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MARKETING DESTINATION ZIMBABWE DURING AND POST THE 2000-2008 POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISES

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ABSTRACT

Consequences of political and economic crises on tourist destinations are profound and inescapable. This paper discusses the 2000-2008 political and economic crisis issue in Zimbabwe in relation to the tourism industry. The 2000-2008 political and economic environment was characterised by political stand- off among the three major political parties, heightened negative publicity, shortages of basic commodities, hyperinflation and isolation of Zimbabwe by the international community. During the height of this crisis, international visitors declined sharply and hotels reported a one digit occupancy figure triggering a tourism crisis. This paper has some significance, as the tourism industry was greatly affected by the political and economic instability. Yet the overall marketing and promotional strategies adopted by stakeholders during and post the crisis to put the tourism industry on the recovery path have been rather minimal. The study used secondary sources of data and netnography to collect data. The article argues that tourist destinations that are prone to political and economic instabilities should be pro-active and device novel marketing strategies to reassure prospective tourists of the safety of the destination. The study revealed that destination Zimbabwe re-engaged with the western markets, courted the Asian market, bid to host high profile events and sought destination endorsement as a cocktail of practical marketing strategies to revive the tourism sector. Recommendations include collaborative marketing campaigns fronted by political leaders, activation of tourism police service and partnering with embassies to ensure visitor`s safety. Future research is suggested at micro level and industry sub-sector level like hotels and tour operators on how they individually market their products during a crisis period.

Keywords: Political and economic crisis, Tourism industry, Zimbabwe tourism authority, Marketing strategies, Hotel sector, Western markets, Asian market, Zimbabwe.

Contribution/ Originality

Few studies to date have investigated marketing strategies employed during and post political and economic crises. The findings of this study can be viewed as a preliminary step towards greater comprehension of tourism crisis-related marketing strategies for tourist

destinations. There are numerous studies that have investigated the impact of tourism crisis at various tourism destinations, however, this is the first study to the author`s knowledge that examines the marketing strategies used during and after a tourism crisis of political and economic nature in a developing country. The article also contributes to the tourism management literature by broadening the research methodology focusing more on secondary data and netnography sources, which in itself is a departure from previous studies.

1.   INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is undoubtedly one of the most viable global economic sectors, yet it is also one of the most susceptible and vulnerable to crises (Pforr, 2009). Numerous exogenous variables like weather, the political and economic environment, and currency exchange rates impact on the tourism sector (Cassedy, 1992; Okumus *et al.*, 2005; Pforr, 2009). Every day, the media is full of negative reports from all over the world (Marra, 1998). A perceived safe and secure tourist destination naturally appeal to tourists, however, when a crisis takes place tourists shun the destination (Mansfeld and Pizam, 2006). To date, the issue of managing and dealing with tourism disasters has largely focused on natural disasters. Yet political and economic crises can potentially have longer and further reaching consequences on the marketing of a destination. The net effect of continued and sustained media exposure to riots, scarcity of basic commodities, stratosphere inflation and political stand-offs can carry on for a much longer period of time potentially having a more sustained ramification on the perceived tourism destination image. Africa in general has had many political and economic crises such as in North Africa where there have been uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Central Africa has earned itself the notorious phrase the ever boiling pot of Africa because of the incessant and periodic flare-ups of political upheavals. Madagascar, Mozambique, Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo are also cases in point which have gone through political and economic crises. These dramatic negative events can threaten, weaken or complete destroy the competitive advantage of a tourist destination (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). In southern Africa, Zimbabwe has had a rough political and economic patch from 2000 up to sometime in 2008, when a government of national unity was brokered to salvage the political and economic crisis that had engulfed the country. The focus of this paper is to examine how the Zimbabwean tourism fraternity managed the marketing of the tourism industry during and in the aftermath of the 2000-2008 political and economic crises, as well as facing an image which is inimical to attracting discretionary tourism. The political violence and economic challenges facing the country then were extensively and intensively reported in the international media. Given the media`s predisposition to cover conflict and crisis and its tendency to magnify them, the political and economic crisis was easily magnified resulting in rash postponements and cancellations of groups and individual bookings.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON ZIMBABWE`S TOURISM SECTOR

In the 1990s, Zimbabwe experienced the most successful year for inbound tourism largely from the traditional source markets. The country capitalised on the political and economic peace that were obtaining in the country. The country`s tourism sector grew phenomenally courtesy of the marketing efforts of the national tourism lead agency, that is, Zimbabwe Tourism Authority (ZTA) and the sector was showing every sign of success. Until 1998, inbound tourism to Zimbabwe had breached the 2.2 million mark (Zimbabwe Tourism Authority Annual Report, 2008). The majestic Victoria Falls, the big five, the imposing and antique Great Zimbabwe ruins and the giant Lake Kariba and dam wall were the selling points hence became the trump cards for the success/growth of Zimbabwe`s tourism sector. When it was announced that South Africa had won the bid to host the FIFA 2010 World Cup tourism players in Zimbabwe were confident that 2010 would be the most successful year ever for tourism. The surge in growth of tourism was ominously curtailed in 1999 when the Zimbabwe government initiated the land reform program which was not well received by the international community especially western countries. Ironically these countries happened to be the key source markets for Zimbabwe`s tourism sector. The failure by the Zimbabwe government to reach a mutually acceptable agreement with Britain, its former colonial power inflamed the already battered political and economic relations between the two countries.

The opposition political parties weighed in making fodder of the government`s fast track land reform. The progressive world allegedly at the behest of Britain slapped Zimbabwe with economic sanctions and the political environment was never the same again. The disputed elections and the attendant violence as well as the intensive and sometimes distorted coverage by the international media led to an immediate and adverse impact on tourism to Zimbabwe. In some cases the impact was compounded by the actions of western governments particularly the US, Britain, Australia and Japan, who took the extreme measure of advising their nationals to avoid travel to Zimbabwe. The ramification of the reduction in tourist numbers to Zimbabwe was catastrophic. The tourism sector literally came to a halt. Ironically, while Zimbabwe`s tourism sector was in doldrums, tourism traffic to neighbouring South Africa increased markedly. While Zimbabwe tourism authorities and operators alike could legitimately claim that most regions of the country were unaffected by political violence, the same could not be said on the economic challenges that were engulfing the country through shortages of basic commodities.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature abounds with an increasing number of disasters and crises which affect the tourism industry, such crises range from human-influenced to natural incidents (Faulkner, 2001). Very recently, the global tourism phenomenon experienced numerous crises and disasters notable terrorist attacks, tsunamis, earthquakes, volcanoes, economic recessions, and political instability. Faulkner (2001) and Ritchie (2004) content that there is a dearth of research on the impacts, and marketing of tourist destinations affected by such events. Further, research on the impacts of such

events fails to take a detailed examination of the spill over repercussions on other adjacent and nearby tourist destinations. Previous research has also often ignored the positive outcomes induced by such crises on the actual tourist destination as well as other countries or places that are economically, politically and geographically tied to the tourist destination where the crisis would have occurred. Worthy mentioning are the works of Burnett (1998); Faulkner (2001); Kash and Darling (1998) who noted the ability of tourism crises to have a transformative effect on the tourist destination. Scott *et al.* (2007) argued that tourist destinations are networks of stakeholders that may be reconfigured into more efficient structures following a crisis. In the medium to long haul, these tourist destinations may as well capture the benefits of the displaced tourism demand, heightened media attention, and may even develop a new product (Peters and Pikkemaat, 2005; Williams and Ferguson, 2005).

This article therefore sets out to examine the marketing of destination Zimbabwe during and after the economic and political crisis of 2000 to 2008. Even though there was insignificant effect on the country`s tourism infrastructure, international tourists` perceptions of the crisis and the attendant safety and security risks altered patterns of demand. This is in tandem with findings from similar studies of crisis and disasters (Young and Montgomery, 1998; Armstrong and Ritchie, 2007; Kozak *et al.*, 2007). The (Zimbabwe Investment Authority, 2014) (ZIA) estimates that the economic impact of the 2000-2008 political and economic crisis on the country`s tourism sector is in the region of USD10 billion of potential revenue, not factoring in employment loss and a battered image of the country. Therefore, this article focuses on marketing during and after the crisis, which have been ignored to date in past research. The article also highlights the utility of secondary sources and netnography sources of data.

4. TOURISM CRISIS AND DISASTERS

A tourism crisis and disaster are terms which can be used interchangeably (Kim and E., 1998), whilst Faulkner (2001) posited that a distinction between a crisis and disaster lies on the extent to which the situation is attributable to the organisation itself, or can be described as originating from outside the organisation. Scott and Law (2005) concur with this view. According to Prideaux *et al.* (2003) a crisis is caused by lack of management planning, and therefore could have been anticipated, whereas a disaster can only be responded to well after the event, and human involvement, therefore, can only be reactive.

Crises to some appreciable extent can be controlled and are within the influence of managers, whilst tourism disasters are largely external and more unpredictable (Faulkner, 2001; Faulkner and Vikulov, 2001). This is supported by Prideaux *et al.* (2003) "...disasters can be described as unpredictable catastrophic change that can normally only be responded to after the event, either by deploying contingency plans already in place or through reactive response". Hill (1998) further suggested that from an emergency planning perspective, disasters are spontaneous and overwhelming phenomena that occur for a limited duration in a distinct location. It takes a significant amount of time after a disaster for a tourist destination to recover. In 1999, the

Zimbabwe government embarked upon a land reform program and this triggered a political and economic crisis. The political and economic challenges therefore could be classified as a crisis. Depending on the unit of analysis and system used to explore the ramifications of the political and economic challenge, this disaster for the tourism sector may have been a crisis due to inept planning at a destination or specific subsector or organisational level. Disasters or crises in other industries could have an impact on the tourism system because of its interdependence and linkage with those industries or negative image associated with a particular destination.

5. DISASTER MANAGEMENT STUDIES

The proliferation and far reaching impacts of disasters and crises at tourist destinations has led to more recent tourism related research. To mention just a few (Pine and McKercher, 2004; Evans and Elphick, 2005; Fall and Massey, 2005). Most of the focus has been on natural hazards and disasters, including hurricanes (Chandler, 2004; Higgins, 2005; Sharpley, 2005; Carlsen, 2006); (Huang and Min, 2002; Ciocco and Michael, 2007). Other researchers have explored diseases amplifying on Foot and Mouth in the United Kingdom, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARs) in the Asia-Pacific (Sharpley, 2000; Coles, 2003; Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; AKM *et al.*, 2005; Kim *et al.*, 2005; Rodway-Dyer and Shaw, 2005; Williams and Ferguson, 2005; Zeng *et al.*, 2005; Williams and Ferguson, 2006) However, limited research has been carried out on marketing initiatives during and in the aftermath of a political and economic crisis in a developing country. Further, there is non-usage of secondary data sets and netnograghy.

6. METHODOLOGY

Almost all tourism researches are based on the analysis of primary data. Whilst there is a plausible reason for such a tradition since it furnishes the researcher with direct knowledge, the use of secondary data analysis and netnography have also become a widely employed methods for data collection. In secondary and netnography data analysis, analysis can be done based on data available in classical statistics, published articles, national tourism organisation websites, marketing research reports, or the original data source (Church, 2001). Saunders *et al.* (2000); Churchill (1995); and Pizam (1994) concur that secondary data is a useful data source for tourism research, provided data are reliable, valid and can address the research questions. Reliability entails the extent to which data can provide consistent results for the purpose of the research whilst validity refers to the degree upon which the results of the data analysis accurately reflects the specific concept or predicts the criterion the researcher is attempting to measure (Pizam, 1994).

Data for analysis were acquired from three secondary sources. Each year the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, Hospitality Association of Zimbabwe and the Zimbabwe Investment Authority of Zimbabwe collects performance data and marketing activities in the tourism industry for more than 10000 tourism players representing all the registered operators in Zimbabwe. These data are provided by operators themselves including chain groups,

management companies` owners, and independent operators who subsequently employ these quarterly and annual reports to benchmark their performance against the competition on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. The use of secondary data sources from these three sources was considered by the researcher to have a high degree of validity and reliability, as these data sources were the most appropriate to address the research questions related to marketing initiatives during and post the 2000-2008 political and economic crisis in Zimbabwe.

7. RESULTS

7.1. Zimbabwe`s Tourism Authorities` Marketing Response

The cumulative impact of the 2000-2008 political and economic events resulted in Zimbabwe tourism sector thinking outside the box and confront the strongly ingrained international perception that Zimbabwe had become a pariah state hence dangerous and to be avoided. With a vast and relatively uncensored local and international media presence in Zimbabwe, events in the country attracted a far higher level of coverage than almost anywhere in the world. The virtual absence of content control means that events in Zimbabwe were subjected to a far more sensationalist spin coverage from other countries in the region. During the political and economic crisis two main aspects of the nature of media reporting of phenomena in Zimbabwe have been especially damaging to tourism, firstly, the false impression extrapolated by isolated and localised incidents that the whole country was enmeshed in political violence, and secondly that the Zimbabwe political and economic crisis was embroiling the entire Southern Africa region. The first of these impressions greatly impaired and tainted Zimbabwe`s image as a tourist destination, and the second benefited numerous of Zimbabwe`s near and more distant neighbours. South Africa`s tourism industry which is closely linked with Zimbabwe, has been a prime benefactor. To this end the Zimbabwe tourism fraternity undertook a number of marketing initiatives to deal with Zimbabwe`s image problem accentuated by the political and economic crisis.

7.2. Perception Management Taskforce

The 2000-2008 crises resulted in a bad perception about Zimbabwe due to negative publicity. As a marketing measure, the authorities set up and assembled a task force on perception management as a way of diluting the negative publicity the country was receiving. The international news channels like the Cable News Network (CNN) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Fox news spewed negative vitriol on Zimbabwe as an unsafe tourist destination which any serious tourist should avoid. The taskforce targeted the same news channels to broadcast the Zimbabwean story from the Zimbabwean lens. The task force aimed at delivering a counter message to the risky tag on destination Zimbabwe. This went a long way to tone down the bad reportage that was being churned out on Zimbabwe as pariah state.

7.3. Re-engagement with the International Community

During the political and economic crisis Zimbabwe tourism operators sought to re-engage in dialogue with the key source markets particularly Europe and North America. Political leaders took the initiative fronted by the Tourism and Hospitality Industry minister. The prime objective was not to completely lose out these markets since they represent the tourism sector`s cash cow. On the spending front these markets are well known for being high spenders. Since the isolation of Zimbabwe emanated from a bilateral dispute between Britain and Zimbabwe, it was prudent for national leaders to take up this initiative so as to normalise the strained relations. This initiative continued well after the 2000-2008 crises, since more effort was put to try and increase arrivals from these markets during the Government of National Unity (GNU) period. The initiative paid off since international arrivals peaked moderately. These countries later on lifted travel warnings they had earlier on issued against travel to Zimbabwe. Key countries which were targeted include Britain, the US, Germany, Japan, France, New Zealand and Australia.

7.4. Asian Market and ADS Status from China: Developing New Long Haul Source Markets

Zimbabwe tourism sector had experienced an uninterrupted growth riding on the back of the western market until the land reform programme in 1999. As a result of the declining number of tourists from western markets, Zimbabwe explored the new Asian market in which she made significant head start. Targeting the emerging markets like China, India and a host of other Asian Tigers, Zimbabwe sought to plug the gap of dwindling tourism traffic from Europe and North America. This seemed to have paid off as evidenced by the subsequent granting of an approved destination status (ADS) to Zimbabwe by China in 2004.

7.5. Opening up New Tourist Information Offices in Asia

During the height of the 2000-2008 crisis Zimbabwe sets her eyes on the Asian market. Following this move tourist information offices were opened as a way of trying to disseminate information to prospective tourists on what is on offer in Zimbabwe. This created awareness among the promising Asian market. Subsequent to this, the Asian economic powerhouse, China granted Zimbabwe an approved destination status, which was a shot in the arm for Zimbabwe`s tourism sector. Organised tour groups specially arranged under this dispensation saw an increase in tourist arrivals from the East. Alongside upping the number of tourist information offices the authorities also lured airline carriers which had pulled out to ply destination Zimbabwe, and this saw positive results since more airlines are coming back with the first to fly the Zimbabwean skies being the United Arab Emirates Airline (UAEA).

7.6. Destination Endorsement by South Africa

Zimbabwe sought endorsement from South Africa, its regional competitor. This was done in the run up to the hosting of the FIFA 2010 World Cup. The destination endorsement sought to reassure the much anticipated visitors who thronged South Africa for the soccer

tournament/event that Zimbabwe was a safe tourist destination. This paid off as a marketing initiative. Traditionally, 30 per cent of all visitors to South Africa ends up spilling over to Zimbabwe and the assurance given to the market by South Africa that Zimbabwe was indeed safe helped the Zimbabwe tourism sector to realise some meaningful tourism business in the aftermath of the 2000-2008 crisis. It was also befitting for South Africa to endorse Zimbabwe on the strength that South Africa had superintended over the consummation of the GNU in Zimbabwe. Since South Africa had baby sit Zimbabwe`s political and economic challenges, she naturally had moral obligation to endorse the country as safe tourist destination.

7.7. Bidding and Hosting High Profile Events

Another marketing initiative in the aftermath of the crisis was that Zimbabwe bid and won the right to host firstly the Africa Travel Association (ATA) congress in early 2013 and late in the same year hosted the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) General Assembly again in Victoria Falls. These events were perfect windows to market and showcase Zimbabwe`s tourism offerings. They really helped put Zimbabwe firmly on the world tourism map. The negative perception was dealt a huge blow through the successful hosting of these high profile events. Besides, the country asserted itself as MICE destination which put itself in line for consideration in future in the hosting of similar events.

7.8. Upgrading and Updating of Website Information

Zimbabwe upgraded and updated information on the national tourism organisation website. Videos were also produced showcasing an array of Zimbabwe`s tourist attractions. The use of Chinese language, the addition of Chinese Day during the annual Sanganai/Hlanganani travel expo here in Zimbabwe reinforced and reflected the country`s new market focus.

7.9. Holding of Beauty Pageants and Friendly Soccer Tournaments

Zimbabwe through the ZTA came up with the concept of beauty pageantry as a marketing initiative. Miss Zimbabwe pageantry drew entrants from across the globe and the event is beamed live on hundreds of news channels showcasing Zimbabwe as a tourist destination. The models/contestants during the event are taken through all the prime tourist destinations where they sample the tourism product. This is believed to help in word of mouth advertising when these contestants return to their home countries. The influx of media personalities, audiences and publicity stunts associated with such a competition help putting the country on the tourism map. Soccer tournaments were also organised and played here in Zimbabwe between the national team, that is, warriors and Nigeria. The publicity associated with such teams, and the fans, help to market the country in the aftermath of the crisis. Beauty pageant promoted destination Zimbabwe as safe following the premise that if models/contestants are able to participate live it will bolster the efforts to promote destination Zimbabwe.

7.10. Upping Presence and Visibility at World Expos, WTB, ITB, Great Indaba, Shanghai Expo

Zimbabwe increased its visibility on all critical world travel expos particularly International Tourism Bureau (ITB), World Travel Mart (WTM), Shanghai Travel Expo, Great Indaba. Zimbabwe exhibited annually during and after the 2000-2008 crises at all these international trade expos. This enabled the country to have a platform to engage with buyers and intermediaries. Such platforms helped the country to market itself as a safe tourist destination. The ZTA took a lead in all this.

7.11. Zimbabwe, a World of Wonders, a Shift in Marketing Philosophy

Due to the challenging tourism landscape obtaining during the 2000-2008 crisis Zimbabwe came up with a new marketing strategy in which they sought to repackage and reposition Zimbabwe as a world of wonders. This was a shift from the earlier marketing philosophy anchored on the premise of Zimbabwe as Africa`s paradise. Publicity and marketing campaigns were mounted to try and reach the intended audience. Information was also conveyed via tour operators and travel agencies, brochures and other tourism paraphernalia. The former marketing orientation was discarded since it was no longer selling. The new and unique selling point became Zimbabwe, a world of wonders.

7.12. Familiarisation Tours

Zimbabwe also invited soccer personalities and other celebrities during and after the 2000-2008 crises to come to Zimbabwe and sample the Zimbabwean tourism product. This was meant to assist these personalities to market the country on return to their home countries. First hand information is critical to the success of the tourism sector and hence when these personalities report to their colleagues and friends it will be more credible than if it were from another source. Familiarisation tours were made in all the prime tourist destinations on the understanding that increasing in the number of travel industry educational tours would enable travel agents and trade press journalists to see Zimbabwe for themselves and report to colleagues and clients.

7.13. South Africa: Major Beneficiary

South Africa emerged as the major benefactor of Zimbabwe`s political and economic crisis. She benefited from cheap labour of migrants who crossed the border in droves seeking employment opportunities. She also benefited from trade since most of the goods were imported from South Africa. Its president being the mediator between the two Zimbabwean major political parties elevated South Africa`s public relations as a peace loving country. The upturns and downturns of the Zimbabwe tourist market have been increasingly reflected in South Africa which took advantage of the crisis and include the majestic Victoria Falls as part of its itinerary much to the chagrin of Zimbabwean tourism players. To this end, South Africa was a collateral beneficiary of Zimbabwe`s political and economic crisis.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As argued in this article, there have been a growing number of crises and disasters affecting the tourism industry, giving rise to a need to better understand the marketing initiatives of tourist destinations during and after such events. Although research related to this topic has grown over the last 10 years, studies are still mainly descriptive and rely on qualitative research or small quantitative studies (Ritchie, 2009). This study has attempted to address these shortcomings through the use of secondary data sets and netnography. In addition, research has often failed to assess the marketing initiatives during and after the event. A number of insights can be drawn from this study`s results that provide insights into the crisis in question. The use of beauty pageants and soccer tournaments was a departure from the norm as a marketing initiative. In addition, the increase of tourist information offices in a completely new market conforms to what other studies have established, for example, Beirmann (2002). South Africa emerged as the huge beneficiary of the Zimbabwe crisis. This confirms what Ritchie (2009) and Faulkner (2001) suggest that there are winners and losers in a tourism crisis/disaster. Destination endorsement emerged as a new marketing initiative in the aftermath of a tourist destination. Prior studies do not have this.

The study`s chief findings are heartening. The tourist destination in question made use of 10 marketing initiatives during and after the crisis. This far exceed the findings of Beirmann (2002) who reported that only 5, that is, travel industry educational trips, tourist information offices, press release updates, upgraded Internet sites, and developing long haul markets were used in his study. The current study established beauty pageants, soccer tournaments, destination endorsement, and a total shift in marketing philosophy as new and additional marketing initiatives. Also encouraging is this study`s finding of cooperation between two competitors in which one tourist destination vouches for its another in time of need through destination endorsement. In this case South Africa vouched for Zimbabwe by endorsing the latter as a safe tourist destination. The study`s results identified that educational trips, tourist information offices, courting of new markets were common marketing initiatives, hence these findings support the literature. However, in this study, re-engagement with the western market due to the uniqueness of the crisis, use of beauty pageants and soccer matches were completely new strategies implemented in the Zimbabwean case. These can also be adopted by other tourist destinations which would experience similar crises since these initiatives bore fruits for destination Zimbabwe.

As a result of this study, a number of potential research areas have been identified. First, there is merit in examining the marketing initiatives at a tourist destination during and after a political and economic crisis. Future research should move beyond mainly descriptive studies to look at organisational and sector specific sub-industry to ascertain their marketing initiatives, for example, hotels, lodges, tour operators, and travel agents.

Secondly, this study is a snapshot during and after a particular period of time. Future research should be longitudinal to examine the impacts of the marketing initiative during and in

the aftermath of crisis. In particular, it would be interesting to track how the market would respond to new marketing initiatives, changes in market perception, and level of visitation and even purpose of visit during and after the crisis.

Thirdly, future research should attempt to quantify the economic ramifications of the political and economic crisis to the economy of a tourist destination. This maybe so important for policy makers and hotel operators. Lastly, it is my hope that this research highlights the utility of secondary data and netnography`s usefulness in tourism research. To amplify further, as the global tourism industry gravitates towards internet marketing, this marketing channel becomes an enormous source of data to assess marketing initiatives by tourist destinations which would have gone through a crisis/disaster.

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