Full Length Research Paper

The advertisement effectiveness of animated spokes-characters

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Many studies have discussed the advertisement effectiveness of endorsements by spokespersons such as celebrities, experts, executives, and typical consumers. However, few studies have investigated the advertisement effectiveness of endorsements from animated spokes-characters. This study focuses on animated spokes-characters and the involvement concept to examine the correlations between animated spokes-characters, advertisement communication effects, and purchase intentions. According to the empirical results, advertisements endorsed by animated spokes-characters enhance brand impression, improving advertisement communication effects; however purchase intention is not guaranteed. The results of this paper highlight that manufacturers can employ animated characters to attract attention, but product and brand appeals must also be involved to enhance consumers' product, brand attitudes and purchase intentions.

Key words: Animated spokes-characters, advertisement communication effects, source credibility.

INTRODUCTION

Advertisements can be defined as a type of communicative and persuasive marketing activity, the goal of which is to influence consumers' cognition, attitude, and behavior towards the product being advertised. Among the many types of advertising, advertisements with endorsers is a widespread type (Hsu and McDonald, 2002) often preferred by modern enterprises. Numerous scholars (Friedman and Friedman, 1979; Atkin and Block, 1983; Freiden, 1984; Ohanian, 1990; Bower and Landreth, 2001; Chen, 2001) investigated the advertisement effectiveness of endorsements from spokespersons such as celebrities, experts, chief executive officers, and typical consumers. Of these spokespersons, celebrities were the favorite. Manufacturers pay a high amount of

money for celebrities to endorse products. The reason is that manufacturers can take advantage of the credibility and attractiveness of celebrities, anticipating consumers will extend their liking of the celebrity to the products, and will then adopt and purchase the endorsed brand and products (Baker and Churchill, 1977).

However, celebrity spokespersons may have unpredictable risks. Consumers' positive regard for a celebrity may not result in tangible sales. Additionally, celebrities experiencing unfavorable events or scandals may damage corporate image (Till and Shimp, 1998). The high frequency of using the same celebrity to promote various brands and products in the short-term will cause side effects, such as recommendation fatigue (Chen, 2001). In contrast, animated spokes-characters pose no risk. Corporations can reduce the distance with consumers, and connect, build, or strengthen company and product image via a personified animated spokes-character.

Recently, an increasing number of companies have

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used animated spokes-characters as the transmission media for advertising messages. These companies design a customized spokes-character that matches the business' organizational culture and mission. Animated spokes-characters are highly moldable, adaptable, and easily controllable, and can even become an identifying symbol of the company.

Animated spokes-characters reduce the distance between companies and consumers, and encourage consumers' liking for the spokes-character to extend to the brand and its products. When the juice brand 'Qoo' entered the Korean market in the beginning of 2002, Qoo immediately topped the bestselling juice brands to become the third most popular beverage brand in the country. Heiser et al. (2008) researched animated spokes-characters and human spokespersons, and their results indicated that the advertising efficacy of animated spokes-characters exceeded that of human spokespersons. Therefore, designing an attractive, likable spokes-character that embodies the company spirit has become an issue worth investigating.

This study concentrates on animated spokes-characters and the involvement concept to examine the advertisement communication effects of animated spokes-character on consumers' purchase intentions. The majority of relevant research on animated spokes-characters focuses on the relationships of brands, advertising, and consumption effects between children and animated spokes-characters (Zheng, 2000; Chen, 2000; Ke, 2004). Apart from children-oriented research, studies discuss no more than the effects brought by animated spokes-characters, leaving the focus on the antecedents rarely touched.

In other words, most research examines the relationship between animated spokes-characters and advertisement effectiveness, but discussions on the antecedents impacting advertisement effectiveness of animated spokes-characters is lacking, namely the critical factors of animated spokes-character that can influence consumers (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004). Which factors can trigger a preference of the endorsed products, resulting in purchase intentions, still remained to be determined, as do the circumstances that result in the successful advertisement effectiveness of products endorsed by animated spokes-characters. According to the background information, the objectives of this study are organized as follows:

(1) Establish the primary antecedents that influence the advertisement effectiveness of animated spokes-characters, and analyze whether the extent consumers like the products is affected by the antecedents and influences of advertisement effectiveness.
(2) Determine the advertisement effectiveness of animated spokes-characters and whether their influence varies with different involvement levels.
(3) Examine the correlations between advertisement effectiveness and consumers' purchase intentions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advertisement effectiveness

Advertisement effectiveness was measured using the sales and communication effect (Chow et al., 1992). Excluding those factors, other influences that also affect sales include prices, packaging design, distribution, quality, and promotions. Therefore, the sales volume is suitable for measuring advertisement effectiveness. More also, communication effects investigate the potential impacts of specific advertisement messages on consumers' cognition and preferences, evaluating the communication between the messages and the clients. Because communication effects are measurable, many scholars have used communication effects (products, advertisements, and brand attitudes) as a benchmark to measure advertisement effectiveness (Friedman and Friedman, 1979; Mowen and Brown, 1981; Lo, 2000; Chen, 2001; Chiang, 2000).

Spokesperson effectiveness

Most relevant research used celebrities, experts, chief executive officers, and typical consumer spokespersons as subjects. Spokesperson-related research can generally be classified into two major categories, the source-credibility and the source-attractiveness model. The most representative model contains the three major dimensions proposed by Ohanian in 1990, and these are expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. Expertise is defined as the professional knowledge, training and experience of the products that the message communicators should possess. Trustworthiness refers to the believability of the messages communicated by the spokesperson to the receivers during the advertisement process. Attractiveness is the ability of spokespersons to attract audience attention.

In recent years, numerous corporations continuously design animated characters (such as Qoo of Qoo Juice, Ah Long of Taiwan Life, Pukii Pig of Shanghai Commercial and Savings Bank, and Open-chan of Seven-Eleven) as spokespersons for company-owned brands and products. The reason for this is that animated spokes-characters can convey a personality and impression to consumers the way humans do (Callcott and Phillips, 1996). However, most research discusses the effects of the animated spokes-characters, and very few focus on the antecedents.

Callcott and Alvey (1991) and Callcott and Phillips (1996) determined three major elements that explain why animated spokes-characters are popular: relevance to products, expertise, and nostalgia. Callcott and Alvey

(1991) discovered that the reason animated spokes-characters had better advertisement effectiveness is the nostalgia they possess. Manufacturers usually propose nostalgic slogans to arouse consumers' memory, making consumers recall the old times. They also want to trigger the use of endorsed products via consumers' trust in animated spokes-characters (Neeley et al., 2000). For example, the famous U.S. brands, Pillsbury Doughboy and The Jolly Green Giant, have become brand icons that can arouse positive emotions and recall from consumers. Relevance to products refers to when consumers can easily connect product features with the features of animated spokes-characters, stimulating the effect of matching (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004). For example, the physical appearance of the Michelin Man is easily associated with the advertised products. Expertise refers to when the animated spokes-characters are exclusively designed for certain brands; they serve as experts to explain and demonstrate products (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004). For example, Mr. Clean serves as a cleaning expert, introducing a series of cleaning supplies; Toucan Sam is the expert of Kellogg's fruit cereal, following its nose to search for relevant information about fruit cereals.

Brown and Stayman (1992) suggested that a consumer's liking for an advertisement may be an effective indicator to measure advertisement effectiveness. Callcott and Phillips (1996) discovered that advertisements endorsed by animated characters were more popular than other advertisement types. Hawkins et al. (1998) believed that advertisements must be to the consumer's liking, so they searched for relevant information and trial endorsed products after receiving messages. Therefore, this research considers consumer liking as an intervening variable of advertisement effectiveness. In other words, the key antecedents possessed by animated spokes-characters can predetermine the liking levels of consumers, affecting the subsequent advertisement's effectiveness.

Involvement levels

The involvement of consumers can impact the advertisement effectiveness when they are stimulated by advertising, influencing their attitudes and impressions of endorsed products. The three involvement levels are involvement with advertisements, involvement with products, and involvement with purchase decisions (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Different levels of involvement cause variances in the attitudes and behavior demonstrated by consumers in response to advertisement messages. A considerable number of theories exist to explain how advertisements influence and persuade consumers. The commonly applied theory is the elaboration likelihood model (ELM), proposed by Petty and Cacioppo in 1981. The research of Petty and Cacioppo (1981) indicated that a high level of involvement encouraged people to give increased thought to the message content. Conversely, under a low level of involvement, whether viewers or listeners were willing to accept a message was unrelated to the content of the message, but determined by whether the message source was attractive to them or by the number of arguments. Callcot and Phillips (1996) indicated that when consumers purchase inexpensive products with a low level of involvement and limited brand differentiation, they are more easily influenced by animated spokes-characters.

This research primarily aimed to study the advertising effects of animated spokes-characters. When the recipients of advertisements have a higher level of involvement with the advertised products, they are more attentive to the product attributes and information provided. If the advertisement message is strong and effective, viewers or listeners easily develop a positive attitude toward the advertised product. Conversely, if viewers or listeners have a low level of involvement, they may focus on factors not directly related to the product, such as the credibility of the animated spokes-character or its attributes and attractiveness. This study incorporated high and low levels of involvement into the questionnaire designed, and investigated whether these factors influence the advertising effects of animated spokes-characters and consumers' willingness to purchase the advertised product.

METHODOLOGY

Research framework

This study conducted two pretests. The first pretest aimed to understand the product involvement levels of consumers and select a representative animated spokes-character. The first pretest also investigated the possible antecedents of advertisement effectiveness of animated spokes-characters via exploratory research. In the second pretest, the key dimensions of antecedents that affect the advertisement effectiveness of animated spokes-characters were established. This research aims to understand the relationships between the antecedents of advertisement effectiveness and levels of consumer liking of animated characters, as well as the impacts on the advertisement effectiveness and purchase intentions triggered by consumer liking levels. The conceptual framework of this paper is shown in Figure 1.

Description of questionnaire design

The pretest comprises two sections. The first section is open-ended questions, aiming to investigate the possible reasons that animated spokes-characters attract subjects. The second section is questions to question subjects on their impressions of famous animated spokes-characters in Taiwan, and select animated spokes-character candidates for the formal questionnaire. The pretest candidates are Tatung baby of Tatung, Kuai Kuai of Kuai Kuai, Ah Long of Taiwan Life, Prince Instant Noodles of Ve Wong, Little Dummy of Lucky (Lucky Flute Wafer), Qoo of Qoo Juice, Bird Hitachi of Hitachi Appliances, Open-chan of Seven-Eleven, and Mr. Chunghwa of Chunghwa Telecom. After calculating the frequency of selection by the respondents, Tatung Baby was the highest high-involvement animated character, while Kuai Kuai was the highest low-involvement animated character.
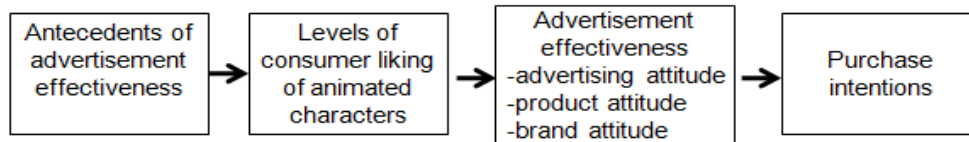
Figure 1. Research framework.

The second pretest comprised 32 questions, which sourced from antecedents obtained from relevant research on spokespersons and animated spokes-characters and opinions of respondents collected in the first pretest. Following completion of the second pretest questionnaire, 405 effective questionnaires were collected. After eliminating the questions with low reliability, 13 questions remained. After conducting factor analysis on the 13 questions, the eigenvalues of three factors were greater than 1. This study denominated factors with a factor loading greater than 0.6. The three factors were characteristic attraction, nostalgia, and trustworthiness. The reliability coefficients of these three factors were above 0.7, indicating that the internal reliabilities for the three factors were high. The names of each factor and the reliability analysis data were organized in Table 1.

The formal questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section (13 questions) focused on the possible reasons consumers might be affected by the messages communicated by animated spokes-characters. The second section (18 questions) examined the advertisement communication effect and purchase intentions produced by animated spokes-characters. The third section (5 questions) questioned respondents' demographic variables.

Hypotheses to be verified

H_1: A significant correlation exists between the antecedent potential factors and consumers' liking.
H_{1a} Significant positive correlation exists between characteristic attraction and consumers' liking.
H_{1b} Significant positive correlation exists between nostalgia and consumers' liking.
H_{1c} Significant positive correlation exists between trustworthiness and consumers' liking.

H_2: A significant correlation exists between consumers' liking and the advertisement communication effect.
H_{2a} Significant positive correlation exists between consumers' liking and advertising attitude.
H_{2b} Significant positive correlation exists between consumers' liking and product attitude.
H_{2c} Significant positive correlation exists between consumers' liking and brand attitude.

H_3: The advertisement communication effect is significant correlated with purchase intentions.
H_{3a} Significant correlation exists between advertisement communication effects and purchase intentions.
H_{3b} With different product involvements, the advertisement communication effects of animated spokes-characters has significantly different impacts on purchase intentions.

Empirical analysis

Background information of the subjects

This research distributed 400 questionnaires and collected 387 effective questionnaires. Among the samples, the gender proportion was almost even with 49.35 male and 50.65% female. The largest age groups were the categories of 20 to 29, comprising 36.69% of the sample size. In terms of education levels, the largest group was college/university, comprising 66.67%.The largest group of monthly income or allowance was 15,840 TWD and below, comprising 30.49% of the sample size. Finally, due to sampling difficulty regarding occupation, the largest occupational type was students, comprising 28.42% of the sample size.

Structural equation modeling analysis

According to the research framework, the model has three exogenous potential variables, namely antecedent potential factors (characteristic attraction, nostalgia, and trustworthiness), five endogenous potential variables, namely advertisement effectiveness (advertising, product, and brand attitudes), liking and purchase intentions, 13 exogenous observed variables (X1- X13), and 19 endogenous potential variables (Y1- Y19). Table 2 shows the organized data. This research employed the maximum likelihood method to conduct the modeling estimation. The structural equation modeling fits are shown in Table 3.

RESULTS

Relationships between the potential variables

According to Table 4, significant positive correlations were found between the two antecedent potential factors, characteristic attraction and trustworthiness, and liking, which match the research hypothesis. Therefore, H_{1a} and H_{1c} of this study are proven by the empirical evidence. Of the hypotheses, the effective coefficients of characteristic attraction are higher (0.536 and 0.680) than that of the other factors, indicating that animated spokes-characters with high characteristic attraction can result in higher levels of liking from respondents. Regarding nostalgia and liking, a significant positive correlation was found between the nostalgia caused by Tatung Baby and respondents' liking. Conversely, the nostalgia variable in Kuai Kuai is not significant, meaning that even though Kuai Kuai does induce nostalgia in the subjects, the nostalgia does not enhance their likings of Kuai Kuai. The influence of the characteristic attraction of these two animated characters is greater than that of their trustworthiness and nostalgia-inducing factors.

Also, concerning consumers' liking and advertisement communication effects, Table 4 indicates a significant positive correlation between liking and advertisement communication effects (advertising, product, and brand attitudes). The coefficients of the three dimensions are all higher than 0.9. This result matches what Brown and

Table 1. Antecedent denominations of animated spokes-characters and reliability analysis.

Factor	Question	Factor loading	Cronbach α
Characteristic attraction	Appearance characteristics of animated spokes-characters attract my attention.	0.770	0.89
	The lovely personality of animated spokes-characters can increase my liking of them.	0.761	
	Theme songs of animated spokes-characters trigger my preference.	0.730	
	I like animated spokes-characters because they are humorous and funny.	0.680	
	Visual images of animated spokes-characters in advertisements can concentrate my attention on the products.	0.657	
	Animated spokes-characters make people happy.	0.653	
	Cute appearances of animated spokes-character always attract my attention.	0.630	
	I like animated spokes-characters because they are always delightful.	0.601	
Nostalgia	Animated spokes-characters stimulate my nostalgia.	0.871	0.87
	When I see animated spokes-characters, I think of times past.	0.866	
	Animated spokes-characters make me recall my childhood.	0.812	
Trustworthiness	I trust the endorsed products because of the famous animated spokes-characters.	0.785	0.70
	I believe all the animated spokes-characters are sincere and honest.	0.766	

Source: Data collected and organized by this study.

Table 2. The structural equation modeling variables.

	Potential variable	Variable-measured question	Observed variable
Exogenous	Characteristic attraction	8	X1- X8
	Nostalgia	3	X9- X11
	Trustworthiness	2	X12-X13
Endogenous	Liking	1	Y1
	Advertising attitude	6	Y2-Y7
	Product attitude	5	X8- X12
	Brand attitude	5	X13-X17
	Purchase intention	2	X18-X19

Source: Data collected and organized by this study.

Stayman (1992) proposed, namely that liking is the optimal index to measure advertisement effectiveness. Therefore, H_{2a}, H_{2b}, and H_{2c} of this study corresponded to the empirical evidence. Furthermore, regarding advertisement communication effects and purchase intensions, even

Table 3. The structural equation modeling fits.

Variable	Description	Indices	Threshold	Result
Absolute fit	Assessing whether the theoretical model can predict the observed co-variances or levels of the correlation matrix	χ^2test	P>0.05	4118.645
		x^2 / df	<3	2.98
		GFI	>0.9	0.847
		RMR	<0.05	0.054
		RMSEA	<0.05 extremely excellent	0.036
Incremental fit	Comparing the theoretical model with a stricter and basic baseline model to measure the amended ratio of fits	NFI	>0.9	0.826
		CFI	>0.9	0.876
		IFI	>0.9	0.877
Parsimonious fit	Calculating the estimated coefficients to reach certain levels of model fits	PGFI	>0.5	0.737
		PNFI	>0.5	0.765
		PCFI	>0.5	0.812

Source: Data collected and organized by this study.

Table 4. Coefficients of potential variables.

Relationship between the potential variable	Tatung Baby		Kuai Kuai	
	Coefficient	P-value	Coefficient	P-value
Liking←Characteristic Attraction	0.536	0.000**	0.680	0.000**
Liking ←Nostalgia	0.091	0.007**	0.039	0.196
Liking ←Trustworthiness	0.230	0.000**	0.215	0.000**
Advertising Attitude←Liking	0.985	0.000**	0.988	0.000**
Product Attitude←Liking	0.947	0.000**	0.992	0.000**
Brand Attitude←Liking	0.985	0.000**	0.989	0.000**
Purchase Intention ←Advertising Attitude	-0.170	0.757	-1.749	0.051
Purchase Intention←Product Attitude	0.258	0.291	1.346	0.323
Purchase Intention←Brand Attitude	0.752	0.177	1.267	0.193

Source: Data collected and organized by this study. *P< 0.05; **p<0.01.

though respondents possess a positive attitude towards the advertisements endorsed by both the animated characters, they fail to increase their purchase intentions. Therefore, H_{3a} of this study does not correspond with the empirical evidence. And since H_{3a} was not supported by empirical evidence, it failed to prove significant differences existed between advertisement communication effects and purchase intentions with different levels of involvement. H_{3b} also subsequently does not correspond with the empirical evidence.

Relationships between the observed and potential variables

This study accessed contributions of observed variables in each dimension via relationships between the coefficients of observed variables and potential dimensions.

According to the data in Table 5, the coefficients of observed variables designed by this research are statistically significant; regarding the characteristic attraction of antecedent potential factors. Generally, X5 and X7 are influential factors in both models.

Regarding nostalgia, the nostalgia coefficients of Tatung Baby were higher than Kuai Kuai, thus Tatung Baby can trigger consumers' memories and increase nostalgia more effectively than Kuai Kuai can. Regarding trustworthiness, Tatung Baby can communicate a higher level of trustworthiness to consumers' than its counterpart can. Regarding advertising attitudes and advertisement communication effects, the trustworthiness coefficients of Tatung baby are higher than that of Kuai Kuai. The reason for this may be the involvement levels. Generally, the respondents tend to pay more attention to high-involvement products, thus Tatung Baby can trigger more positive advertising attitudes. Regarding product attitude,

Table 5. Relationships between the observed variables and potential variables.

Relationships Between the Potential Variables	Tatung Baby		Kuai Kuai	
	Coefficients	P value	Coefficients	P value
X1 Humorous ←characteristic attraction	0.636		0.622	
X2 Features ←characteristic attraction	0.701	0.000**	0.619	0.000**
X3 Joyful ←characteristic attraction	0.698	0.000**	0.675	0.000**
X4 Appearance ←characteristic attraction	0.720	0.000**	0.691	0.000**
X5 Delighted ←characteristic attraction	0.731	0.000**	0.715	0.000**
X6 Attention ←characteristic attraction	0.567	0.000**	0.563	0.000**
X7 Lovely ←characteristic attraction	0.718	0.000**	0.711	0.000**
X8 Theme song ←characteristic attraction	0.237	0.000**	0.232	0.000**
X9 Childhood ←nostalgia	0.627	0.000**	0.653	0.000**
X10 Recall ←nostalgia	0.820	0.000**	0.782	0.000**
X11 Memory ←nostalgia	0.820	0.000**	0.804	0.000**
X12 Honest ←trustworthiness	0.715	0.000**	0.708	0.000**
X13 Integrity ←trustworthiness	0.786		0.774	
Y2 Attractiveness ←advertising attitude	0.663		0.616	
Y3 More information ←advertising attitude	0.681	0.000**	0.658	0.000**
Y4 Interesting ←advertising attitude	0.568	0.000**	0.563	0.000**
Y5 Impressive ←advertising attitude	0.628	0.000**	0.564	0.000**
Y6 Persuasive ←advertising attitude	0.784	0.000**	0.688	0.000**
Y7 Believable ←advertising attitude	0.693	0.000**	0.640	0.000**
Y8 Enjoy ←product attitude	0.663		0.626	
Y9 Satisfied ←product attitude	0.714	0.000**	0.693	0.000**
Y10 Wise ←product attitude	0.717	0.000**	0.711	0.000**
Y11 Liking ←product attitude	0.637	0.000**	0.576	0.000**
Y12 Joyful ←product attitude	0.629	0.000**	0.594	0.000**
Y13 Catchy ←brand attitude	0.541		0.483	
Y14 Trust ←brand attitude	0.678	0.000**	0.664	0.000**
Y15 Good brands ←brand attitude	0.608	0.000**	0.608	0.000**
Y16 Preference ←brand attitude	0.604	0.000**	0.616	0.000**
Y17 Image ←brand attitude	0.684	0.000**	0.630	0.000**
Y18 Worth buying ←purchase intention	0.780		0.753	
Y19 Consider to buy ←purchase intention	0.770	0.000**	0.745	0.000**

Note:*p<0.05; **p< 0.01.

the subjects who are satisfied with the products endorsed by Tatung Baby and believe that adopting the endorsed products is a wise option can increase their positive product attitude. Regarding brand attitude, the observed variables of Y17 and Y14 have higher contributions. In terms of purchase intentions, the observed variable of Y18 has a higher contribution than Y19.

DISCUSSION

The research results proved that a positive correlation existed between the antecedents and consumers' liking of animated characters, supporting the results by Callcott and Alvey (1991) and Callcott and Phillips (1996), which states that consumers hold more positive opinions on the antecedents of animated spokes-characters, resulting in higher levels of liking of the characters. In the empirical results of the observed and potential variables, the descriptions of "joyful," "cute appearance," "lovely personality" are comparatively higher than for Kuai Kuai. Therefore, manufactures can consider those factors when designing their animated spokespersons to increase consumers' liking.

Regarding nostalgia, the study assumes that consumers attracted by the animated characters increase their liking, triggering their trust in the characters as well as the products. In other words, consumers do not feel the characters themselves to be sincere and honest. In a broad sense, the characteristic attraction of these two animated characters has a greater impact on consumers than trustworthiness and nostalgia do. Also, as regards the

relationship between consumers' liking and advertisement communication effect, this study proves that positive and significant correlations are found between consumers' liking and advertisement communication effects (advertising, product, and brand attitudes).

Obviously, higher levels of liking can result in better advertisement communication effects. Additionally, consumers' liking is definitely influential on the advertisement communication effect. For the relationship between the advertisement communication effect and purchase intentions, advertising, product, and brand attitudes are not significantly correlated with purchase intentions. In other words, positive opinions toward the advertisement may not result in purchase intention increasing.

Conclusion

This study therefore suggests that consumers are affected by animated spokes-characters, increasing the advertisement communication effect. However, product and brand values are essential reasons for making purchase decisions. Hence, regardless of high- or low-involvement products, consumers consider their real demands when purchasing products.

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