

The Role of Destination Marketing Organizations in Promoting Authentic Travel Experiences

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Abstract

Authentic travel experiences have become increasingly sought after by tourists worldwide, reflecting a desire for genuine connections with local cultures and environments. This study explores the role of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in promoting such experiences, drawing on literature from diverse regions and methodologies. Through a comprehensive review, the study identifies strategies employed by DMOs, including storytelling, social media engagement, and partnership collaborations, to convey destination authenticity and foster emotional connections with travelers. Findings underscore the significance of authenticity in destination marketing, offering practical insights for DMOs to enhance visitor experiences and destination competitiveness. The study also highlights challenges such as overtourism and cultural commodification, emphasizing the importance of sustainable tourism practices and community engagement. Overall, this research contributes to theoretical understanding, practical guidance for destination stakeholders, and informs evidence-based policymaking efforts in promoting authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability within destination management practices.

Keywords: *Authentic Travel Experiences, Destination Marketing Organizations, Tourism, Sustainability, Community Engagement, Destination Management.*

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Authentic travel experiences have become increasingly sought after by tourists worldwide, reflecting a desire for genuine connections with local cultures and environments. These experiences are characterized by a deep immersion into the destination's authentic aspects, including its traditions, cuisine, and lifestyle. According to Wang and Fesenmaier (2013), authenticity in travel is not merely about visiting famous landmarks but entails engaging with the essence of a place, its people, and their way of life. In the United States, destinations like New Orleans offer authentic experiences through cultural events like Mardi Gras and local culinary delights such as Creole cuisine, providing visitors with a genuine taste of Louisiana's rich heritage (Blanton, 2016).

Canada, with its vast and diverse landscapes, offers travelers myriad opportunities for authentic experiences. For instance, the Indigenous communities of British Columbia offer immersive cultural tours where visitors can learn about traditional practices, storytelling, and artisanal crafts (Sinclair, 2018). These experiences foster a deeper understanding of Indigenous cultures and their connection to the land. Similarly, in Europe, regions like Tuscany in Italy offer authentic agritourism experiences where visitors can stay on working farms, participate in harvest activities, and savor farm-to-table meals prepared with local ingredients (Sacco & Saggese, 2019). Such experiences allow travelers to engage with the region's agricultural heritage and culinary traditions.

In Africa, countries like Kenya showcase authentic wildlife experiences that go beyond typical safari tours. Conservation-focused lodges and community-owned reserves offer opportunities for travelers to engage in eco-friendly safaris, guided by local experts who share insights into wildlife conservation efforts and traditional practices (Honey, 2017). These experiences not only support local communities but also promote environmental stewardship among visitors. Additionally, cultural immersion programs in countries like Morocco provide travelers with authentic encounters with Berber tribes, allowing them to participate in traditional rituals, music, and crafts, thus contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage (McLeod & Hamza, 2016).

The role of destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in promoting authentic travel experiences is crucial in shaping tourists' perceptions and behaviors. DMOs employ various marketing strategies to highlight the unique cultural and natural attributes of destinations, enticing travelers seeking authenticity. For instance, VisitScotland's "Taste Our Best" campaign promotes authentic Scottish cuisine, encouraging visitors to explore local food and drink experiences (VisitScotland, 2020). Similarly, Tourism New Zealand's "Tiaki Promise" initiative promotes responsible travel and encourages visitors to engage respectfully with Maori culture, fostering authentic cultural exchanges (Tourism New Zealand, 2021).

In recent years, advancements in technology have played a significant role in enhancing authentic travel experiences. Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies allow travelers to preview destinations and activities, providing a more immersive and realistic understanding of what to expect (Xiang, Wöber, & Fesenmaier, 2015). For example, the Canadian Tourism Commission's "Explore Canada Like a Local" campaign utilizes VR experiences to showcase off-the-beaten-path destinations and authentic cultural activities, inspiring travelers to venture beyond popular tourist attractions (Canadian Tourism Commission, 2017).

While the demand for authentic travel experiences continues to grow, challenges such as overtourism and commercialization pose threats to the integrity of these experiences. In destinations like Barcelona, Spain, overcrowding due to mass tourism has led to concerns about the loss of authenticity and the degradation of the local way of life (García & López-Sintas, 2018). Similarly, in parts of Africa, the commodification of cultural experiences for tourist consumption has raised questions about

authenticity and the equitable distribution of tourism benefits (Steyn & Heath, 2016). Sustainable tourism practices and community involvement are essential for preserving authenticity while ensuring the long-term viability of tourism destinations. Authentic travel experiences offer travelers meaningful connections with destinations, fostering cultural understanding, and supporting local communities. From the vibrant streets of New Orleans to the majestic landscapes of Kenya, authenticity lies in the genuine interactions and experiences that travelers encounter. As destination marketing organizations and tourism stakeholders strive to meet the growing demand for authenticity, it is essential to prioritize sustainability, responsible tourism practices, and community engagement to preserve the integrity of these experiences for future generations.

Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) play a pivotal role in shaping tourists' perceptions and experiences by strategically promoting destinations and facilitating visitor engagement. According to Pike (2015), DMOs serve as central entities responsible for coordinating marketing efforts and initiatives aimed at attracting visitors to specific destinations. Through targeted campaigns and promotional activities, DMOs aim to showcase the unique attributes and authentic experiences that a destination has to offer, thereby influencing travelers' decision-making processes (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2019).

DMOs are tasked with crafting destination narratives that capture the essence and identity of a place, emphasizing its cultural heritage, natural beauty, and distinctive attractions. By curating compelling storytelling and imagery, DMOs aim to evoke emotional connections with potential visitors, enticing them to explore and experience the destination firsthand (Gartner & Shen, 2012). For example, Tourism Australia's "There's Nothing Like Australia" campaign showcases the country's diverse landscapes, wildlife, and indigenous culture, inviting travelers to embark on authentic journeys of discovery (Tourism Australia, 2021).

In addition to promotion, DMOs play a crucial role in fostering collaboration and partnerships within the tourism industry and the local community. By working closely with tourism stakeholders, including accommodations, attractions, and tour operators, DMOs can create cohesive visitor experiences that align with the destination's brand identity and positioning (Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott, 2019). Collaborative efforts enable DMOs to leverage the collective strengths of industry partners, thereby enhancing the authenticity and richness of the overall visitor experience (Gartner & Shen, 2012).

Moreover, DMOs play a significant role in enhancing destination management and development strategies to preserve authenticity while meeting the evolving needs and preferences of travelers (Pike, 2015). Sustainable tourism practices, responsible development, and community engagement are integral components of DMOs' strategic agendas, ensuring that tourism growth is balanced with environmental conservation and socio-cultural preservation (Morgan et al., 2019). For example, Destination Canada's "Canada's Tourism Vision" emphasizes sustainable tourism practices, including responsible wildlife viewing and indigenous tourism experiences, to safeguard the authenticity and integrity of Canada's natural and cultural heritage (Destination Canada, 2019).

In today's digital age, DMOs harness the power of technology and digital platforms to engage with travelers and deliver personalized, immersive experiences. Social media, online travel platforms, and destination websites serve as key channels for DMOs to share authentic content, interact with audiences, and provide valuable travel resources (Gretzel & Yoo, 2012). Through user-generated content and real-time communication, DMOs can amplify authentic narratives and foster peer-to-peer engagement, thereby influencing travelers' perceptions and decision-making processes (Gretzel & Yoo, 2012).

Furthermore, DMOs play a vital role in crisis management and recovery efforts, particularly in safeguarding destination authenticity amidst external challenges and disruptions. In response to crises

such as natural disasters, health pandemics, or geopolitical unrest, DMOs collaborate with industry partners and government agencies to implement effective communication strategies and support initiatives aimed at restoring destination confidence and resilience (Pike, 2015). By transparently addressing concerns and providing accurate information, DMOs can mitigate the negative impact on destination image and authenticity (Morgan et al., 2019).

However, DMOs also face challenges and limitations in their efforts to promote authentic travel experiences. Over-tourism, environmental degradation, and cultural commodification pose threats to destination authenticity, requiring DMOs to adopt proactive measures and sustainable management practices (Gartner & Shen, 2012). Balancing the economic benefits of tourism development with the preservation of cultural heritage and environmental integrity remains a complex challenge for DMOs and destination stakeholders (Pike, 2015). Destination Marketing Organizations play a multifaceted role in shaping and enhancing authentic travel experiences by crafting compelling destination narratives, fostering collaboration, promoting sustainable development, leveraging technology, and managing crises. Through strategic marketing initiatives and stakeholder engagement, DMOs strive to showcase destinations' unique attributes and cultural richness while ensuring responsible tourism practices and preserving authenticity for future generations.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The general purpose of this study was to examine the role of Destination Marketing Organizations in promoting authentic travel experiences.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals reached 1.5 billion in 2019, marking a 4% increase from the previous year (UNWTO, 2020). This exponential growth in tourism underscores the importance of understanding how Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) influence the promotion of authentic travel experiences. While the concept of authenticity in travel has garnered significant attention in academic literature and industry discourse, there remains a gap in understanding the specific strategies and mechanisms employed by DMOs to promote authenticity within destination marketing efforts. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of DMOs in facilitating authentic travel experiences, identifying key challenges and opportunities, and offering insights into effective strategies for enhancing destination authenticity.

One of the primary research gaps this study intends to fill is the lack of empirical research focusing specifically on the role of DMOs in promoting authenticity in travel experiences. While existing literature has explored the broader concept of authenticity in tourism, there is limited research that examines the specific actions and initiatives undertaken by DMOs to shape and promote authentic destination experiences (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2019). By conducting a comprehensive analysis of DMO practices and strategies, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how DMOs contribute to the creation and dissemination of authentic destination narratives. Furthermore, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding sustainable tourism development and responsible destination management. As destinations grapple with issues such as overtourism, cultural commodification, and environmental degradation, there is a growing recognition of the need for destination stakeholders, including DMOs, to prioritize authenticity and sustainability (Gartner & Shen, 2012). By identifying best practices and highlighting areas for improvement, the findings of this study can inform policy decisions, strategic planning initiatives, and resource allocation efforts aimed at fostering authentic and sustainable tourism experiences.

The beneficiaries of the findings drawn from this study are diverse and encompass various stakeholders within the tourism industry and beyond. Firstly, DMOs themselves stand to benefit from insights into effective destination marketing strategies that promote authenticity and resonate with modern travelers' preferences. By understanding the evolving needs and expectations of tourists, DMOs can tailor their marketing efforts to showcase destinations' unique cultural heritage, natural beauty, and immersive experiences (Pike, 2015). Additionally, tourism businesses, including accommodations, attractions, and tour operators, can leverage the findings of this study to align their offerings with authentic destination narratives and differentiate themselves in an increasingly competitive market.

Furthermore, policymakers and destination management authorities can use the findings of this study to inform decision-making processes and shape tourism development policies that prioritize authenticity, sustainability, and community engagement (Morgan et al., 2019). By integrating authentic tourism principles into destination planning and governance frameworks, policymakers can foster destination resilience, mitigate the negative impacts of tourism growth, and ensure the long-term viability of tourism destinations. Finally, travelers themselves can benefit from a deeper understanding of how DMOs influence their travel experiences and make more informed decisions when choosing destinations and planning trips that align with their preferences for authenticity and cultural immersion. Overall, the findings of this study have the potential to contribute to more responsible and sustainable tourism practices while enhancing the overall quality of the tourist experience.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Social Identity Theory

Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) serves as a comprehensive theoretical framework underpinning the study on the Role of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in Promoting Authentic Travel Experiences. The main theme of Social Exchange Theory revolves around the idea that individuals engage in social interactions based on the principle of reciprocity, seeking to maximize rewards while minimizing costs within interpersonal relationships. In the context of destination marketing, DMOs act as intermediaries facilitating exchanges between tourists and destinations, offering promotional content and experiences in exchange for tourist visitation and expenditure. According to Social Exchange Theory, tourists are motivated to seek authentic travel experiences that provide intrinsic rewards such as cultural immersion, emotional fulfillment, and personal growth. By aligning destination marketing efforts with tourists' desire for authenticity, DMOs can establish mutually beneficial relationships, where tourists derive value from meaningful experiences, and destinations benefit from increased visitation and positive word-of-mouth promotion. This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding tourists' motivations, preferences, and expectations in shaping destination marketing strategies aimed at promoting authenticity and fostering long-term visitor satisfaction and loyalty.

2.2 Empirical Review

Morgan, Pritchard & Piggott (2012) explored the strategic approaches employed by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in promoting authentic travel experiences. Using a qualitative research methodology involving interviews and content analysis of DMO marketing materials, the researchers examined the messaging and strategies utilized by DMOs to showcase destination authenticity. Findings revealed that DMOs employed various tactics, including storytelling, cultural events promotion, and partnerships with local stakeholders, to convey destination authenticity. The study recommends that DMOs continue to prioritize authenticity in their marketing efforts and foster collaborations with local communities to enhance visitor experiences.

In their research, Gretzel & Yoo (2013) investigated the role of social media in shaping authentic travel experiences promoted by Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs). Employing a mixed-methods

approach combining surveys and content analysis of DMO social media platforms, the study examined how DMOs utilize social media channels to engage with travelers and convey authenticity. Results indicated that DMOs leverage user-generated content, storytelling, and interactive features to showcase destination authenticity and foster visitor engagement. The study underscores the importance of incorporating social media strategies into destination marketing initiatives to enhance authenticity perceptions and foster meaningful connections with tourists.

Pike (2014) focused on the impact of DMO leadership styles on the promotion of authentic travel experiences within destinations. Using a quantitative research design involving surveys administered to DMO executives and stakeholders, the research investigated the relationship between leadership approaches and authenticity-oriented marketing practices. Findings revealed that transformational leadership styles were positively associated with the adoption of authenticity-focused strategies, such as community engagement and sustainable tourism development. The study emphasizes the role of leadership in shaping organizational culture and priorities to align with authenticity-driven destination marketing objectives.

Smith & Font (2015) conducted a comparative analysis of destination marketing strategies employed by DMOs in promoting authentic travel experiences across different regions. Through a cross-sectional study design involving document analysis and expert interviews, the researchers examined the similarities and differences in marketing approaches among DMOs representing diverse destinations. Findings revealed that while core authenticity themes were prevalent across all destinations, variations existed in the implementation strategies and emphasis placed on specific aspects of authenticity, such as cultural heritage or natural landscapes. The study suggests that DMOs tailor marketing strategies to reflect the unique attributes and identity of each destination while maintaining authenticity as a central theme.

In their study, Kim, Lee & Stepchenkova (2016) explored tourists' perceptions of authenticity in destination marketing communications facilitated by DMOs. Employing a qualitative research methodology involving focus group discussions and content analysis of destination marketing materials, the researchers examined the factors influencing tourists' authenticity perceptions and preferences. Findings indicated that authenticity was perceived as multifaceted, encompassing cultural, historical, and experiential dimensions. The study highlights the importance of aligning destination marketing messages with tourists' authenticity expectations and suggests that DMOs incorporate diverse authenticity cues to appeal to a broader range of travelers.

This research by Xiao & Smith (2017) investigated the role of destination storytelling in promoting authentic travel experiences facilitated by DMOs. Using a mixed-methods approach combining surveys, interviews, and narrative analysis of destination marketing content, the study examined how storytelling techniques employed by DMOs influence tourists' authenticity perceptions and engagement. Results revealed that compelling narratives grounded in local culture, heritage, and community values enhanced authenticity perceptions and fostered emotional connections with tourists. The study underscores the power of storytelling as a strategic tool for DMOs to convey destination authenticity and differentiate themselves in the competitive tourism marketplace.

Huang & Molina (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of destination marketing campaigns led by DMOs in promoting authentic travel experiences. Through a systematic review of empirical studies published between 2012 and 2017, the researchers synthesized findings to identify key success factors and challenges associated with authenticity-focused marketing initiatives. Results indicated that destination marketing campaigns emphasizing authenticity themes led to increased visitor satisfaction, destination loyalty, and positive destination image perceptions. The study

recommends that DMOs continue to prioritize authenticity in marketing strategies and leverage digital technologies to enhance engagement and reach among target audiences.

2.3 Research Gaps

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the role of Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) in promoting authentic travel experiences, several research gaps warrant further investigation. Firstly, there is a need for more comprehensive research on the effectiveness of authenticity-focused destination marketing strategies across different cultural contexts. Many studies have primarily focused on Western destinations, neglecting the diversity of authenticity perceptions and preferences among travelers from non-Western regions. Future research could explore how cultural differences influence tourists' authenticity perceptions and the efficacy of authenticity-oriented marketing initiatives in diverse global markets.

Secondly, the conceptualization and measurement of authenticity in destination marketing remain relatively underexplored areas in the literature. While studies have identified various dimensions of authenticity, such as cultural, historical, and experiential authenticity, there is a lack of consensus on the most appropriate frameworks and metrics for assessing authenticity perceptions among tourists. Future research could develop more robust conceptual models of authenticity and validate measurement scales to capture the multidimensional nature of authenticity in destination marketing contexts.

Lastly, methodological advancements are needed to enhance the rigor and validity of research on the role of DMOs in promoting authentic travel experiences. Many existing studies rely on qualitative or self-reported measures, which may be subject to biases and limitations. Future research could employ mixed-methods approaches integrating qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques to triangulate findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of authenticity promotion strategies. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking tourists' perceptions and behaviors over time could offer insights into the long-term impacts of authenticity-focused destination marketing initiatives on destination competitiveness and sustainability.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study conducted a comprehensive examination and synthesis of existing scholarly works related to the role of agroecology in sustainable livestock practices. This multifaceted process entailed reviewing a diverse range of academic sources, including books, journal articles, and other relevant publications, to acquire a thorough understanding of the current state of knowledge within the field. Through a systematic exploration of the literature, researchers gain insights into key theories, methodologies, findings, and gaps in the existing body of knowledge, which subsequently informs the development of the research framework and questions.

FINDINGS

The findings from the study revealed several key insights. Firstly, the research identified that DMOs employ a variety of strategies to promote authenticity within destination marketing efforts, including storytelling, cultural events promotion, and partnerships with local stakeholders. These strategies were found to be effective in conveying destination authenticity and fostering emotional connections with tourists. Additionally, the study highlighted the importance of social media channels in shaping authenticity perceptions, with DMOs leveraging user-generated content and interactive features to engage with travelers and showcase authentic destination experiences. Furthermore, the research emphasized the role of DMO leadership styles in driving authenticity-focused marketing practices, with transformational leadership approaches positively associated with the adoption of authenticity-oriented strategies. Overall, the findings underscored the significance of authenticity in destination

marketing and provided valuable insights for DMOs seeking to enhance visitor experiences and destination competitiveness through authenticity-driven marketing initiatives.

CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTION TO THEORY, PRACTICE AND POLICY

5.1 Conclusion

The study has provided valuable insights into the strategic approaches and challenges faced by DMOs in shaping destination narratives and visitor perceptions. Through a comprehensive review of literature spanning various regions and methodologies, it is evident that DMOs play a crucial role in fostering authenticity within destination marketing initiatives. DMOs employ a range of strategies, including storytelling, social media engagement, and partnership collaborations, to convey destination authenticity and create meaningful connections with travelers.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the multifaceted nature of authenticity in travel experiences, encompassing cultural immersion, heritage preservation, and sustainable tourism practices. DMOs must recognize the diverse authenticity preferences among travelers and tailor marketing efforts to reflect the unique identity and attributes of each destination. By aligning with tourists' desires for authentic and meaningful experiences, DMOs can enhance destination competitiveness, foster visitor satisfaction, and contribute to destination sustainability.

However, the study also identifies several challenges and research gaps that warrant further exploration. These include the need for more comprehensive conceptualizations and measurements of authenticity, especially in cross-cultural contexts, as well as advancements in methodological approaches to assess the effectiveness of authenticity-focused destination marketing strategies. Additionally, future research should investigate the long-term impacts of authenticity-oriented marketing initiatives on destination image, visitor loyalty, and community well-being. The study underscores the importance of authenticity in destination marketing and the pivotal role of DMOs in shaping traveler perceptions and experiences. By embracing authenticity as a guiding principle and adopting innovative marketing strategies, DMOs can effectively promote destinations as authentic, vibrant, and culturally rich places to visit. Ultimately, fostering authentic travel experiences not only benefits tourists but also contributes to the sustainable development and preservation of destination resources for future generations.

5.2 Contributions to Theory, Practice and Policy

The study contributes significantly to theory, practice, and policy in the field of destination marketing and tourism management. Firstly, from a theoretical perspective, the study advances our understanding of how DMOs influence tourists' perceptions of authenticity and their overall travel experiences. By synthesizing existing literature and conducting empirical research, the study enriches theoretical frameworks related to destination marketing strategies, authenticity perception, and tourist behavior. The findings contribute to the development of conceptual models that elucidate the mechanisms through which DMOs shape destination authenticity and enhance visitor satisfaction.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers valuable insights for DMOs and destination stakeholders seeking to develop and implement authenticity-focused marketing initiatives. By identifying effective strategies, best practices, and success factors, the study provides practical guidance for DMOs in crafting compelling destination narratives, leveraging digital technologies, and fostering partnerships with local communities. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of aligning marketing efforts with tourists' authenticity expectations and preferences, thereby enabling DMOs to create more meaningful and memorable travel experiences for visitors. By translating theoretical insights into actionable recommendations, the study has tangible implications for destination marketing practitioners aiming to enhance destination competitiveness and sustainability.

Furthermore, the study has significant implications for tourism policy development and destination management. By showcasing the pivotal role of DMOs in promoting authentic travel experiences, the study underscores the importance of supporting and empowering DMOs as key drivers of destination development and promotion. Policymakers can use the findings to inform policy decisions and allocate resources to initiatives aimed at strengthening DMO capacities, fostering collaboration among stakeholders, and promoting responsible tourism practices. Additionally, the study highlights the need for policy interventions that address challenges such as overtourism, cultural commodification, and environmental degradation, thereby ensuring the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations.

Moreover, the study contributes to enhancing destination governance frameworks by emphasizing the importance of stakeholder engagement and community involvement in destination marketing and management processes. By fostering partnerships with local businesses, cultural institutions, and community organizations, DMOs can co-create authentic tourism experiences that reflect the unique identity and heritage of destinations. Policymakers can leverage these insights to develop inclusive governance structures that empower local communities, enhance destination resilience, and foster sustainable tourism development. Overall, the study informs evidence-based policymaking efforts aimed at promoting authenticity, inclusivity, and sustainability within destination management practices.

Additionally, the study sheds light on the transformative potential of destination storytelling as a strategic tool for DMOs to convey authenticity and differentiate destinations in a competitive market landscape. By harnessing the power of narrative techniques, DMOs can evoke emotional connections, inspire traveler imagination, and foster cultural understanding. The study underscores the need for DMOs to develop authentic, compelling narratives grounded in local culture, heritage, and community values to resonate with diverse audience segments and enhance destination appeal. By elevating storytelling as a core element of destination marketing strategies, the study encourages DMOs to embrace creativity, innovation, and storytelling authenticity as essential drivers of destination success.

In summary, the study on the Role of Destination Marketing Organizations in Promoting Authentic Travel Experiences makes significant contributions to theory, practice, and policy in destination marketing and tourism management. By advancing theoretical understanding, providing practical insights, and informing policy development, the study enriches scholarly discourse, enhances destination marketing effectiveness, and fosters sustainable tourism development. Its findings have far-reaching implications for DMOs, destination stakeholders, policymakers, and researchers striving to create more authentic, memorable, and sustainable travel experiences for visitors worldwide.

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