Can brand personality differentiate fast food restaurants?

Alisha Ali[1]* and Vishal Sharma[2]

[1]*Sheffield Hallam University, City Campus, London, United Kingdom*
[2]*PriceWaterHouse Coopers, London, United Kingdom*
*Corresponding author email: alisha.ali@shu.ac.uk

This study examines brand personality as an approach to establish brand differentiation in the highly competitive fast food sector. A modified brand personality scale proposed by Musante et al. (2008) was used to develop a questionnaire which was distributed to customers to assess their perceived brand personalities for three well known fast food restaurants – McDonald's, KFC and Subway. The results demonstrated that even though the overall perceived brand personality was different for all three brands, no individual personality dimension characterised any of the brands.

Keywords: brand, brand personality, fast food, restaurants

Introduction

Intangibility is a critically inherent characteristic of the food service industry and even though certain core products are offered, the overall consumption is experiential in nature, which provides an immense challenge to marketers (Kotler et al. 2010). Within the food service sector, fast food restaurants (FFRs) are developing rapidly at a global level, which is characterised by low barriers of entry, including ease of access and low investment for many businesses (Mamalis 2009). Despite these favourable entry conditions, there is little room for error as the global recession has restricted consumer spending and limited access to financial sources for restaurateurs (Kim et al. 2011). One of the key strategies used by marketers to allow such businesses as FFRs to compete and survive is the development of associations with consumers through brand management. The concept of brand management involves creation of a strong brand, enhancing its awareness and adapting it continually to changes in the market (Keller 2003). Customers who have an understanding of a restaurant's concept and branding would be more inclined to become a patron than those who do not (Kim et al. 2011).

To build a strong brand, FFRs must not only deliver what the brand promises but also exceed customers' expectations and strive hard to establish a strong and distinguished brand presence (Kim and Kim 2004, Murase and Bojanic 2004). Competition with familiar brands, the uncertain nature of the fast food product quality, the difficulties of developing new products and the threat of substitution makes brand positioning, management and differentiation in FFRs highly important (Rekom et al. 2006). One of the key tools in influencing a brand's image and consumer association is brand personality, which is the set of human attributes that consumers associate with a brand (Aaker 1997). FFRs can use brand personality for establishing brand-consumer relationships and attract consumers on the basis of highlighting symbolic or non-functional attributes of the brand as customers have often been observed to describe brands using associative terms of personality traits. Freling and Forbes (2005) observed that the ease and clarity with which customers identify a brand's personality is important in determining success of the brand.

The aim of this research was to assess customers' perceived brand personalities of three well known global FFRs brands and to examine the differentiation in these perceptions. Musante et al. (2008) presented a modified version of Aaker's (1997) model for the restaurant industry. These researchers were supported by the work of Austin et al. (2003), who argued that several of the 42 items on Aaker's (1997) Brand Personality Scale (BPS) were not applicable to restaurants. This study attempts to use the modified BPS developed by Mustane et al. (2008) to understand customer perceptions of these three FFRs brands. Specifically, this research aims to answer two key questions:
- Are there differences in customers' perceptions of brand personality between FFRs based on the modified model?
- Does brand personality serve as a differentiation factor between FFRs based on the modified model?

Literature review

The American Marketing Association (cited in Kotler et al. 2009, 250) defined a brand as 'a name, term, sign, symbol or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors'. Creating a strong brand name signals to the consumer the quality, value and symbolism of the product, eliminating purchase search time (Murase and Bojanic 2004). Even though competitors can imitate product design to an extent by introducing similar products, they cannot mimic the essence of a brand name and its value (Crimmins 2000). The creation of strong brands has a multitude of benefits which include ease of identification,

deeper customer loyalty, resilience in crisis management, increased profits, higher market share and favourable responses from the consumers (Freling and Forbes 2005, Kotler et al. 2010, Oh 2000).

Aaker (1999) suggested that consumers select brands with personalities congruent with themselves and their personal situations. Brand personality derives knowledge of how brands are used by consumers to construct and express their emotions (Heding et al. 2009). The primary function of brand personality is about relating to and aiding consumers in the process of their self-expression (Dubois 2000). The extent to which consumers use this method of constructing and expressing their identity is the point of reference that forms the basis for differentiation of one brand over other brands in the same product category. The rationale behind this lies in the premise that people seek associations with brands that portray images similar to their perceived self-concept and thus choose brands as a tool to express their personality (Freling and Forbes 2005, Musante et al. 2008). This implies that consumers use brand personality to experience its emotional benefits and 'self-express' their personality (Phau and Lau 2001). For instance the McDonald's personality has always been one of 'fun' as depicted by its cartoon characters (Siguaw et al. 1999).

Expression by the consumers could be one of three forms which include expressing one's own self, that is projecting an image of their overall personality (Belk 1988), portraying an ideal self or a desired image that one wishes to project (Malhotra 1988) or expressing a specific dimension or a singular characteristic of one's self (Kleine et al. 1993). In the context of brand management, therefore, creating brand personality is a way to differentiate brands, drive consumer preference and improve the financial objectives of the business (Heding et al. 2009).

Research framework: modified BPS

Aaker (1997), with the BPS, made a landmark contribution to marketing research to measure and assess brand personality in different industries through surveying respondents to list all possible traits that came to mind when thinking of specific brands. She asked a total of 631 subjects to rate 37 brands, which resulted in 309 personality traits which were then filtered down to 114 depending on consumers' ratings of how descriptive the traits were for brands in general (Aaker 1997, Musante et al. 2008, Siguaw et al. 1999). This was followed by a series of studies in which Aaker asked respondents how well these 114 traits matched with a set of 59 brands, which were selected from wide-ranging industries and also included some hospitality companies such as McDonald's, Holiday Inn and Marriott. From this analysis, a 42-item scale was developed to identify five personality factors which were excitement, sincerity, ruggedness, sophistication, and competence; with each factor consisting of a number of traits.

Even though not much research related to the restaurant industry has been carried out using the BPS there have been some notable contributions. For example, Jones et al. (2002) focused on the perceptions of KFC, McDonald's and Burger King in the UK and concluded that customers were clear on the overall brand image of all three restaurants but their work was limited to brand image rather than brand personality. Siguaw et al. (1999) tested the BPS to measure or identify consumer perceived brand personalities of various brands across three restaurant segments whilst Austin et al. (2003) examined the application of BPS across brands within the same category in different restaurant segments. Murase and Bojanic (2004) undertook a similar piece of research but focused on cultural differences in the perceptions of FFRs brands. The findings from these researchers advocated for restaurateurs to undertake brand personality development, brand communication and management to give them a competitive position in the market. More recently, Opoku et al. (2008) concentrated on the brand personality of SME franchised restaurants on their websites, Lee et al. (2009) focused on the relationship between a restaurant brand personality and customer emotions, satisfaction and loyalty, whilst Kim et al. (2011) looked at the outcomes of brand personality in casual theme restaurants. Aaker's (1997) BPS model formed the theoretical framework of all of these studies.

Although the use of Aaker's (1997) BPS has been extensive and practiced through various industries, there have been some strong arguments against its effectiveness and applicability. Azoulay and Kapferer (2003) have questioned the relevance of the BPS in achieving its primary aim of measuring brand personality by observing that the BPS in essence is not a tool measuring brand personality; but instead it is more reflective of brand identity, of which personality is only an integral part. These researchers have further stated that the BPS integrates a number of facets of the brand's identity, only some of which can be classified as being personality facets. Batra et al. (2006) have criticised the BPS on the grounds that its construction was heavily attributed by category personality constructs instead of individual brands in a category. The BPS has also been criticised as not being of complete relevance in many settings such as that of measuring individual brand personalities within a product segment and not generalisable across all industries and within product categories across different samples and countries (Austin et al. 2003). Das et al. (2012) commented on the need for BPS modifications, citing studies where the BPS dimensions failed. For example, Siguaw et al. (1999) found little differentiation in the brand personality dimensions of casual dining restaurants whilst even though Lee et al. (2009) corroborated Aaker's (1997) five brand personality dimension, they found that some components such as sincerity and excitement differ for the restaurant sector.

Musante et al. (2008) observed that not all elements of the BPS were generalisable to the restaurant industry. As such, they proposed to examine the viability of creating a different version of the BPS that would be more applicable to the restaurant industry. They proposed a modified BPS, which was developed through a two-stage research process. The first stage examined the viability of reducing the 42-item BPS by eliminating items that may be less relevant in the assessment of restaurant brands. The second phase included an assessment of the internal reliability of the revised scale developed. Musante et al. (2008) eliminated the ruggedness dimensions of the original BPS and other attributes, which showed little or no relevance to the food service sector in the four other dimensions. The modified BPS proposed by Musante et al. (2008) consisted of four dimensions, namely, excitement, sincerity, sophistication, and competence, and 18 traits, as seen in Table 1. This created the foundation for the research framework of this study and was used for designing the research instrument.

Table 1: Personality dimensions and traits relevant to the restaurant sector

Competence	Sincerity	Excitement	Sophistication
Reliable	Honest	Trendy	Upper-class
Corporate	Sincere	Unique	Glamorous
Successful	Real	Up-to-date	Charming
Leader	Wholesome		
Confident	Original		
	Cheerful		
	Friendly		

Source: Musante et al. (2008)

Methodology

To develop an understanding of how customers perceive brand personality for FFRs, three chains were selected, McDonald's, KFC and Subway, due to their availability in the city where this research was conducted and their product differentiation. A questionnaire was designed based on the modified BPS. Questions were based on a Likert scale and requested respondents to rate how they felt each personality trait described the brand. The range varied from 1 to 5 with one being non-descriptive and 5 being highly descriptive. Demographic variables were also covered in the questionnaire to determine if this had any influence on personality perceptions.

The sample consisted of customers of these three FFRs. A user-survey method was the most appropriate to carry out this study as the consumers of a brand are the best source to enquire about their characteristics and attitudes towards the brand (Kotler et al. 2010). Permission was received from the store manager to administer the questionnaires to customers in one of these stores. This approach was different to other studies of brand personality in restaurants as they sought to primarily use students as their population (see for example Kim et al. 2011, Murase and Bojanic 2004). Using a convenience sampling approach, respondents were approached and provided with a questionnaire based on their willingness to participate. The key advantage of a respondent-completed survey was respondents were not inhibited by the presence of a third person while discussing their opinions and views and would thereby provide honest, unbiased information (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008).

To examine whether there was any bias in the consumers' response towards the brand of the outlet in which the questionnaires were being distributed, an initial 25 questionnaires were distributed. This analysis suggested a generic response towards all three brands without any particular brand being favoured. Questionnaires were then distributed to investigate the topic under consideration. A sample size of 120 (completed) responses was received, with 100 being usable. For an effective and generalisable social research, a sample between the range of 50 and 200 holds great value and reliability (Hair et al. 2007), hence the number of useable questionnaires was deemed sufficient to proceed with the analysis. Usability was determined on two parameters, familiarity with all three brands and completed questionnaires.

The collected data were analysed using SPSS and Cronbach alpha was used to determine the internal reliability. An overall score of 0.864 was achieved, which was an acceptable level of reliability and Hinton et al. (2004) indicated that scores of 0.75

and above are considered by most researchers as being highly reliable. The data were analysed using the descriptive statistics obtained under general linear multivariate analysis. This was similar to that used by other researchers studying brand personality of FFRs (Musante et al. 2008, Siguaw et al. 1999). The mean ratings obtained for the eighteen variables and thereby the four personality dimensions were used to assess the perceived personality of the three brands under study. This was done by conducting a comparative analysis of the scores obtained by each brand on the four dimensions by comparing these scores with those of the other two brands. Further analysis was done to evaluate the influence of demographic factors such as gender, age and ethnic origin on the perceived brand personalities of the three FFRs.

Results

Overall brand perception

McDonald's was perceived to be the most competent brand, receiving a mean rating of 4.06 whilst Subway and KFC had mean scores of 3.69 and 3.63. Subway was identified as the most sincere brand with a mean score of 3.55, which was marginally higher than McDonald's and KFC who scored 3.28 and 3.21 respectively. Subway was also identified as the most exciting brand with a mean score of 3.63, ahead of McDonald's (3.45) and KFC (3.27). Sophistication saw the lowest scores amongst all the three personality dimensions for the brands. All three appeared to be moderately sophisticated. However, Subway led in this dimension again with a mean score of 3.08 compared to McDonald's mean score of 2.90 and KFC's mean score of 2.78. McDonald's was thus the most competent brand of the three and Subway the most sincere, exciting and sophisticated.

KFC, however, with the lowest rating on each of the three brands, seems to display a poor personality in comparison to the other two brands being studied. Even though the brands did show a difference in an overall personality structure defined by the four personality dimensions, the low degree of variance between the scores of each dimension for all the brands was in itself marginal in most cases, thereby suggesting a lack of clear differentiation in the perceived personalities.

Personality dimensions

Competence
McDonald's was considered the most competent brand of the three brands and it received the highest scores amongst the three brands on all five-competence factors. McDonald's and Subway were perceived to be more reliable (3.81 and 3.73 respectively) than KFC, which was seen as moderately reliable (3.42). Second to McDonald's, KFC was considered more successful than Subway, whereas McDonald's was perceived as more corporate than the other two brands.

Sincerity
Subway was considered as the most sincere brand with all factors under this dimension scoring the highest than the other two brands. Subway scored relatively higher than McDonald's and considerably higher than KFC in being original and friendly. It scored considerably higher than both brands on being wholesome and real. A higher score in these factors

could be attributed to the warmth displayed in its store outlets along with the 'healthy' product lines. Subway is also perceived to be significantly more honest and cheerful than either McDonald's or KFC.

Excitement
McDonald's and Subway received similar scores (3.72 and 3.76) on being trendy, whereas KFC was considered not to be as trendy (3.32). In terms of uniqueness, Subway (3.54) was considered to be more unique than either KFC (3.07) or McDonald's (3.03), which was perceived to be the least unique of all. KFC was the least up-to-date (3.41) with a marginal lead by McDonald's (3.61) and relatively higher difference with Subway (3.73).

Sophistication
While Subway was seen to be the most upper class brand of the three, KFC seemed to be the lowest, but only marginally behind McDonald's. There was a similar perception towards the glamour quotient of the three brands. KFC was the least charming (2.83) marginally led by McDonald's (2.96) and significantly behind Subway (3.13).

Demographics
Respondents in this survey were 55% female and 45% male. Forty-four percent were White, followed by 27% being of Asian/Asian British ethnicity. Black/Black British accounted for 15% of the respondents whilst 8%, 5% and 1% of the respondents accounted for Chinese, Arab and Mixed ethnicity respectively. Thirty-four percent of the respondents were aged 21–25 years followed by 27% of the respondents aged 26–30 years. The age group of 16–20 years had 17% participants in the study with 11% participants in the age group of 31–35. Eleven percent of the respondents were 36 years old or above. There were no respondents under the age of 15.

Gender influence on perception
Perceptions for competence were highest and similar for both males and females with a mean rating of 3.77 and 3.81 respectively. Both sets also rated excitement (3.48 and 3.45 respectively) and sophistication (2.92 and 2.93 respectively) without much difference in perceptions. However, the males considered the restaurants to be relatively more sincere (mean rating 3.40) than females (mean rating 3.30). There was a generic similarity in the ratings by both genders without much variation in the perceived personality dimensions in the case of McDonald's and Subway. In the case of KFC however, there was a variance wherein the males rated KFC being more sincere than exciting with a mean score of 3.30 (for sincerity) whereas the females perceived it to be considerably less sincere (and more exciting) with a rating of 3.14.

Age influence on perception
Respondents in the age group of 41–45 perceived the FFRs to be much more competent (mean rating 4.33) than those in the age group of 16–20 (mean rating 3.52). The other age groups rated competence in the range of (3.59–3.98). Other dimensions such as sincerity (range 2.98–3.53) and excitement (range 2.89–3.64) played a key role in perceptual differences. The difference was the most for sophistication, which was, rated the lowest as 1.92 (age above 50) and the highest

as 3.16 (age 21–25). The perceived brand personalities for the three brands varied significantly with age. Unlike the gender influence in which males and females had given similar ratings to the three brands, people from different age group gave considerably different ratings to each brand. This signifies that on the basis of age, brands are perceived to have greatly varying and *differentiated* personalities.

Ethnicity influence on perception
Ethnic origin was an important factor in the brand personality dimension perceptions. In the case of sophistication, there was immense difference in the perception of White people (mean score 2.37) and Asian/Asian British respondents (mean score 3.51). The Asian and Chinese respondents also gave a higher rating to excitement (3.82 and 3.61 respectively) than the Black, Arab and White respondents (3.41, 3.26, 3.33 respectively).

When the three brands were compared, respondents from various ethnic origins seemed to give similar ratings to different personality dimensions of the brands with a few varying perceptions. For example, the Chinese respondents consider KFC as being more competent and exciting than sophisticated or sincere, whereas the Black respondents considered KFC to be less competent and rated all the dimensions relatively at the same level.

Conclusions

Summary and discussion
The purpose of this research was to determine customer perceptions of three FFR brand personalities using the modified BPS proposed by Musante et al. (2008). McDonald's was perceived as the most competent brand whereas Subway was the most sincere, exciting and sophisticated brand of the three. KFC did not lead on any of the personality dimensions and had a moderate rating for each of the dimensions. While the overall personality based on the ratings given to different personality dimensions showed that consumers perceived these brands to have varying personalities, none of the brands actually stood apart on any particular personality dimension. For example, even though Subway was seen as the most exciting brand among the three, it was not clearly differentiated on that dimension, as McDonald's was close behind.

It was determined that demographics played an important role in the outcomes of the brand personality projected by the FFRs. Consumers' emotional and psychological responses to products and brands seem to vary between different generations, social groups, nationalities and cultures (Demirbilek and Sener 2003). The role of the community or the culture in which the individuals develop is significant in creating behavioural and psychological constructs (Mooij 2010). In smaller communities, brands play a central role during the process of social interaction amongst consumers and build up a social context of consumption and thus overall brand image projection (Heding et al. 2009). The age group variance in perceptions was significantly wide, with the respondents from age group 16–18 having a totally different and contrasting approach towards a brand than those over the age of 50.

Similarly, differences in perceptions attributed to ethnic origin were significant as well. A culture can be seen as a magnified community and the approach of social interaction

works at a larger scale in this aspect (Heding et al. 2009). Since all the brands studied were global in nature and a considerable number of respondents could be essentially permanent residents of different countries, for example China and India, the perceptions would be a combined outcome of their service experiences of the brands in the two countries. Global brands thus need to depict an aspect of consistency in image building across cultures while localising to the market conditions of different countries (Gilbert et al. 2004). A varied product offering in different countries can also influence preference as in some countries a brand may provide a product offering which it does not in other countries; thereby highlighting cultural origins as a key factor in brand preferences and perceptions (Mooij 2010).

There are a number of factors that influence what a consumer perceives the brand to project. It is important to understand and evaluate these factors in light of the results obtained in the study. Rijswijk and Frewer (2008) observed that customers have an inclination towards 'healthy options' and the nutritional benefits have had a major influence in how food service firms design their products. The results of the study showed that Subway was considered to be the most wholesome brand amongst the three, along with being the most honest and up-to-date. These outcomes can be attributed to a direct relation between Subway's projection of the healthy lifestyle through consumption of its food. Clearly, in sync with the brand personality construct, people who are health-conscious, up-to-date and believe in a wholesome lifestyle would therefore choose Subway over the other brands more occasionally.

All three brands in this study were highly rated on their friendliness, which signifies the importance of employee-consumer relationship from the food service business point of view. The study shows that Subway was the friendliest brand followed by McDonald's and KFC. Brand engagement or the role of employees has a considerable impact on the perceived brand value, especially in the people-centred service industry (Buckingham 2008). Various elements of the sincerity dimension of the brand personality scale are related to emotional attributes, which can be greatly influenced by peoples' behaviour (Heding et al. 2009). FFRs, which need to process a number of customers with speed and efficiency, rely on scripts for establishing communication, and communicating with customers during service delivery is important in establishing the brand-consumer relationship (Schau et al. 2007). These researchers further state that this element distinguishes the FFRs from full service restaurants for providing low customisation in contact personnel judgement and this leads to uniformity in the service experience which has a positive influence on the customers brand perception. Friendly, honest, cheerful are aspects that consumers would relate more to the people aspect of the brands (Dubois et al. 2000).

Metaphors also play an interesting role in brand communications. Ang and Lim (2006) state that using metaphors has an influence on perceived brand personalities such that symbolic products are seen to be more sophisticated and exciting and less sincere or competent whereas utilitarian products get enhanced on sophistication and excitement and reduced on sincerity. In one of its advertisements, Subway projected the high level of customisation possible with a single item on its menu, right from bread choice to the selection of fillings and sauces. This was a communication of the unique, wholesome and 'real' characteristics of the brand. KFC has been seen to essentially bring 'situational' advertisements (Mooij 2010) to highlight the features of its continually changing menu items projected in different situations using varying metaphors, for example 'adolescent crush' for its 'Krusshems'. These advertisements also project an image of being 'up-to-date' and 'trendy' as they highlight the continual upgrade in the offering. McDonald's has gone beyond the communication of product features to target the intuitive section (Rajagopal 2008) of a mental construct.

Managerial implications

As has been seen through the study, the three FFR brands involved, namely McDonald's, KFC and Subway, have been successful to an extent in creating unique brand personalities for themselves as evidenced through the use of the modified BPS. They have conveyed varying messages through the mix and match of various media including an array of communication strategies, employee involvement, brand and product designing and public relation management. It is therefore the role of brand managers to design a personality construct using various means available, which shows distinctiveness in the personality dimensions. This would depend on the target market that they wish to capitalise on, clubbed with the key propositions of the brand. On the basis of these two factors, brand managers need to create corresponding personality constructs that can be used by consumers as a means of establishing brand relationships, and thereby differentiate the brand from its competitors.

In the FFRs business, brands aim at catering to all segments of the market to expand the consumer base. This in most cases may not be avoidable due to the 'impulse' purchase behaviour heavily influencing this industry. However brand personality construct aims at classifying consumers into different groups within a segment. Thus the most critical role for managers when using brand personality as a differentiating strategy is to convey to the consumers the element/s of their brand personality most influential for the business – filtering out a section from a target segment.

This involves working on two areas. The first requires marketers to identify those aspects of the business on which their consumers perceive the other factors to depend. For some consumers price could be the main feature and for others it may be menu variety, the service setting or staff behaviour. Marketers need to identify the key or the independent features which then influence the other elements of a consumer's dining/purchase experience. This will develop and determine the essence of a brand. The brand essence would highlight to the management what the consumers expect most from a brand and would show an inclination towards establishing that in the brand image and personality. Determining the brand essence would then lead to the second stage of positioning and communicating the brand personality and specifically the key dimension of the personality. Age and ethnicity strongly influenced brand perceptions and it is critical that marketers capitalise on and be cautious of these variations while designing communication media. Various other factors that can influence consumer perception, such as designing the brand and its products, employee behaviour, co-branding strategies, corporate social responsibility and

others can be altered and systematically used to convey the desired associations that a brand wishes to establish with its consumers. If used tactically, brand personality can be used as a highly beneficial strategy to gain competitive advantage in the highly crowded quick service restaurant segment by creating a proposition of differentiation and unique consumer-brand associations.

Limitations and avenues for further study

This study was limited to capturing customer perceptions of three brands in one restaurant segment. It would be useful to apply the modified BPS across different restaurant segments to validate these results. Future efforts can concentrate on testing the modified BPS on a larger sample using more brands, representing a greater diversity and testing the same three brands in different countries to see whether culture is a moderating variable. Likewise, the research focused solely on the modified BPS. Another avenue stemming from this research would be to do a comparative analysis between Aaker's (1997) BPS and the modified BPS to see what differences exist. Moreover, Geuens et al. (2009) presented a new five-dimension brand personality measure, which are responsibility, activity, aggressiveness, simplicity and emotionality. It would be useful to test this BPS to see its relevance and applicability to FFRs. This study has brought to light the importance of demographic variables in how brand personality is perceived by customers of FFRs and further work can focus on isolating these demographic variables and determining their relationship to brand personality.

About the authors

Alisha Ali is part of the Hospitality team at Sheffield Hallam University where she teaches in the areas of technology, sustainable tourism, innovation and service excellence and focuses on the specific applications of these concepts to the hospitality industry. She completed a PhD, which focused on investigating the uses and applications of ICT for sustainable tourism for destinations. Current research interest includes computer-mediated sustainability for destinations and tourism businesses.

Vishal Sharma received his Bachelor of Business Administration degree from Symbiosis International University, India. He then successfully pursued a Master of Science in International Hospitality and Tourism Management from Sheffield Hallam University, UK. Vishal is currently working with PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP (PwC).

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