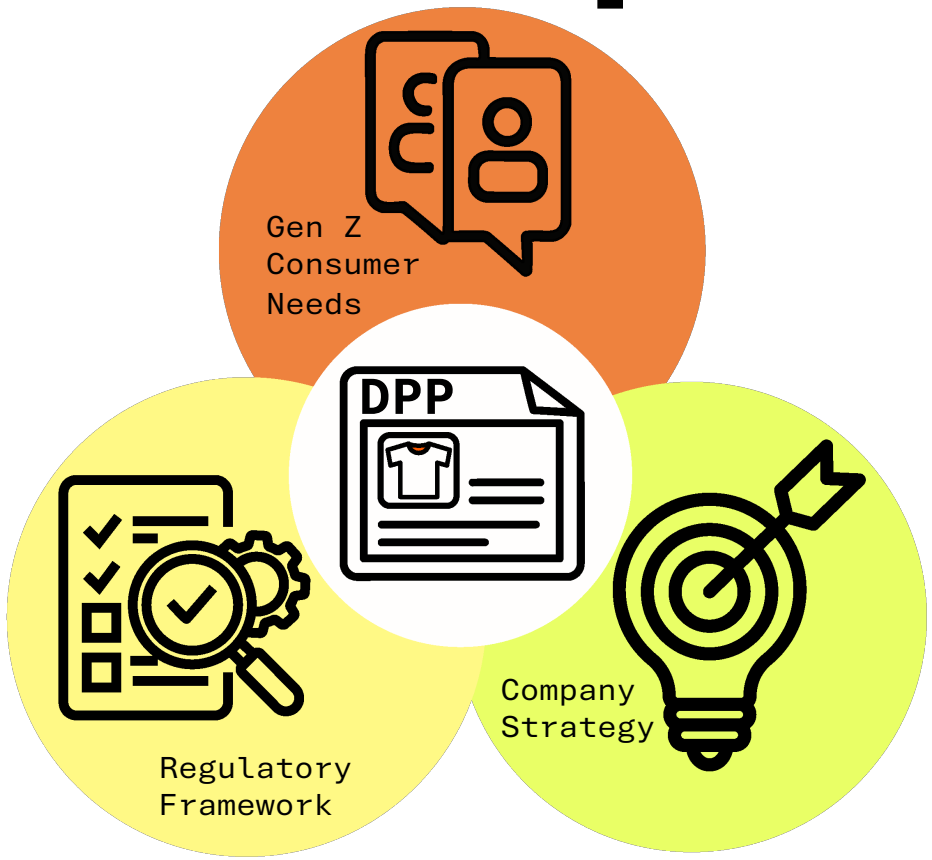

Introduction

The fashion industry is entering a new regulatory era with Digital Product Passports (DPPs), which will define what data must exist, but not how consumers will actually use it.

This research explores how Gen Z perceives sustainability, quality, transparency, and circularity - and what they expect from DPPs in real shopping situations.

Findings reveal the true drivers of behaviour: trust, convenience, emotional connection, quality, value, and the gap between sustainable intentions and actual actions.

The insights offer a behavioural roadmap for designing DPPs and circular systems that work with real Gen Z consumer motivations.

The Challenge

With DPPs becoming a legal requirement in Europe from 2027, supply chain information including countries of origin, materials information, disposal, and care guidelines, will need to be made easily available to consumers.

A key challenge industry faces is the need to understand Gen Z consumers' attitudes to fashion consumption, and how this consumer group can be encouraged to engage more with circularity through their interaction with digital product passports.

Connected to this, is the need to identify how DPPs can best be used to accurately collect and communicate meaningful supply chain and sustainability related data in a way that utilises storytelling to captivate and engage audiences, whilst avoiding greenwashing.

In response, Fashion Industry students from UWL have carried out research into Gen Z's attitude to fashion consumption, and how this consumer group can be encouraged to engage more with circularity through their interaction with digital product passports.

Methodology

Research Question:

How can Gen Z be encouraged to emotionally connect to the life cycle of fashion product through their engagement with DPPs?

Aims:

To gain fresh insights into the Gen Z consumer's attitude to fashion consumption, to help understand their expectations of DPP content, and to improve customer engagement with this.

To explore how the Gen Z consumer can be encouraged to value their purchases more and emotionally connect with the product life cycle.

To encourage engagement with sustainable and circular practice - in the repair, re-use, and recycling of products.

How:

Level 5 students engaged in qualitative research through running a full day of focus groups into student opinion, attitudes, and expectations, relating to engagement with the fashion circular economy and DPP's.

Focus Group date: 5th March 2026

Participants: 28 x Students from UWL Fashion Marketing, Buying & Promotion - within the Gen Z profile (14-29).

Analysis: We used an accelerated, reflexive thematic approach informed by Braun and Clarke's (2021) principles to identify cross cutting themes

Trust, Transparency & Greenwashing Scepticism

01

“I have no trust in high street brands at all. When I’m looking at ‘sustainability’ from a high street brand, I usually look at the speed and amount at which they’re producing.”

Key Research Insight:

Sustainability Claims Are Widely Distrusted. DPPs must provide proof, not promises.

Participants:

Participants overwhelmingly believe that most fashion sustainability claims - especially from high street and fast fashion retailers - are marketing-driven and unreliable.

“Eco” labels, green tags, and “conscious” collections are dismissed as greenwashing unless backed by clear, credible evidence.

Participants only trust sustainability information when it is simple, visual, and backed by verifiable proof, not vague promises.

Participants trust social media creators and peer-generated content (particularly TikTok) more than official brand communications, viewing creators as more honest and transparent.

Proof Point:

Gen Z consumers want to see brands prove that their marketed ethical practices are put into practice, having brand transparency draws in Gen Zs as they see the brand as trustworthy. (TEAM LEWIS, 2022)

Source: TEAM LEWIS (2022)

Consumer Priorities: Quality, Price, Convenience Over Sustainability

02

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“Everyone’s conscious of what they put in their body, and once you look into the labels, you’re like, ‘I’m paying £100 pounds for plastic’.”

“Price is the biggest factor, no matter how good the claims are.”

Key Research Insight:

Quality is the strongest behavioural driver.

Participants:

Quality was an important factor across all participants far outweighing sustainability in purchase decisions.

Participants are extremely price conscious, and value driven. Most have limited budgets and prioritise affordability over sustainability.

They will choose sustainable options only when they align with affordability and clear cost-benefit logic.

Circularity must feel financially smart, not morally superior.

If sustainable actions take effort, participants don't follow through - if a process is slow, complicated, or unclear, they rapidly disengage.

Proof Point:

"Tap into the rising demand for quality over quantity...including repair services and lifetime warranties" (WGSN, 2024)

"If something is expensive, it needs to last. That's what makes it worth it."

Over-consumption Awareness, Self-Regulation & Behavioural Contradictions

03

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"I do a one in, one out. Every month I go through my wardrobe and make a pile of stuff I'd sell on Vinted. If I sell four things, I know that I can purchase four more things."

Key Research Insight:

Overconsumption is Acknowledged, but Not Fixed

Participants:

Participants openly recognise their overconsumption and understand its environmental impacts yet acknowledge that they continue to buy excessively.

Participants use personal strategies to manage consumption (e.g., one-in-one-out), but these methods are inconsistent and easily overridden by impulse buying, trends, or convenience.

A persistent gap exists between sustainable intention and behaviour because convenience and affordability routinely overpower ethical goals.

Proof Point:

"Generation Z cares about social and environmental issues and is known for its activism and concern for the environment regarding climate change, social justice and sustainability. But these values are not always reflected in their buying behaviour." (Fashion United, 2024) Source: Blaazer, E. (2024)

"When I'm going out, I'll have a new outfit for every occasion... it's basically an excuse for more clothes. But I do donate clothes, so I feel like it's a balance in my head."

Second-Hand Ecosystem: Motivations, Barriers & Emotional Differences

04

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“I feel it’s become cool to say that you’re buying vintage. With a lot of my friends, it’s like, where did you buy this? They’re going to say it’s vintage. It’s kind of status now, I feel.”

Key Research Insight:

For Gen Z Second-Hand is the default Sustainability

Participants:

Second hand purchasing is widely viewed as the easiest and most authentic form of sustainable behaviour because it requires no research and immediately reduces guilt about consumption.

Motivators include offering better value, greater uniqueness, emotional resonance, and access to items not found in standard retail – with sustainability perceived as an automatic bonus.

Barriers included lack of time, inconsistent sizing, hygiene concerns, and difficulty reselling trend-led items.

DPPs should enable circular ecosystems with integrated resale, provenance & authenticity tools.

Proof Point:

There has been an “increase in this generation buying second-hand fashion [… the] preloved fashion market has become increasingly crowded with online resale platforms, retailers and charity shops.” (Sender Ceron, 2025)

“I don’t shop first-hand a lot, maybe I make 5 purchases a year first-hand. Everything else would be second-hand. I don’t know if it’s life before really matters much, because I feel good already just buying it second-hand.”

Emotional Connection, Identity & Clothing Attachment

"The emotional connection that you have with an item is way beyond price or whatever. It could be just a sweater from a charity shop, but if you love that sweater, and you have a specific memory in it, you're going to be more inclined to want to really care for it and nurture it so it has a long life, and you can continue wearing it."

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Key Research Insight:

Emotional Connection Drives Longevity

Participants:

Emotional connection is the most influential driver in prolonging garment life – surpassing quality, price, and even sustainability.

Clothing functions as a personal archive of identity, carrying cultural, emotional, and narrative meaning that shapes self-expression and deepens attachment to specific pieces.

Garments tied to memories, personal milestones, or identity become irreplaceable. This emotional dimension is the most powerful lever for circularity.

Proof Point:

Gen Z like to document things so adding a documental layer can build a bridge between product and consumer. For example, "Imagine this with a pair of Levi's jeans: the DPP tracks fades, repairs, years owned, and stories. Over time, the product becomes emotionally irreplaceable." (Maliska G, 2026)

Implication:

Use DPPs to tell stories, document ownership history & build emotional value.

Circular Features: Repair, Resale, Buyback & End-of-Life Behaviours

06

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"I'd repair an expensive item, not cheap high street stuff."

"I don't know how to sew... so it ends up in the bin."

Key Research Insight:

Resale value helps justify premium purchases

Participants:

Resale value helps justify premium purchases.

Peer-to-peer resale is preferred over brand buyback.

Buyback matters as insurance, not for cash return, and boosts perceived value.

DPPs should include repair instructions and simple tutorials + repair partners + repair vouchers.

Gen Z will repair when: An item is premium, high-quality, loved, rare, or fits perfectly, or a repair service is offered.

Repairs do NOT happen because: The cost is greater than value. There is a general lack of skills and tools.

Proof Point:

“Younger consumers, particularly Gen Z, show much higher levels of interest in buying clothes with information on the label about end-of-life, compared to the average shopper.” (Sender and Rudd, 2025)

“I can get more for it on Vinted than a brand buyback.”

“Buyback just feels safer — like you’re not wasting your money.”

"If I knew something was actually being recycled in some sort of way, I do think I would just feel better about what I'm doing. It would be nice to be offered an alternative that feels like it's doing something and not just going to a landfill."

Consumer Archetypes

The digital savvy consumer	1
The sustainability and circularity committed consumer	2
The DPP sceptic	3

The Digital Savvy Consumer

Psychographics

Highly connected and socially influenced. Values brand transparency, storytelling, and peer validation.

Sees shopping as an interactive digital experience and enjoys using tools to make smarter purchase decisions.

Balances ethics, price, and convenience without being driven by any one factor.

Source: https://uk.pinterest.com/pin/1030761433485019929/

Media interaction

Discovers brands through TikTok, Instagram, reviews, influencers, and omnichannel experiences. Engages most with short-form content that explains products visually and quickly.

Shopping behaviour

What: Trend aware pieces, popular items, and well-reviewed products.

When: After seeing social proof, reviews, or influencer use.

How: Compares reviews, searches for discount codes, checks multiple platforms before buying.

Why: Wants confidence they are making a smart, informed purchase.

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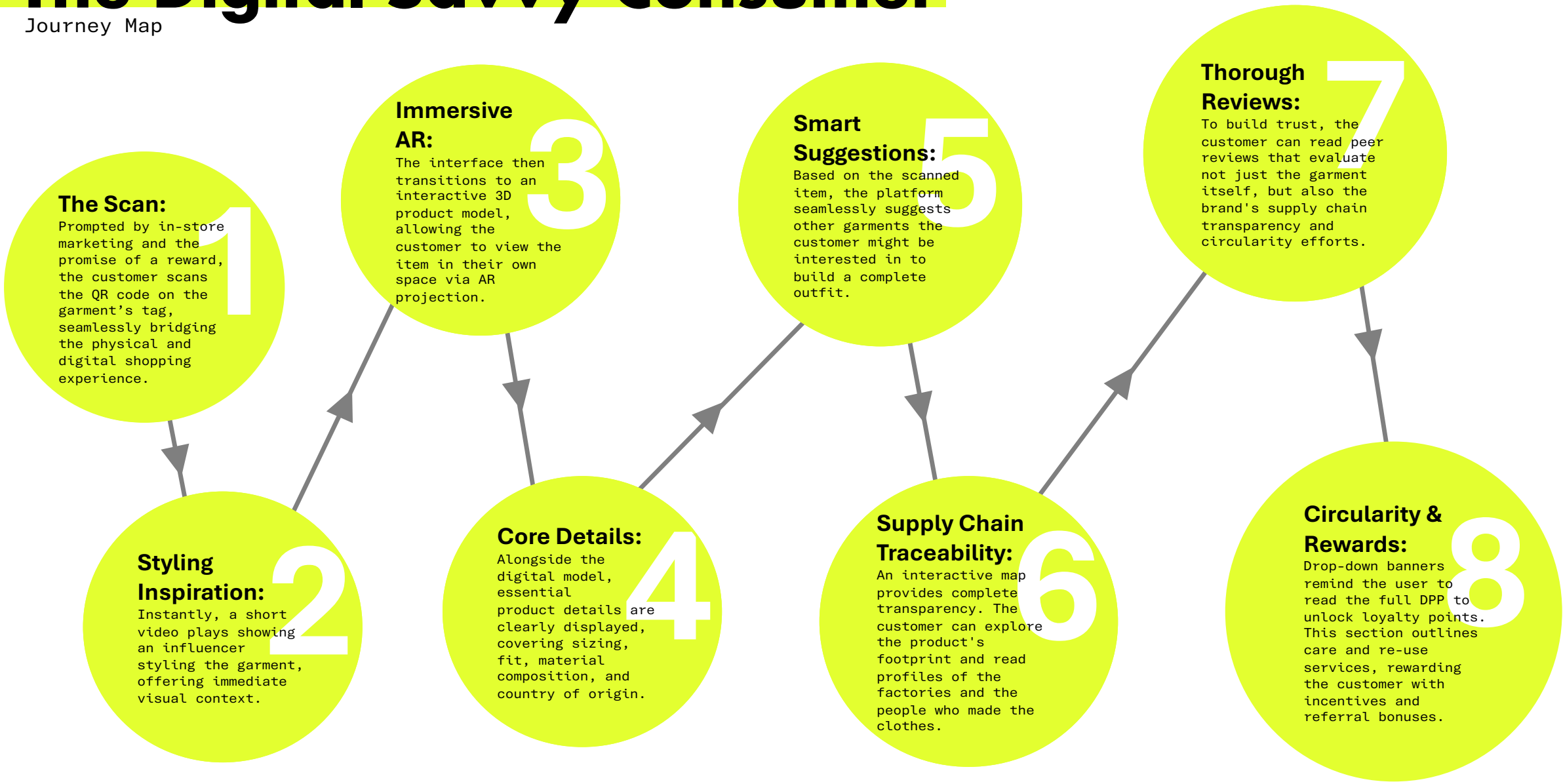
The Digital Savvy Consumer

Journey Map



Sustainability and Circularity Committed Consumer

Psychographics

Driven by ethics, longevity, and responsibility.

Sees clothing as an investment and is sceptical of greenwashing and paid influencer campaigns.

Values proof, transparency, and product quality over trends.

Source: https://uk.pinterest.com/pin/1030761433485019256/

Media interaction

Finds brands through Instagram and TikTok but prefers in store experiences to assess quality. Engages with infographics, symbols, and visual explanations before long text.

Shopping behaviour

What: High quality, timeless garments, second-hand pieces, or small ethical brands.

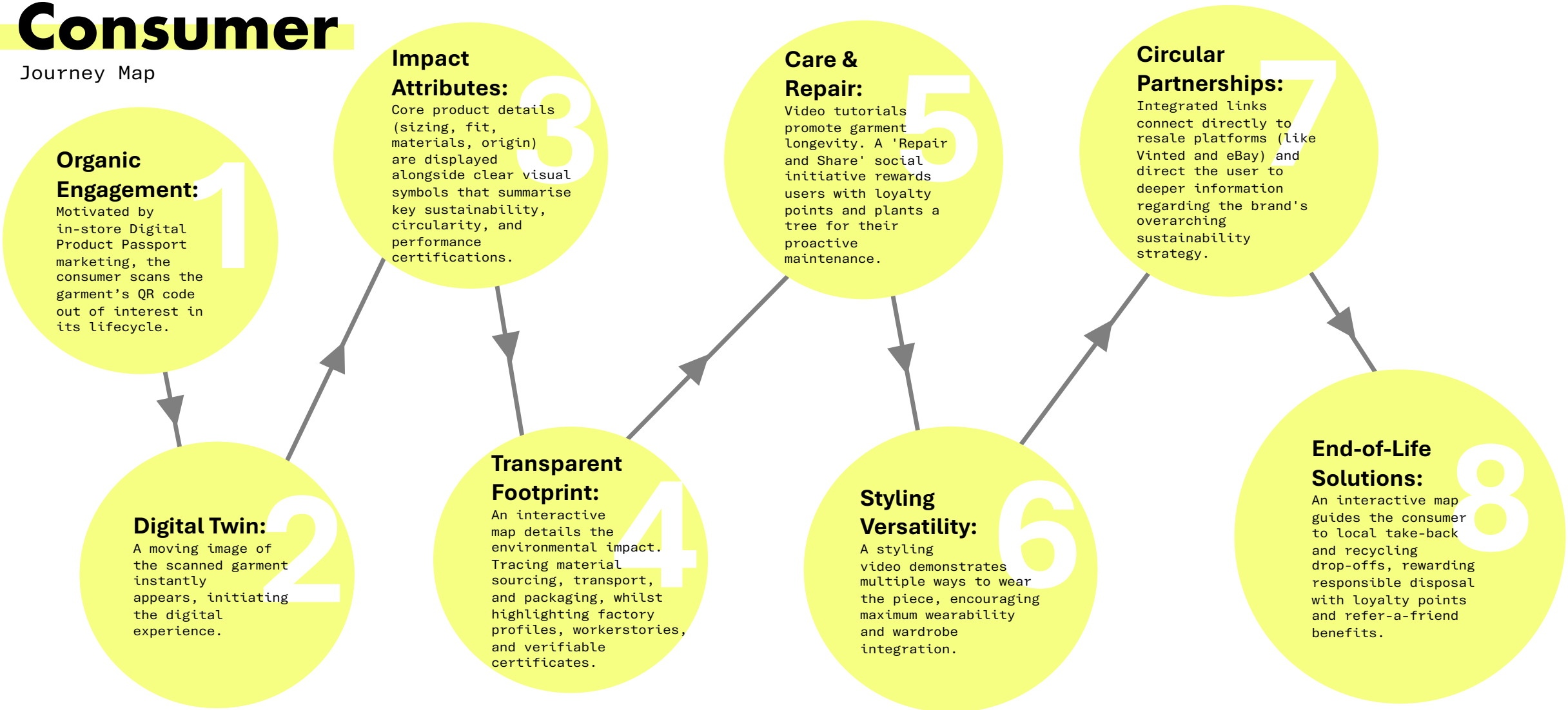
When: After verifying brand ethics, materials, and durability.

How: Lightly but intentional research, checks labels, and inspects garments in person.

Why: To align purchases with environmental and moral values.

Sustainability and Circularity Committed Consumer

Journey Map



DPP Sceptic / Reluctant Scanner

Psychographics

Led by aesthetics, speed, and social proof rather than information.

Shopping is entertainment driven and impulsive.

Clothes are seen as disposable, and trend led rather than long term items.

Source: https://www.projectcece.com/blog/656/psychology-of-fast-fashion/

Media interaction

Influenced heavily by reels, hauls, ads, and influencer styling. Consumes fast, visually engaging short-form content.

Shopping behaviour

What: Trending items, discounted products, visually appealing outfits.

When: Immediately after seeing a haul, ad, or styling video.

How: Shops directly through social media or fast fashion sites with minimal research.

Why: For instant gratification, newness, and keeping up with trends

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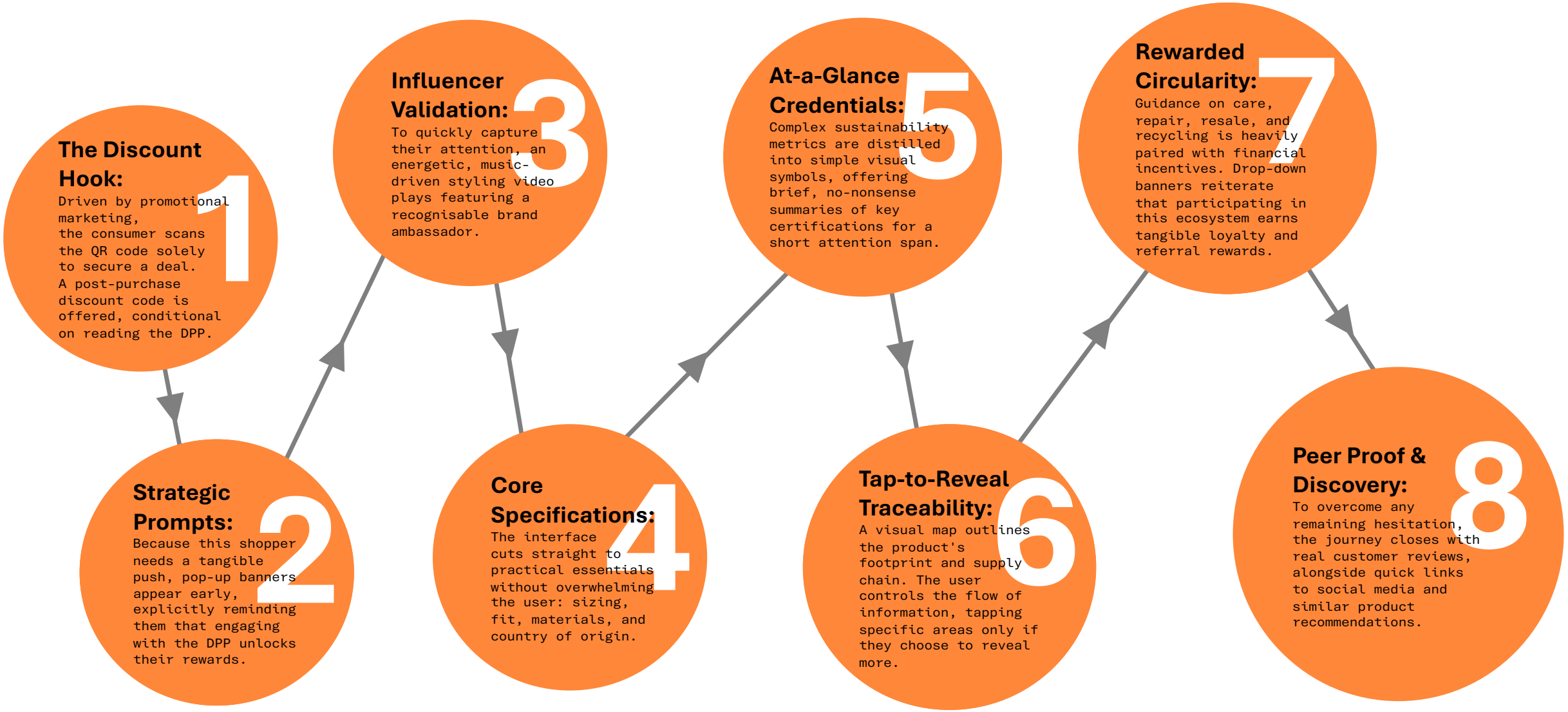
DPP Sceptic / Reluctant Scanner

Journey Map



Digital Product Passports: Conditions for Adoption

07

“It’s environmental and financial cost to store all this information. So, we need to make sure that we’ve got enough to be useful, but not so much that it’s being wasteful.”

Key Research Insight:

Participants will scan - but only when it delivers fast, meaningful content

Participants:

Participants will scan if it delivers contents such as as care guidance, authenticity checks, resale information, or emotionally engaging stories.

Barriers to DPP adoption include slow performance, overwhelming text, poor connectivity in stores, and concerns that the content may be irrelevant, or overly technical.

Proof Point:

"This group is suffering burnout and stress from beingonline, and they are looking for a balance between beingconnected and disconnected. Offer thoughtful andalternative tech tools that enable them to connectand participate in knowledge-sharing" (WGSN)

"We're at this point, where we've got such information overload. There's just a limit to how much we can take in."

DPPs Must Combine Practical Utility + Emotional Storytelling

“I cannot stress how important images are… nobody wants to read anything, and even a video is very long. (…) You could have a symbol with an explanation if someone wanted, it’s just giving options for the level of depth that anyone wants to go into.”

Key Research Insight:

Explain practicality through honest storytelling to build emotional connection

Participants:

DPPs are most valuable when they combine practical utility with emotional storytelling, offering clear information on supply chain, care, repair, provenance, resale value, and recycling pathways.

DPPs have the potential to build emotional connection through storytelling, making garments feel more valuable, meaningful, and worth keeping.

Proof Point:

Gen Z wants simple, visual learning tools for: Clothing care, Repair, Upcycling. Education builds confidence andpride in maintaining clothes, encouraging longer use and emotional attachment. (I-D, 2025)

“If you’re going to use it as a marketing tool, it should feel cohesive with the brand, and whatever is being put in it should reflect the values of the customer. So, if the customer cares about how to style things, put it in, if it’s a brand that does only wool garments, they should put in beautiful videos of how to wash and take care of your garments, that sort of thing, longevity”.

Incentives & Rewards as Behaviour Drivers

08

“It’s not just about getting a reward from the brand you bought the product from. It could be some centralised loyalty scheme. I mean, we’re in a cost-of-living crisis.”

Key Research Insight:

Financial rewards are the strongest motivator

Participants:

Participants value financial rewards for repairing, recycling, returning garments or updating DPPs.

Participants prefer flexible, cross-brand or cross-category reward systems over single-brand loyalty schemes because they offer greater perceived value and avoid feeling restrictive.

DPPs should use financial + emotional incentives as the bridge between intention and action.

“I like the idea of a voucher for a local repair place”

”If the garment is expensive and you can take it back to be repaired… why not?”

Brand Loyalty, Community & Social Identity

09

"If brands have a good ambassador that really believes in sustainability, Gen Zs are happy to be influenced by these personalities. I think that's a good way to tell the story for the brand."

Key Research Insight:

Authenticity should be identified and utilised to help build connections

Participants:

Emotional resonance, personal memories, and authenticity influence Gen Z brand loyalty more than sustainability messaging.

Brands that show creative processes, include customers in storytelling, and present genuine voices earn trust and loyalty.

Participants value brands that cultivate authentic communities, involve consumers in creative processes, and communicate openly and inclusively through transparent, humanised storytelling.

Proof Point:

“Gen Zs are reinventing the very notion of brand loyalty. They’re largely open to it, but they expect brands to earn it – and to continue to win them over in new and innovative ways for the long haul.” (VOGUE BUSINESS, 2024)

“It’s about being part of something, not just buying something.”

“Be honest, be human. That’s what makes me stay.”

Key Takeaways: What Really Drives Sustainable Behaviour

1. Trust is earned through proof, not messaging

Gen Z distrusts sustainability claims and only engages with information that is simple, visual, and verifiable - trust now sits with TikTok creators and peers, not brands.

2. Quality is a powerful driver of behaviour

Durability, comfort, and craftsmanship outweigh sustainability considerations, in shaping Gen Z fashion consumption.

3. Convenience determines whether sustainable behaviour happens

If repair, resale, or recycling is slow or complex, consumers disengage-friction is the biggest barrier to circularity.

Key Takeaways: What Really Drives Sustainable Behaviour

4. Emotional connection is the engine of longevity and loyalty

Items linked to identity, memory, and meaning are kept longer, while brand loyalty is built through emotional resonance.

5. Second-hand succeeds because it is easy, affordable, and meaningful

Seen as automatically sustainable whilst being affordable, unique, and emotionally engaging - the most adopted circular behaviour.

6. DPPs need to feel instantly useful, engaging, and effortless

Gen Z want a fast, visual experience, with useful product information, value (care, repair, resale, recycle) alongside emotional storytelling (provenance, owner history).

7. Financial incentives transform intention into action.

Financial rewards (discounts, vouchers, and repair credits) will activate sustainable actions (repairing, updating DPPs, or recycling).

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Strategic recommendations:

How to Activate Circularity, Build Trust, and Win Over Gen Z Through Digital Product Passports

1. Build Trust Through Radical Transparency

Earn Gen Z trust by proving sustainability with clear, verifiable sustainability evidence rather than marketing claims.

2. Make Quality Central to Sustainability Messaging

Highlight durability, craftsmanship, and repairability to reinforce long-term value and credibility.

3. Make Circularity Effortless

Design seamless experiences so sustainable actions require minimal effort and friction.

Strategic recommendations:

4. Use Emotional Storytelling to Drive Longevity

Use storytelling and personal product histories to deepen attachment and extend product life. Enable customers to use DPP's to add their own memories, repairs, or ownership history.

5. Integrate resale and repair as core brand services

Embed resale and repair into the brand experience using data to ensure authenticity, trust, and longevity.

6. Optimise DPPs for Utility and Storytelling

Balance functional features with rich narratives to increase engagement and reduce disposability.

7. Offer Meaningful Incentives

Reward circular actions with meaningful benefits so that incentives transform intention into act

8. Build Community Through Authenticity and Co-Creation

Gen Z stays loyal to brands that feel human, honest, and culturally connected - involve creators and share transparent, behind-the-scenes brand stories.

Conclusion

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Gen Z's path to sustainability is shaped by trust, quality, emotion, and ease — not by claims.

This research shows that real circular behaviour happens when brands provide proof, not promises, elevate quality and durability, and remove friction from responsible actions.

Second-hand thrives because it is effortless and meaningful, while repairs and recycling only occur when supported with simple tools, clear guidance, and real incentives.

Emotional connection is the strongest driver of longevity, making storytelling, provenance, and identity far more powerful than environmental messaging alone.

Digital Product Passports can become transformative when they deliver fast utility, transparent evidence, and emotional value in one place.

Brands must design DPP for how people really behave -creating systems that are transparent, convenient, rewarding, and rooted in authentic human connection.

Research by students from BA (Hons) Fashion Industry: Marketing, Buying, & Promotion.

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