

# **Investigating National Football League (NFL) Fan Loyalty**

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*The present study attempts to determine if a consumer's consumption motivation and customer commitment influence the loyalty the consumer exhibits toward his or her favorite National Football League (NFL) Team. The present study utilizes survey responses from 302 NFL fans. A path model analysis using Amos 17 was performed to assess the hypothesized relationships. The results indicate that increasing an NFL fan's social motivation to consume increases the fan's customer commitment, and increasing an NFL fan's customer commitment increases the fan's attitudinal loyalty. Additionally, the results indicate that an NFL fan's customer commitment influences his or her behavioral loyalty.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sports marketing research is often concentrated in the areas of sponsorships or economic impacts. Sponsorship research is valuable in terms of its ability to provide organizations much needed guidance in determining which sponsorships provide optimal return on an investment (Cornwell, Pruitt, & Clark, 2005). Economic impact assessments are also worthwhile as they allow governments or municipalities greater insight into the possible utilization of sports-related monetary infusions (Solberg & Preuss, 2007). However, neither sponsorship research nor sports-driven economic impact studies investigate the attitudes and behaviors of the individual consumers involved in the consumption of the service of sports. Recent estimates of consumer spending on sports or sports-related products are eye-catching. The sports business industry in the United States is annually a \$200+ billion operation. In terms of feasible comparison, the sports business industry in the United States is significantly larger than many other entertainment service industries, including the motion picture industry. Each year, sports spectators spend billions of dollars to cover the costs of tickets, concessions, parking, on-site merchandise sales, travel to and from sporting events, and internet purchases of officially licensed league or team apparel, in addition to a variety of other sports related spending initiatives (Adams, 2008).

In the United States, one sport has emerged as the leader in terms of popularity and interest. The National Football League (NFL) has grown in recent years to be the favorite sport of more sports fans in the United States than any other sport (Hall, 2010). The NFL has grown as its exposure on television has increased. In 2012, NFL games are televised on CBS, Fox, NBC, ESPN, and the NFL Network, and DirecTV offers NFL fans the opportunity to watch all Sunday afternoon regional games by subscribing to that service through the satellite television provider. Additionally, and probably the strongest indication of the popularity of the NFL, the February, 2012, NFL Super Bowl set a record as the most watched television program *in history*, pulling in an estimated 111.3 million viewers (McCarthy, 2012). And although NFL games are available through a variety of media outlets, attendance at NFL games remains unbelievably high. For the 2011 NFL season, 26 of the 32 NFL teams filled 90% or more of their stadium

seating capacity for home games. Of these 26, nine teams were at 100% or higher (with some teams selling standing-room only tickets that put attendance figures above actual stadium seat capacity numbers), and another twelve teams averaged between 95.0 and 99.9% ([http://espn.go.com/nfl/attendance/\\_sort/homePct](http://espn.go.com/nfl/attendance/_sort/homePct)).

Sports-driven consumer spending has increased dramatically in recent years (Euromonitor International, 2011). As a result, owners of sports teams and managers of sports organizations need better understanding of the consumption habits of sports consumers. Many questions remain unanswered for sports organizations seeking to gain greater insight into the perceptions, motivations, and attitudes that shape sports consumers and help determine their consumption preferences. Additionally, as the sports industry continues to introduce new physical goods and services (teams, apparel, equipment, concessions, parking options, etc...), it becomes increasingly clear that the identification and understanding of loyal customers is of vital importance for any sports-related provider.

For a number of years, marketing research focused on the critical aspect of satisfying customers. Significant time and effort has been spent identifying the factors that lead to satisfied consumers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Recently, however, research has found that obtaining and maintaining loyal customers is, in all probability, more important than the overall satisfaction of customers (Agustin & Singh, 2005). Moreover, Reichheld and Teal (1996) have shown that even small increases in loyalty can produce rather large improvements in overall profitability. As such, uncovering the factors that create loyal customers is of utmost importance for organizations.

Although the concept of loyalty has been extensively studied, developing a universally-accepted definition of it in marketing has been elusive. One of the most popular conceptualizations of loyalty is credited to Oliver (1997), who believed that two distinct forms of loyalty exist. The first, behavioral loyalty, represents specific purchases by consumers. The second, attitudinal loyalty, revolves around a mental commitment toward the brand and the consumer's expected commitment to purchasing. Chiou and Droke (2006) used Oliver's (1997) cognitive-affective-conative loyalty framework to study the antecedents of loyalty. The authors utilized this framework to identify specific consumer beliefs and attitudes that were deemed important in developing customer loyalty. Two factors, consumer satisfaction and trust, were found to be important predictors of loyalty. However, the majority of research focusing on the antecedents of loyalty often ignores the consumer's motivation for purchasing. Based on the aforementioned loyalty framework, it can be noted that the consumer's motivation to consume is likely to have an important influence on the loyalty exhibited by customers. Finally, Oliver's loyalty framework (1997) also underscores the role of involvement as an antecedent of loyalty. As sports purchases are often driven by highly involved consumers, it is important to understand how this involvement or commitment relates to loyalty and consumption motivation. Therefore, the present research study investigates the relationships between an NFL fan's consumption motivation, customer commitment, and consumer loyalty.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Consumption Motivation

Consumer socialization is the process by which young people develop consumer-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Ward, 1974, 1980). More simply defined, consumer socialization is the process of learning how to be a consumer. Consumer socialization research identifies a variety of influential sources often identified as socialization agents that impact consumers from a very young age. These influences help each consumer develop his or her attitudes, motivations, and behaviors as consumers. Additionally, research has shown that socialization agents may, but do not have to be, individuals (Clark, Bush & Martin, 2003).

The consumer socialization literature has identified a consumer's motivation to consume as a critical influence in the development of consumption-related skills, attitudes, and behaviors (John, 1999). Conceptually, a consumer's consumption motivation can fall into two distinct categories. The first, *objective* motivations to consume, reflect a consumer's desire to purchase products based on economic,

functional, or objective reasons (Moschis, 1978). Thus, consumers objectively motivated often focus on a product's economic benefits, frequently seeking better value through shopping comparisons (Moschis, 1981). The second type of consumption motivation, *social*, recognizes that consumer often place a significant level of importance on the perceptions and feelings of others in the marketplace. Social motivations to consume are frequently driven by conspicuous consumption and a consumer's desire for self-expression in consumption-related decisions (Moschis, 1981). More recent research has identified a positive relationship between social motivation to consume and many of the variables related to materialism (Fitzmaurice & Comegys, 2006).

In the world of sports, consumer motivation has been examined frequently based on a specific league or sport. The majority of these studies examine attendance motivations for consumers at sporting events, such as Australian football (Hoye & Lilis, 2008; Neale & Funk, 2006), or college basketball (Ridinger & Funk, 2006).

### **Customer Commitment**

As consumption motivation often drives a consumer to adopt specific attitudes and behave in certain manners, it is important to understand how this motivation is related to customer commitment. In marketing, commitment, along with trust, has been established as one of the most critical foundations for organizations seeking to establish long-term relationships with customers. Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined commitment between a customer and an organization as "an exchange partner believing that an ongoing relationship with another is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it; that is, the committed party believes the relationship is worth working on to ensure that it endures indefinitely" (p. 23). The central theme of the Morgan and Hunt (1994) conceptualization of customer commitment is that without this type of emotional involvement, relationships between organizations and customers never reach full potential. As a foundation in the buyer-seller relationship, customer commitment is critical for both parties seeking to build long-lasting consumption relationships.

Customer commitment is often influenced by organizational behaviors in a consumption-driven environment. Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekaran (1998) found that as a consumer's dissatisfaction with complaint handling increased, customer commitment decreased. Research has also shown that a service customer's commitment is often driven by varying levels of financial, structural, or social connections with the service brand (Hsieh, Chiu, & Chiang, 2005). Research focusing on customer commitment has established that it can also be a significant predictor of consumer behaviors and attitudes. Customers who possess a strong sense of commitment to an organization are more likely to remain customers of that organization (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Additionally, customer commitment has been shown to exhibit a significant influence on a consumer's desire to switch service providers (Bansal, Irving, & Taylor, 2004). As such, a lack of commitment is seen as an important variable that could influence consumers to make specific purchases related to product brands.

### **Loyalty**

One of the most studied, yet most difficult to define variables in marketing is the concept of customer loyalty. Oliver (1997, 1999) has put forth considerable effort in an attempt to create a universally-accepted conceptualization of customer loyalty. Most researchers in marketing today accept that customer loyalty can occur both in attitudinal and behavioral forms. Attitudinal loyalty suggests that customers are loyal to a specific product when they possess favorable or positive beliefs toward that product (Agustin & Singh, 2005). Although attitudinal loyalty suggests that customers have favorable perceptions of products, it is only an indication of a consumer's mental connotations and does not encompass the act of actual product purchase. Therefore, the second form of customer loyalty, behavioral loyalty, is critical to the conceptualization of loyalty as it defines loyalty as a customer's inclination to purchase a product based on a precedent of past purchases (Russell & Kamakura, 1994). Finally, it is important to note that recent marketing research studies are focusing on customer loyalty, not brand loyalty. This conceptualization is based on loyalty characteristics present in customers as opposed to characteristics attributed to brands (Zhang, Dixit, & Friedmann, 2010).

## HYPOTHESES

Both objective and social motivations to consume have been shown to have distinct influences in the consumer socialization literature. As objective motivations to consume have been shown to be positively related to consumption-based communication in families, and negatively related to exposure to television (Moschis & Churchill, 1978), objective motivations to consume are often considered positive influences in the decision-making processes of consumers. Conversely, social motivations to consume are often associated with materialistic views and conspicuous consumption, leading many to assume that socially-motivated consumers are negatively influenced by these motivations (John, 1999).

However, the influence of specific motivations to consume on the customer commitment of NFL fans might actually contradict the positive-negative trend seen in past studies. Recent research has shown that sports fans often exhibit extreme social connections with their favorite sports teams (Heere & James, 2007). The behaviors and actions of sports fans are often heavily influenced by the need for social recognition and socialization through a specific team (Dionisio, Leal, & Moutinho, 2008; Funk & James, 2006). Previous studies suggest that being a committed fan of a specific sports team is comparable to joining a religion, complete with rituals, sacred behaviors and affiliations (Percy & Taylor, 1997). Real and Mechikoff (1992) suggested that for the most deeply involved sports fans, the sport and/or a specific team actually become a form of self-identification. Devoted sports fans become ritualistic consumers, dedicated to the social status that this type of conspicuous consumption brings to their life. Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw (1999) have proposed that sports fans can be divided into strata. The three highest levels of sports-involved fans, devoted, fanatical, and dysfunctional, all exhibit differing levels of social desirability through sports, suggesting that these sports fans consistently adapt to fit into the social norms associated with their favorite team or sport.

In the present study, the socially-driven sports fan is likely to be more significantly influenced by social surroundings than by any monetary or financially-driven motivation. Specifically, NFL fans desiring to be accepted by their fellow sports fans are not likely to be driven to consume by financial or quality considerations, and are more likely to be socially-motivated to consume. Committed NFL fans will want to participate in the consumption experiences that provide them with the opportunity to display their involvement as fans. These activities include purchasing memorabilia, apparel, and tickets to games of their favorite teams. Objectively motivated consumers would often be hesitant to make these types of purchases, unless a true benefit-over-cost relationship existed. Additionally, early conceptualizations of customer commitment suggested that social-based market transactions, as opposed to those driven by economic motivations, were commonly associated with committed customers (Cook & Emerson, 1978). As customer commitment in the present study is an emotionally-driven concept, it is likely that the customer commitment of the NFL fans in the present study will be negatively influenced by objective motivations to consume and positively influenced by social motivations to consume. Hence:

*Hypothesis 1: The greater the objective motivation to consume of an NFL fan, the less the customer commitment of an NFL fan to his or her favorite team.*

*Hypothesis 2: The greater the social motivation to consume of an NFL fan, the greater the customer commitment of an NFL fan to his or her favorite team.*

Customer commitment is also likely to drive the loyalty sports fans feel and show toward their favorite team. Berry and Parasuraman (1991) propose that commitment, from both the organization and the customer, forms the basis of any consumption relationship. Without customer commitment, organizations run the risk of establishing repeat purchases from customers that are primarily based on the customer's lack of effort to find suitable substitutes, or a lack of acceptable substitutes in that product category. As Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggest, commitment from customers is vital for organizations seeking to claim valuable monetary outcomes from customers. Customer attitudinal loyalty and purchase loyalty are likely two of the most sought after outcomes for all organizations.

Multiple research studies have shown that customer commitment is likely to have a significant and positive impact on customer loyalty perceptions and actions. Initially, Fullerton (2003) found that when customers possess shared values and identification with an organization, customer loyalty to that organization is positively impacted. As established earlier, sports fans often identify socially with their favorite teams, indicating shared values and a significant level of commitment. Results from a separate study investigating independent customer samples from restaurants and department stores indicate that committed customers are expected to both continue purchasing from the same retailer, and increase the amount of overall purchases made (Lacey, 2007). Additionally, research has shown that in a sports setting, consumer satisfaction from committed consumers is a strong predictor of consumer attitudinal loyalty (Boden & Bernache-Assollant, 2011). The implications from this study suggest that customer commitment is critical in establishing repurchase intentions of customers.

Three very recent studies have found strong bonds between customer commitment and loyalty measures. Jones, Fox, Taylor, and Fabrigar (2010) found that service customers who possess affective commitment toward their service provider exhibit strong loyalty-based responses to that service provider. As affective commitment is described as the psychological commitment one feels for an organization based on favorable perceptions of that organization, it is likely that this commitment is ever-present in the relationship between NFL fans and their favorite teams. Previous research analyzing soccer fans indicates that fans are committed to their teams, even through the positives and negatives associated with wins and losses. The results suggest that these committed fans are “bound” to their teams (Koenigstorfer, Groeppel-Klein, & Schmitt, 2010). Finally, it has been shown that soccer fans who express pride in their team are more likely to exhibit customer commitment and loyalty toward that team. Pride is also expected to lead to increased consumption behaviors for these fans (Decrop & Derbaix, 2010). Hence:

*Hypothesis 3: The greater the customer commitment of an NFL fan to his or her favorite team, the greater the attitudinal loyalty of an NFL fan to his or her favorite team.*

*Hypothesis 4: The greater the customer commitment of an NFL fan to his or her favorite team, the greater the behavioral loyalty of an NFL fan to his or her favorite team.*

Finally, it is expected that the attitudinal loyalty of NFL fans is likely to have a positive impact on the behavioral loyalty of these fans. Fans with positive perceptions of their favorite team often choose to remain psychologically loyal to that team, developing a social attachment with that team and its players. This attachment will likely become evident in the behaviors of fans, culminating in purchase behaviors that indicate behavioral loyalty. Park, MacInnis, Priester, Eisingerich, and Iacobucci (2010) have found that consumers who feel ‘attached’ to a certain brand feel a deep loyalty to that brand. Brand attachments explain a deep, almost devotional relationship with brands that consumers have when they basically fall in love with specific brands. Consumers will actually become emotional, both in positive and negative forms, based on the implications associated with their beloved brands. Sports fans often possess a very similar attachment to their favorite teams. Recent research found that the self-esteem responses of baseball fans positively predicted their purchase intentions, identified as conative loyalty (Harolle, Trail, Rodriguez, & Jordan, 2010). And, as Park et al. (2010) found that brand-attached consumers at the highest level are more likely to spend their own money to express their devotion to their brand, it is expected that fans of the NFL will exhibit the same relationship when making purchase decisions involving their favorite team. Hence:

*Hypothesis 5: The greater the attitudinal loyalty of an NFL fan to his or her favorite team, the greater the behavioral loyalty of an NFL fan to his or her favorite team.*

## METHOD

### Measures

Consumption motivation was assessed using a 9-item scale developed by Moschis (1978). Five items of that scale assess objective consumption motivation, and four items of that scale assess social consumption motivation. Customer commitment was assessed using a revised 4-item scale from Morgan and Hunt (1994). Attitudinal loyalty was assessed using a revised 3-item scale originally used by Muncy (1983) and Selin, Howard, Udd, and Cable (1988). One item from the attitudinal loyalty scale was a negative indicator of attitudinal loyalty and was reversed-coded before final analysis. For each of the aforementioned measurement scales, responses were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Reliability analyses on these scale items exhibited acceptable Cronbach's (1951) alpha scores (*objective consumption motivation* = 0.821, *social consumption motivation* = 0.873, *customer commitment* = 0.934, *attitudinal loyalty* = 0.883). Each of the aforementioned scales was summed before final analysis.

Finally, behavioral loyalty was assessed using a single question taken from Pritchard, Havitz, and Howard (1999) and revised to fit the current study. The question asked respondents to identify the amount of money they had spent over the past 12 months on products directly related to their favorite NFL team.

### Sample and Data Collection

Students from three separate upper-level marketing courses at a Midwestern university were asked to find and distribute questionnaires to individuals who were fans of the NFL. Each student received training on how to identify potential respondents and how to administer the questionnaire. Students were responsible for gathering completed questionnaires and returning them. Each student was asked to find one NFL fan in each of five separate age designations (21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, and 61+).

Eighty-one separate students were given five questionnaires each and asked to distribute the questionnaires to NFL fans in specific age groups, representing a total of 405 potentially distributed questionnaires. These questionnaires contained the aforementioned measurement scales and demographic questions. Completed questionnaires were received from 302 NFL fans, a 74.6% response rate. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the sample.

## RESULTS

To assess the overall relationships between the variables, a path model analysis using Amos 17 was performed (Arbuckle, 2008). Results from this analysis are presented in Table 2. Using the maximum likelihood method of estimation, the overall fit indices for the model appear satisfactory, indicating an acceptable fit of the model to the data. [ $\chi^2$  (4) = 8.669,  $p$  = 0.070, NFI = 0.97, RFI = 0.88, IFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.93, CFI = 0.98]

As shown in Table 2, four of the five hypothesized relationships are supported, two at the  $p$  = 0.00 significance level, one at the  $p$  < 0.01 level, and one at the  $p$  < 0.05 level. Hypotheses 1 was not supported. Although the relationship between an NFL fan's objective motivation to consume and his or her customer commitment was negative, as predicted, the relationship was not significant. Hypotheses two and three were supported, as an NFL fan's social motivation to consume positively and significantly predicted his or her customer commitment, and an NFL fan's customer commitment positively and significantly predicted his or her attitudinal loyalty. Both of these relationships were significant at  $p$  = .000. Additionally, the results indicate that an NFL fan's customer commitment positively and significantly influences his or her behavioral loyalty ( $p$  < .01), providing support for hypothesis 4. Finally, as expected, an NFL fan's attitudinal loyalty positively and significantly influences his or her behavioral loyalty ( $p$  < .05), lending support for hypothesis 5.

**TABLE 1**  
**RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS**

Characteristic	Frequency	Characteristic	Frequency
<b>Race</b>		<b>Marital Status</b>	
African-American	45	Single	91
Caucasian	232	Married	153
Hispanic	5	Divorced	42
Asian	2	Other	9
Bi-Racial	5	Missing	7
Other	3		
Missing	10	<b>Income Level</b>	
		\$ 0 - 25,000	59
<b>Age</b>		\$ 25,001 - 50,000	76
21-30	67	\$ 50,001 - 75,000	92
31-40	62	\$ 75,001 - 100,000	51
41-50	63	\$100,001+	23
51-60	56	Missing	1
61+	54		
<b>Gender</b>			
Female	77		
Male	221		
Missing	4		

**TABLE 2**  
**PARAMETER ESTIMATES FOR PREDICTION PATHS**

Hypothesis	Prediction Paths (————→ )		Standardized Regression Weights	p
<b>H1</b>	Objective Consumption Motivation	Customer Commitment	-0.043	0.456
<b>H2</b>	Social Consumption Motivation	Customer Commitment	0.228	0.000
<b>H3</b>	Customer Commitment	Attitudinal Loyalty	0.681	0.000
<b>H4</b>	Customer Commitment	Behavioral Loyalty	0.196	0.008
<b>H5</b>	Attitudinal Loyalty	Behavioral Loyalty	0.174	0.019
Variance explained: Cust. Commitment = .049; Att. Loyalty = .464; Beh. Loyalty = .115				

## **DISCUSSION**

In terms of practical implications for NFL franchises, one thing is clear: committed customers are loyal customers. The results of the present study clearly indicate that NFL fans who feel a strong sense of commitment to their favorite team are very likely to express sincere attitudinal devotion to that team, and more importantly for the NFL franchise, spend their money on the merchandise and game experiences of their favorite team. Consequently, the key for NFL organizations is identifying the fans who are most committed, and placing a greater focus on both providing those customers with opportunities that reinforce that commitment, and giving those customers opportunities to make purchases. NFL organizations can make a concerted effort to do so by focusing on game day experiences. All NFL teams are guaranteed eight home games during each regular NFL season. This provides each organization with the opportunity to reach its most committed fans only eight times when these experiences include a regular season home game. As regular season home games are likely the consumption outings with the highest attendance of committed fans, these game-day experiences represent the best opportunity for NFL organizations to provide elite shopping experiences for fans.

All NFL organizations have team stores within their stadiums. These stores are dedicated to providing fans with the greatest total amount of team-related merchandise. However, one commonly observed problem exists with these team stores on game days. In 2011, the average attendance at an NFL game was 64,698 (<http://static.nfl.com>). A common occurrence from this vast number of attendees is severe over-crowding in team stores, specifically during the hours before and after games. This likely leads many committed fans to either avoid the team store environment completely, or commit fewer minutes to the team store shopping experience. Having committed fans forgo shopping experiences during a visit to an NFL game represents a sizable lost opportunity for the organization. Committing greater amounts of space to the team store, or providing multiple committed areas for team merchandise, even if underused at other times during the year, would give organizations a much better opportunity to satisfy the buying desires of its most committed customers.

A second implication suggests that socially motivated NFL customers are more likely to be committed customers. This might not be a surprise to devoted sports fans in any sport, but it is a critical piece of information that NFL organizations can utilize for their benefit. Socially motivated consumers make purchase decisions based on the social ramifications that they perceive are related to their purchases, and will purchase products that are expected to have positive social implications. NFL organizations do not need to search for their socially driven customers. Many of these shoppers show up for every NFL home game involving their favorite team. Some arrive hours before the start of games to participate in the ritual of tailgating, the experience of socializing in a party-type atmosphere in the parking lots and common areas surrounding football stadiums. This also becomes the socially motivated customer's opportunity to compare his or her merchandise with other committed fans of the same team. These tailgating experiences provide NFL organizations with the greatest opportunity to reach their most committed fans. In fact, recent research suggests that those fans most committed to tailgating exhibit the greatest involvement, social interaction, and self-identity with their favorite football teams (Drenten, Peters, Leigh, & Hollenbeck, 2009). It would make logical sense that NFL organizations would use these experiences as opportunities to expose committed fans to the newest items in team merchandise. As these committed NFL fans commonly serve as the opinion leaders for a large following of dedicated NFL fans, investing time and effort into understanding and serving these customers, even to the point of offering free samples or giveaways, would provide NFL organizations with occasions to strengthen their ties with their most committed customers.

## **CONCLUSION**

The most logical continuance from the present study is to answer the question of "what leads to customer commitment?" Although social motivation to consume is seen as a significant predictor in the present study, it is not the only variable that leads NFL fans to exhibit commitment to their favorite NFL

teams. Inquiries need to be made to determine the importance of team success. Can teams that consistently lose games expect customers to remain committed long term? Additionally, much has been made about an increasing number of off-the-field problems of NFL players (Banks, 2008). Concerns such as drug use, paternity issues, and criminal activities undertaken by NFL players could cause fans to disconnect with their favorite teams, negatively impacting commitment levels. NFL organizations also need to seek understanding about the game day experiences of NFL fans and how these atmosphere-related factors influence customer commitment. Factors such as stadium amenities, concession options, and fan behavior are all possible influences of the commitment level exhibited by loyal fans. As NFL organizations move forward, understanding the factors that lead to customer commitment will become even more important. For now, though, knowing that customer commitment plays a key role in the loyalty of NFL fans toward their favorite teams gives NFL organizations the opportunity to provide positive experiences for these customers, and obtain the monetary rewards associated with these experiences.

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