THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENTS' SATISFACTION ON SERVICE QUALITY IN UNIVERSITIES TO OPTIMISE THE WORD OF MOUTH ADVERTISING: A CASE STUDY OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN JAKARTA

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ABSTRACT

Marketing is one of the principal activities undertaken by educational institutions in an effort to maintain its survival to develop. Marketing in higher education is very important to see the development of this advanced era and competition among universities. It must of course be done with the right concept. Universities must improve the quality and competitiveness in order to compete with other competitors. One of the effective marketing strategies of higher education institutions is WOM (word of mouth) communication which relies heavily on quality and customer satisfaction, in this case is the students. Quality is the most important parameter of a WOM activities. A quality product talks on its own and that's a key to word of mouth advertising. If a product solves the purpose and lives up to its branding, it results in satisfying customer base which will lead to word of mouth advertising. This study was carried out in the form of case study approach and also employed questionnaires to triangulate the instruments. The research is defined into two major aspects namely to know the importance of students' satisfaction on service quality in universities and to know how it can optimise the word of mouth advertising. To obtain a clear point of view from the participants, in-depth interviews and questionnaires were employed in this study to support the data gained by interviews. This study involved 9 participants for in depth interviews, namely 3 (three) university students, 3 (three) parents, and 3 (three) head of marketing departments whereas the questionnaires were distributed to students and parents. The research proved that the students' satisfaction on service quality plays a significant role in optimising the word of mouth advertising.

Keywords: Word of Mouth Advertising, Marketing, Students' Satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Competition of the education sector among universities both private and public in fighting for "market" to attract students is quite heavy. The increasingly intense competition requires a good marketing strategy to attract prospective students from various high schools in Jakarta. Competition occurs not only in favorite public universities but also in private ones. The number of higher education institutions in Jakarta is not less than 335[1] consist of polytechnic, college, academy, institute, and universities. The number of universities form a three-tiered pyramid based on funding from lower, middle and upper levels. The increasingly fierce competition requires every college to be able to deal with applying the communication strategy appropriately.

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[1] http://kelembagaan.ristekdikti.go.id/index.php/kopertis-wilayah-iii-jakarta/

Quality in higher education is a complex and multifaceted concept and a single correct definition of quality is lacking (Harvey and Green, 1993). As a consequence, consensus concerning "the best way to define and measure service quality" does not exist yet. In an educational institutions, students are the primary customers and their satisfaction will lead towards loyalty, retention and positive word of mouth (Arambewela & John Hall, 2009). Unfortunately, there are still many universities who do not realize that their main customers are students, who experience the daily life of the campus. Students are the closest customers and have a feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with what they get from the institutions. Guolla (1999) rightly points out that students could also take the role as clients, producers, and products.

In general, universities prefer doing classic promotions to prospective customers such as visiting schools, advertising in newspapers and magazines and the internet also sending letters of offer to the parents. However, they forget one thing that is really very important in the marketing activities which is called *word of mouth*. Why is word of mouth so important? because this is a very effective marketing strategy which relies on quality and trust. Quality is the most important parameter of a product and it shouldn't be compromised at any cost. A quality product talks on its own and that's a key to word of mouth advertising. If a product solves the purpose and lives up to its branding, it results in satisfying customer base which will lead to word of mouth advertising.

The purpose of this paper is to review students' satisfaction on service quality in universities to optimise the word of mouth communication so that improvements can be done by related parties in order to make a change in all aspects of services in higher education institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction is being shaped continually by repeated experiences in campus life. Current research findings reveal that satisfied students may attract new students by engaging in positive word-of-mouth communication to inform acquaintances and friends, and they may return to the university to take other courses (Wiers-Jenssen *et al.*, 2002). Student satisfaction has also a positive impact on fundraising and student motivation (Elliott and Shin, 2002). Joseph *et al.* (2005) point out that research on service quality in higher education has relied too strongly on the input from academic insiders while excluding the input from the students themselves. They believe that traditional approaches leave "decisions about what constitutes quality of service (e.g. such as deciding what is 'most important' to students) exclusively in the hands of administrators and/or academics" (p. 67).

Banwet and Datta (2003) believed that customer satisfaction creates loyalty, whereas satisfied students were attracted to attend another course/module or another higher degree from the same university. Student satisfaction is still a complex phenomenon and it has different dimensions (Marzo-Navarro et al., 2005a, b). According to Elliott and Shin (2002. p:198), student satisfaction is defined as "the favorability of a student's subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with education. Student satisfaction is being shaped continually by repeated experiences in campus life". Customer satisfaction and service quality has become an important topic of discussion among the academicians and researchers for the last couple of decades and this trend can also be seen in higher education institutions (Avdjieva & Wilson, 2002).

As students are increasingly seen as consumers of higher education services, their satisfaction should be important to institutions that want to recruit new students (Thomas and Galambos, 2004). Similarly, Appleton-Knapp and Krentler (2004) suggest that students' satisfaction with their educational experience should be a desired outcome in addition to learning. Sander *et al.* (2000), also regards students as primary consumers of higher education service. Student satisfaction has also a positive impact on fundraising and student motivation (Elliott and Shin, 2002).

Further, educational services have several service characteristics. They are predominately intangible, perishable, heterogeneous, and the professor's teaching efforts are simultaneously "produced" and "consumed" with both professor and student being part of the teaching experience (Shank *et al.*, 1995). Due to these unique characteristics of services, service quality cannot be measured objectively (Patterson and Johnson, 1993). As a consequence, consensus concerning "the best way to define and measure service quality" (Clewes, 2003, p.71) does not exist yet.

Service quality

Service quality and customer satisfaction have been proven from past researches to be positively related (Baker & Crompton, 2000;). From the view of operations management, it is obvious that customers play important roles in the organisational process (Lee & Ritzman, 2005, p. 92). Customers are always aiming to get maximum satisfaction from the products or services that they buy. Winning in today's market place entails the need to build customer relationship and not just building the products, building customer relationship means delivering superior value over competitors to the target customers (Kotler et al., 2009). Most companies are adopting quality management programs which aim at improving the quality of their products and marketing processes, because it has been proven that "quality has a direct impact on product performance, and thus on customer satisfaction" (Kotler et al., 2009).

Service quality was also considered as to what extent a service is adequate to meet the customer's need and wants (Lewis & Mitchell, 1990). Service quality may be conceptualised as customers or consumers overall feeling about the superiority or inferiority of the services they received from the service providers (Zeithaml et al., 1990). Most commonly referred definition of service quality is the difference between customer expectations which a customer will receive from a service provider and the perceptions about the services being received by customer from the service provider (Parasuraman et al., 1988). O'Neill and Palmer (2004, p. 42) define service quality in higher education as "the difference between what a student expects to receive and his/her perceptions of actual delivery".

Satisfaction can also be a person's feelings of pleasure or disappointment that results from comparing a product's perceived performance or outcome with their expectations (Kotler & Keller, 2009, p. 789). Although there are other factors such as price, product quality etc. other than service quality that determine customer satisfaction (Wilson et al. 2008, p. 78-79) to my point of view service quality is still the most important of all because service quality has been proven to be the best determinant of customer satisfaction when it comes to service sectors. Also, providing quality services is one of the main targets when it comes to management with respect of customer satisfaction in the business environment of today, meaning it is a very vital topic.

Some authors state that there is no specific definition of customer satisfaction, and after their studies of several definitions they defined customer satisfaction as "identified by a response (cognitive or affective) that pertains to a particular focus (i.e. a purchase experience and/or the associated product) and occurs at a certain time (i.e.post-purchase, post-consumption)". (Giese & Cote, 2000, p. 15) This definition is supported by some other authors, who think that consumer's level of satisfaction is determined by his or her cumulative experience at the point of contact with the supplier (Sureshchander et al., 2002, p. 364). It is factual that, there is no specific definition of customer satisfaction since as the years passes, different authors come up with different definitions. Customer satisfaction has also been defined by another author as the extent to which a product's perceived performance matches a buyer's expectations (Kotler et al., 2002, p. 8). According to Schiffman & Kanuk (2004) customer satisfaction is defined as "the individual's perception of the performance of the products or services in relation to his or her expectations."

Word of Mouth

Word of mouth (WOM) has been acknowledged for many years as a major influence on what people know, feel and do. Customer-to-customer advocacy through "word-of-mouth" (WOM) communication can have a profound influence on customer attitudes and purchasing behaviour (Brown et al., 1993). WOM communication has been described by Mangold et al. (1999, p. 73) as a "dominant force in the marketplace", and Reichheld (2003) has argued that a crucial issue for any company is whether customers are willing to recommend the firm's products or services to their friends and acquaintances. Moreover, Keiningham et al. (2007) stress the importance of balancing and managing the various aspects of the customer experience simultaneously if firms are to optimise the loyalty behaviours they desire from their customers.

Prospective customers thus rely on the testimony of other consumers because they are intuitively aware that WOM recommendation is fuelled by satisfactory experiences for their fellow consumers and that these experiences are, at least in part, a reflection of an organisation's orientation towards customer service and service recovery (Hallowell et al., 1996). WOM communication is considered to be more credible because the sender of the information usually has nothing to gain if the recipient subsequently decides to buy (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). Moreover, within a services context, prospective customers tend to rely on communication from other customers because the intangible nature of services is inherently associated with greater purchase risk (Bansal and Voyer, 2000). It is apparent that WOM recommendation is of great significance to the credibility and marketing efforts of any firm. WOM has usually been associated with unsolicited communication among customers, and such customer advocates are said to be the most loyal customers (Sasser and Jones, 1995). However, WOM can also be utilised as an intentional proactive marketing strategy, such strategies have been variously described as "buzz marketing" (Rosen, 2000), "viral marketing" (Kelly, 2007), and "evangelist marketing" (McConnell et al., 2003).

METHODOLOGY

In this study in depth interview and self completed questionnaires were employed as data collection techniques. Semi-structured interviews was chosen because according to Wilkinson and Birmingham (2003) it allowed the opportunity to direct the interview more closely, to have a pre-determined set of questions while simultaneously allowing the interviewees sufficient flexibility to shape the flow of information given. It is also stated by

May (2001) that the semi-structured interview gives the interviewer the freedom to probe beyond the answers in a manner which would appear prejudicial to the aims of standardisation and comparability. Semi structured interview is also adaptable, flexible, and relatively unstructured and open ended. The interviewer can ask more questions, if the answer does not come up to expectations (Robson, 2002). Robson (2002) also says that it is appropriate to use the interview when the individual perceptions of processes within a social unit are to be studied.

The participants for in depth interview consists of 3 Head of Marketing Departments of private universities to gain information about their experience on marketing the higher education institutions with specific strategy, 3 parents of senior high schools students to dig deeper their perspectives on how to choose universities or colleges for their children, and 3 university students. The total number of participants for in depth interview is 9 people.

Beside in depth interview, this study also employed self-completion questionnaires as the instrument of data collection which served as triangulation and were distributed to 30 members of society. It is a form of survey which involves written questioning in which it is delivered to the respondents by mail or handed to them personally by the researcher in their homes, at work, school or any other places as stated by Robson (2002) and Sarantakos (2005). Self-completion questionnaire is employed as one of the research instruments because of its advantages to this particular research. According to Cannel & Kahn (1968), the interview is defined as a discussion between two or more people with a specific purpose (Sarosa, 2012: 44). With interviews researchers can get a lot of useful data for his research. Interviews enable researchers to dig up "rich" and multi-dimensional data about things from their participants. The author also performs data collection by literature or reviewing the document that is collecting theoretical data by reading books related to the topic required for the theoretical basis in this research and by using internet means to further information. According to Esterberg cited in Sarosa (2012:16), documents are all things in written form made by men. The document is useful if the researcher wants to get information about an event but finds it difficult to interview the perpretrators directly.

Questionnaire was designed in a semi-standardised one which contains a moderate structure and cut down open-ended questions to a minimum as well as Wisker (2001) suggested to put the most simple and obvious questions at the beginning and make them more complicated since this will keep the participants with us and not make them confused at the start.

Triangulation was employed in this study in order to increase the validity. Before the interview and distribution of questionnaires, the author piloted them to two students and two officers, requesting their opinion and modifications were made accordingly.   Then, it was known that the open ended questions should be limited to prevent misunderstanding of the meaning of each terminology. It was done to extent and ensure the validity of the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Interactive analysis from Miles and Huberman (1984) is used. In this analytical model, the three components of the analysis of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion or verification activities conducted in an interactive form with the data collection process as an ongoing process, repetitive, and continuously to form a cycle. Furthermore, researchers only move between the three components of the analysis, thus forming a cyclic pattern. As Patton states (1990) that data reduction can be defined as the process of selecting, focusing on

simplification, abstraction, and transformation of dummy data that emerged from the written record in the field. Thus the data reduction is a form of analysis that sharpens, classify, direct, dispose of unnecessary and organising data in a way such that its final conclusions can be drawn and verified.

Students Perception

Interviews were conducted to 3 college students. This is intended to see how far the power of word of mouth in marketing the educational institutions. Out of the 3 students interviewed, all the three said that they would recommend the institutions if they were satisfied with what they had been getting. This satisfaction was closely related to the quality built by the campus itself, because students are the closest client of the institution. They are people who experience life on campus so they will talk honestly to others about what he felt all along. This fits perfectly with what O'Neill and Palmer (2004, p.42) say that service quality in higher education as "the difference between what a student expects to receive and his/her perceptions of actual delivery".

The three students also agreed that universities sometimes do not realise that students are their clients or their most important customers who need to be served well. It is in accordance with what Guolla (1999) says that students could also take the role as clients, producers, and products. However, based on experience, it repeatedly happens that the promised facilities do not meet with the expectation and if students complain, they are less likely to respond.

From the interviews, it is known that students who are satisfied with what they get from the campus, will be motivated to study harder because they feel campus is their home where they can develop their potential. "A good campus is a campus that makes us feel good, and can do activities not hampered by inadequate facilities or poor service." This is in line with what Elliott and Shin (2002) state that student satisfaction has also a positive impact on fundraising and student motivation. When asked if they would recommend their college to the juniors in high school and neighbours, two of them said "definitely yes" because they were satisfied with the service quality of the university and there is a pride of being a part of the campus. In fact they also took courses and trainings held on campus and did not register elsewhere. This conforms the statement of Wiers-Jenssen *et al.* (2002) and Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, (2005a,b) that satisfied students may attract new students by engaging in positive word-of-mouth communication to inform acquaintances and friends, and they may return to the university to take other courses. "I am not ashamed to recommend my campus to others because I am sure people will be satisfied with what they get."

From the interview, it is also known that the aspects serve as the key factors of students' dissatisfaction are campus facilities and qualification of the lecturers. One of the students said "The quality of the lecturers is far below the expectations of the students as well as the existing infrastructure. IT services and digital libraries are difficult to access." Students who feel dissatisfied with their campus life will not give any recommendation to anyone particularly their family members, friends, or neighbours.

There are three important questions raised in the questionnaires which are related to students' satisfaction, service quality and word of mouth. Out of the 30 questionnaires distributed, 19 people are not satisfied with what they have got from their campus, especially related to the academic qualities such as the lecturers' qualification, and schedule that often changes caused by the absence of lecturers. In addition, there are still inadequate campus facilities such as

limited number of books in the library, E-library which has not been able to operate until now, as well as unstable internet services. A complete computer lab, an adequate collection of books and E-books, good internet service, clean and healthy canteen, clean toilets and ample water supply, public facilities in campus environments such as banks , photo copy, business center are all supporting factors for the quality of institutions that will lead to student satisfaction. It turned out that out of the 30 questionnaires distributed, only 11 people who answer that they are quite satisfied with what they get from their campus. Not only the campus building which is spacious enough, nice and clean but also the qualification of lecturers and facilities talk (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Students' Satisfaction on their colleges
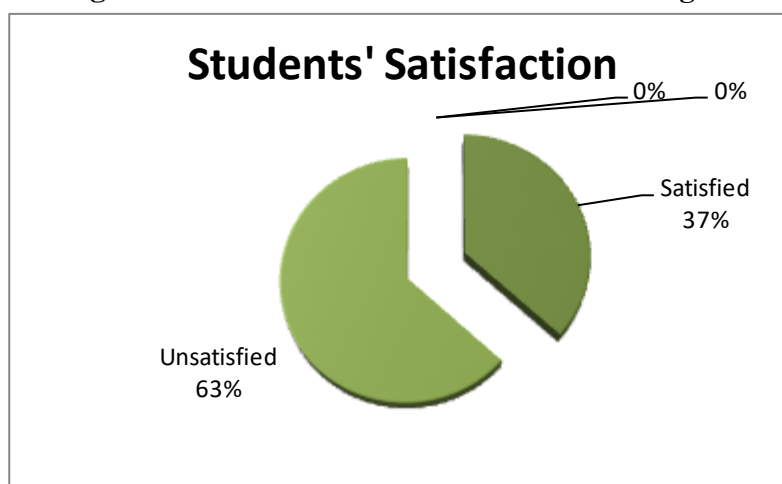

Parents' Perception

Interviews were also conducted on prospective students' parents. The role of parents is crucial to the choice of higher education for their children. The data from the interview show that in general parents or especially mothers always look for information from friends or acquaintances, even the neighbours before determining the university for their children. The three parents said that they were more confident to the information provided by colleagues or their neighbours whose children have experienced with the college.

Although they have come at the campus open house and got an information from university marketing staff, the three parents said that they always look for more detailed information to their colleagues and neighbours. This is due to the trust factor. "Although we have often been invited to the open house events from several universities, we always find out about the university from various sources. For us as parents, testimony from people we know is more important than any other information. "

This conforms the statement of Hallowell et al., (1996) and Parasuraman et al., (1988, 1991) saying that prospective customers thus rely on the testimony of other consumers because they are intuitively aware that WOM recommendation is fuelled by satisfactory experiences for their fellow consumers and that these experiences are, at least in part, a reflection of an organisation's orientation towards customer service and service recovery . Bansal and Voyer, (2000) state that within a services context, prospective customers tend to rely on communication from other customers because the intangible nature of services is inherently associated with greater purchase risk.

Out of 30 questionnaires distributed to parents in some high schools, it is found that 23 parents say that recommendations they get from colleagues, families, neighbours are major considerations before deciding which university to choose for their children. While 7 others say that in fact we can already see the quality of a college through the existing infrastructure and facilities, without having to ask for recommendations of others, as shown in graph 2 below.

Figure 2: The importance of WOM in choosing a university
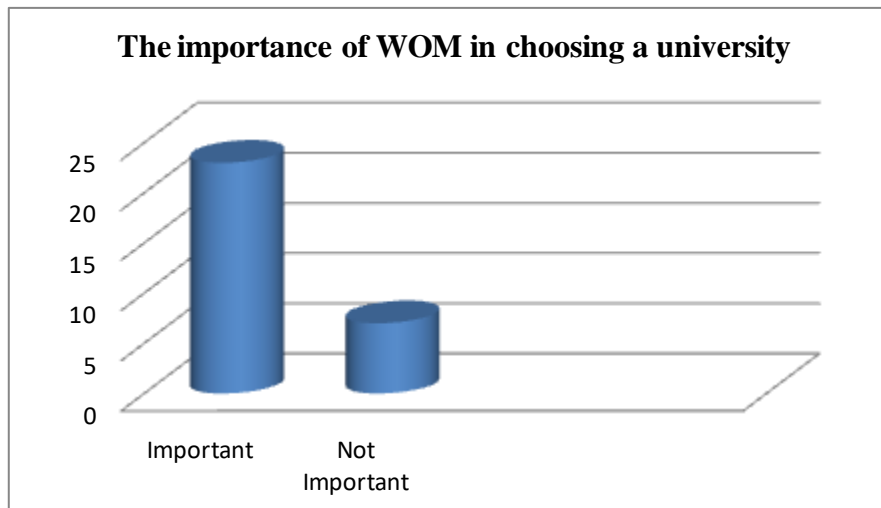
From the distributed questionnaires, it can be seen that the important factors that become parameters for parents in choosing a university for their children are infrastructure (campus building), facilities, lecturer qualification, service quality, college status and cost. Out of the six aspects above, the infrastructure and facilities ranked the highest selected by the parents (57%), while only 5% of people stated that status is the most important aspect in choosing a university, the other 7% said cost is the first aspect to be considered in selecting university, and 31% said the quality of teaching and learning is the most important, as illustrated in figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Aspects to be considered in choosing the university
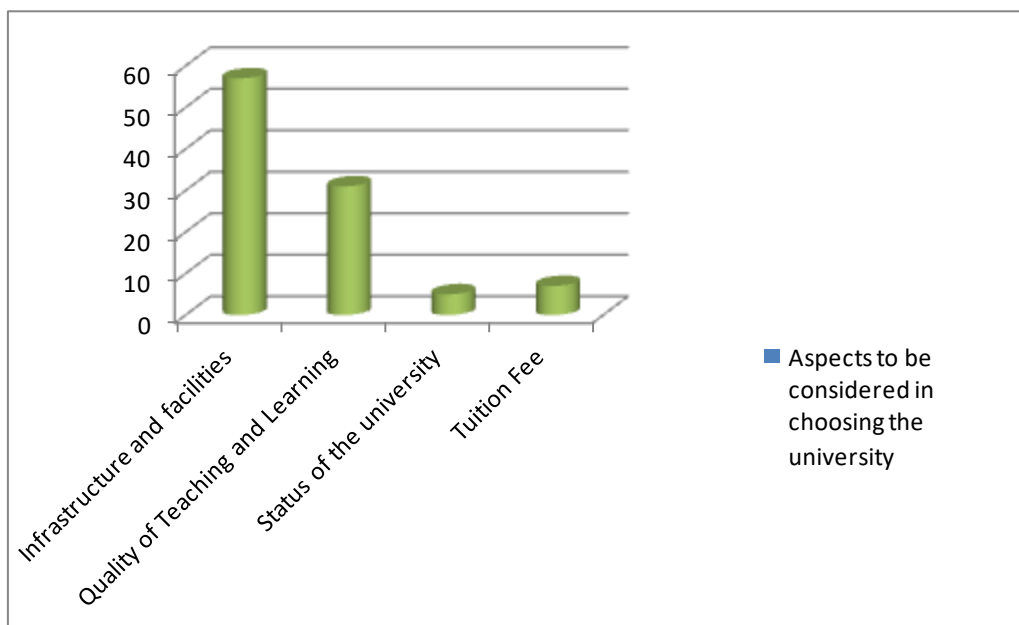
Generally, after considering the infrastructure and facilities aspects, parents seek references from various sources to ensure that the university will be chosen is qualified. Here, it is seen that the word of mouth advertising plays a significant role in parents' decision making.

Head of Marketing Departments' Perception

Interviews were also conducted with 3 Head of Marketing Departments from universities to get a broad overview of their perceptions on WOM. Out of the 3 people interviewed, all of them said that students are the closest and most important customers to them. Why is that? Because students who are satisfied with what they get from the institution, will become loyal customers and word of mouth will happen ranging from close circles of students such as younger siblings, extended families to his friends. This conforms the statement of Arambewela & John Hall (2009) that students are the primary customers for an educational institution and their satisfaction will lead towards loyalty, retention and positive word of mouth.

"We highly prioritise the comfort and satisfaction of our students. Therefore the most important thing is always try to make improvements in every aspect." The three participants also agreed that quality service is the main target, especially in business competition in the world of education and as a marketing team we must understand the level of customer satisfaction which is largely determined by the experience that occurs repeatedly with an institution. It is in accordance with what Sureshchander et al. (2002, p. 364) states that consumer's level of satisfaction is determined by his or her cumulative experience at the point of contact with the supplier. The three participants also agreed that WOM is the most reliable marketing strategy because the person giving the testimony conveys the information honestly without having any commercial purpose from the person given the information as stated by Bansal and Voyer (2000) that WOM communication is considered to be more credible because the sender of the information usually has nothing to gain if the recipient subsequently decides to buy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that students' satisfaction plays a significant role in optimising the word of mouth advertising. Interviews with students and parents gave us a picture on how word of mouth absolutely relied on the service quality of the universities. Finally, further study is needed to examine what the impact is for the institutions which do not rely on the WOM advertising. Up to the present time, there has no research which discusses about this matter.

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