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## Brand Personalities across the Big Four: Positioning Leagues for Differentiation

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**Brand Personalities**

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**Brand Personalities across the Big Four:  
Positioning Leagues for Differentiation**

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**Abstract**

*The concept of brand personality (BP) has become a popular topic of study among academicians in the sport management field. The current study moves beyond the construct conceptualization and scale development of BP, and begins to investigate existing BP profiles for various professional sports (BPS). Specifically, this research examines the existing BPS dimensions across various Big Four professional leagues. The study utilized the BPS instrument (Braunstein & Ross, 2009) and MANOVA procedures to determine ratings of BP dimensions and any differences between sports. Results indicated that on the BPS factors that were measured (Success, Sophistication, Sincerity, Rugged, Community-Driven, Classic), sports differed on four of the six factors. For the factors that significantly differed by sport (Success, Sincerity, Rugged, and Classic), the majority of the highest mean scores associated with hockey and baseball. Conceptualizations and scale development of BPS will be discussed along with positioning and segmentation strategies for sport marketers. This paper begins to shift the focus from the concept of BPS to its application. As such, it fills an identified need to determine if there are differences in the “personalities” (i.e., characteristics) of leagues and, ultimately, how these elements can factor into sound and targeted marketing practices.*

A true test of effective communication is the consumer's clear and consistent understanding of the producer's (intended) message. According to Reis and Trout (1969), it is the marketer's role to alter the product in the consumer's mind rather than the product itself through the branding or "positioning" process. Evolving from the idea that marketing is most effective when the characteristics of the brand "match" those of the endorsers and/or consumers (e.g., Kamins, 1990; Lynch & Schuler, 1994), Aaker (1997) developed five dimensions of brand personality (BP; i.e., Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, Ruggedness) in order to strategically approach this process. Beyond Aaker's original development, academics have studied BP to determine its use and effectiveness in various circumstances (e.g., de Chernatony, 2001; Keller, 2003). As such, sport marketers have begun to adapt and adopt the study of brand personalities (i.e., brand personality in sport or BPS; Braunstein & Ross, 2009), or character traits associated with a product (both developed and perceived), in order to effectively understand and, therefore, communicate the sport brand. As a result of the crowded nature of the sport marketplace, ensuring that this message is appropriately received, and understood in the way it is intended, is often vital to the success of a sport entity.

### ***Brand Personality***

Brand personality (BP) has been defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347), and is often used to describe a brand in relation to human characteristics. It is obvious that a great number of different descriptors can be attributed to both brands as well as individuals. Such characteristics include, but are not limited to, sporty, hardworking, intelligent, or even "old school." Aaker (1997) suggests that a brand's uniqueness in terms of brand personality might be used as a means to increase brand awareness and attachment, in much the same way that individuals might attach to other people.

Brand personality can be conceptualized from two different perspectives (Plummer, 1985); brand position and brand identity. Brand position is the perspective of the individual consumer, and describes how these consumers interpret the brand (Gwin & Gwin,

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2003). This interpretation is how the consumer actually views the brand (Nandan, 2005), and is constructed through a variety of sources such as price, distribution outlets, geographic origins, and marketing campaigns established by the organization. In the sport context, previous research (Gladden, Milne, & Sutton, 1998; Gladden and Milne, 1999) has suggested many antecedents that will influence the creation of this brand image for consumers (e.g., logo design, coach, team performance).

The brand identity perspective views the brand personality from the organizational perspective, and is the desired brand image of the organization. Organizations spend great deals of money on attempting to create a specific brand personality in the eyes of consumers, and the outcomes of these efforts are often different from the intended message. Given that consumer perceptions are filtered through a myriad of personal experiences, cultures, outcomes and other marketplace factors, marketers can only control about one-half of the “fate” of their brands (Tan Tsu Wee, 2004). Because a substantial amount of the constructed brand personality is out of management control, sport marketers must understand the specific elements that can influence and help to create a positive BP.

### *Importance of Measuring BP*

It has long been suggested that BP can influence the success of a product in the market (Ogilvy, 1983), and that the loyalty of the customer can strongly influence the perceived brand personality (Karande, Zinkhan, & Lum, 1997). Loyalty is clearly important for the financial success of sport organizations, and if a consumer has negative view of a sport organization, then the likelihood of consumer loyalty is minimized. Conversely, a sport organization that holds positive images with consumers has a greater potential for attaining significant loyalty among customers (Aaker, 1996).

The measurement and subsequent management of BP is not only important for marketers, but is also an under researched area in sport marketing. Decision-making is a complex phenomenon, and unique BP factors provide a point of differentiation for organizations that might aid in a consumer’s decision-making process. The management of BP includes the development and augmentation of a

set of intangible brand attributes such as user imagery, brand origin, suggested brand values, and brand-consumer relationships (Elliott, 1994; Fournier, 1998) through the manipulation of the marketing mix. However, regardless of the investment in time and resources by the sport organization, the actual customer experience is strongly influential in the constructed BP. That is, sport is intangible, subjective, and unpredictable, with customers being highly involved in helping to create the product experience through simultaneous production and consumption (Lovelock, 1996).

Many studies have sought to conceptualize the construct and develop valid and reliable measurements in the general marketing literature (e.g., Aaker, 1997; de Chernatony, 2001; Keller, 2003) as well as sport (e.g., Gladden & Funk, 2002; Parent & Séguin, 2008). Most recently, Braunstein and Ross (2009) began the process of developing the Brand Personality in Sport (BPS) scale that assesses these dimensions in the unique industry that is sport (Success, Sophistication, Sincerity, Rugged, Community-Driven, Classic). While the various measurement techniques can be debated, as with all scales, this research seeks to move beyond the scale development stage and investigate the interrelationship of BPS with other constructs.

### ***Study Purpose***

As the industry has evolved, the likelihood of differentiating the core product among professional sport teams has been reduced. Therefore, teams and leagues are attempting to find specific attributes that can be utilized as points of differentiation. That is, the sport marketplace has become extremely saturated, and the competition among leagues and teams to attract the attention of customers has skyrocketed in the past decade. Sport organizations are clamoring to find and develop strategies to gain the attention (and subsequent patronage) of consumers, financial and in-kind support from sponsors, along with air and web time from media outlets. As such, sport organizations are attempting to find ways to set their product apart from others, and establish the organization as a unique and beneficial investment for consumer and sponsors alike. BPS can serve as one point of differentiation for these organizations.

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Quite often, certain stereotypical attributes are associated with certain sports. For example, hockey and football anecdotally have the reputation of being tough and physical sports, whereas baseball and basketball are more associated with attributes of being technical in nature. Could these sports differentiate themselves based on BPS dimensions? Could the NHL or the NBA utilize certain dimensions of BPS as a marketing strategy? With these questions in mind, the purpose of this research is to take Braunstein & Ross' (2009) research one step further in order to examine the application of the BPS scale and assess its functionality in determining the brand personality of professional sport leagues. As such, the current study examined differences in BPS factors across the Big Four sport leagues (i.e., NFL, NHL, MLB, NBA), ultimately providing a new technique for sport marketers to evaluate and develop more strategic approaches to their marketing practices.

### *Method*

Data were collected from 449 students affiliated with two universities. Two different universities in varying geographic locations were selected in order to collect diverse information regarding professional teams and account for regional differences. Students enrolled in a number of sport management, kinesiology, and general business courses were offered the opportunity to volunteer as study participants. The use of students was considered appropriate given that they are significant consumers of sport, and the use of this population is common in brand choice research in sport marketing (e.g., Biswas & Sherrell, 1993; Ross, 2008).

First, respondents were asked to list one specific sport team to use throughout the survey. A total of 28 surveys were eliminated from final analysis, as the teams listed were not one of the Big Four sports (final dataset N=421). These teams were then categorized into the four sports to be utilized for analysis; football (N=205), baseball (N=124), basketball (N=50), and hockey (N=42).

Based on the review of literature and observations, the measure of BPS was drawn from Braunstein and Ross' (2009) work, including 40 items under six factors: Success with 14 items (e.g., efficient, dependable, superior), Sophistication with 10 items (e.g.,

stylish, glamorous, trendy), Sincerity with 7 items (e.g., honest, genuine, sincere), Rugged with 3 items (e.g., bold, daring, rugged), Community-Driven with 3 items (e.g., authentic, inspirational, service-oriented), and Classic with 3 items (e.g., traditional, classic, old fashioned). Participants rated the degree to which they perceived each of the statements as accurately describing the professional team that they noted at the beginning of the survey. All items were measured on a seven-point scale, where 1 = 'Totally Disagree' and 7 = 'Totally Agree'.

### **Data Analysis**

LISREL 8.54 was used to compute the confirmatory factor analysis of the BPS scale. The goodness-of-fit measures used in the study were Steiger's (1998) root-mean-square-error of approximation (RMSEA), the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (Tucker & Lewis, 1973), and the comparative fit index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990). In terms of reliability, the most important concern is the consistency of items within a measure. The reliability estimates for the scale were measured using the Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient and the average variance extracted (AVE). Cronbach's alpha coefficient tests the homogeneity of all the items in the instrument subscale. In addition to measures of internal consistency, the variance explained by each of the identified constructs relative to the amount of variance attributed to measurement error (AVE) was examined as a measure of reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). In addition to evaluating the goodness of fit indices through the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and examining the reliability estimates, the construct validity was further examined through tests of discriminant and convergent validity. Convergent validity was assessed by examining each items loading on the construct on which it loaded, and the standard error for which it was associated (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Discriminant validity was assessed through two methods: examination of the correlations between constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), and evaluation of the AVE values (Fornell & Larker, 1981).

Using the general linear model (GLM) procedure in SPSS 16.0, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) procedure was

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conducted to examine any differences in BPS dimensions across four different sports. Univariate tests (tests of between-subject effects) provided with the MANOVA analysis was examined to determine the specific relationships between sport and BP dimensions. A series of pos-hoc tests were also conducted to examine the differences found between sports.

### Results

The results of the CFA indicated that the data does provide an adequate fit to the model (RMSEA=.067, TLI=0.964, CFI=0.966). The reliabilities for all 6 factors met the minimum suggested levels of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). While the AVE values for 3 of the 6 factors did fail to achieve the recommended level of .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), due to the exploratory nature of the study, all factors were kept in the analysis (See Table 1).

Table 1. Factor Reliabilities, AVE, Item Loadings, Standard Errors, and T-values for the BP Dimensions

Item	$\alpha$	AVE	Factor Loading	Standard Error	$t$
Success	.94	.52			
1. successful			.784	.041	18.95
2. efficient			.759	.041	18.10
3. high-performance			.757	.042	18.02
4. dependable			.750	.042	17.79
5. superior			.742	.042	17.53
6. accomplished			.741	.042	17.48
7. respected			.722	.042	16.86
8. reliable			.721	.042	16.86
9. confident			.720	.043	16.81
10. quality			.718	.043	16.75
11. consistent			.674	.043	15.40
12. capable			.664	.044	15.09
13. mature			.641	.044	14.14
14. hard-working			.645	.044	14.54
Sophistication	.86	.39			
1. stylish			.749	.043	17.24

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2. up-to-date			.667	.045	14.74
3. appearance			.657	.045	14.44
4. glamorous			.651	.045	14.28
5. flashy			.641	.045	14.02
6. trendy			.612	.046	13.20
7. upper class			.608	.046	13.09
8. sophisticated			.601	.046	12.93
9. attractive			.591	.046	12.65
10. corporate			.397	.049	8.02
Sincerity	.85	.44			
1. honest			.764	.043	17.54
2. genuine			.681	.045	14.99
3. sincere			.644	.046	13.94
4. down-to-earth			.643	.046	13.91
5. charming			.643	.046	13.91
6. friendly			.640	.046	13.84
7. family-oriented			.635	.046	13.71
Rugged	.70	.45			
1. bold			.829	.048	16.99
2. daring			.693	.049	14.09
3. rugged			.423	.052	8.13
Community-Driven	.76	.51			
1. authentic			.803	.043	18.55
2. inspirational			.753	.044	17.02
3. service-oriented			.570	.047	11.95
Classic	.77	.53			
1. traditional			.801	.045	17.61
2. classic			.754	.046	16.34
3. old fashioned			.625	.04	12.95

Discriminant validity was assessed through two methods: examination of the correlations between constructs (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988), and evaluation of the AVE values for each factor (Fornell & Larker, 1981). No correlation failed the initial test, however, the AVE test of discriminant validity suggested that several of the proposed factors correlate with factors from which they should differ. The convergent validity of the scale was examined by inspecting each items loading on the construct on

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which it loaded, and the standard error for which it was associated (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The results of the data analysis indicate each of the items met this criterion. Research (Browne, MacCallum, Kim, Andersen, & Glaser, 2002; Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998) also suggested that when examining the residual matrix, the standardized residuals should not exceed a 2.58 absolute value. Only a small portion of the standardized residuals (11.9%) in the current research surpassed this criterion.

A MANOVA procedure was used to assess whether there were significant differences across the four sports with respect to the dimensions of brand personality. In general, all BP dimensions were rated high; that is, above the mid-point of 4.0 (see Table 2). The Wilks Lambda multivariate test of overall differences among groups was statistically significant ( $F(18,1165)=7.220, p<.001$ ). Univariate between-subjects tests showed that sport type was significantly related to Success ( $p<.05$ ), Classic ( $p<.001$ ), Rugged ( $p<.001$ ), and Sincerity ( $p<.05$ ). Conversely, there was no significant relationship between sport type and Sophistication ( $p=.145$ ) and Community-Driven ( $p=.151$ ).

Table 2. A Comparison of BP Dimensions by Sport: Means (Standard Deviations), F-statistics, and p-value.

BP Dimension	Total Sample	Sport				F Statistic	p value
		Football	Baseball	Basketball	Hockey		
<b>Success</b>	5.16 (1.05)	5.21 (1.00)	5.05 (1.06)	4.94 (1.29)	5.52 (0.82)	3.04	<.05
<b>Sophistication</b>	4.66 (1.04)	4.71 (1.05)	4.49 (1.07)	4.78 (1.11)	4.82 (0.80)	1.80	n.s.
<b>Classic</b>	4.68 (1.35)	4.66 (1.40)	5.12 (1.06)	3.86 (1.40)	4.42 (1.27)	11.83	<.001
<b>Rugged</b>	4.67 (1.19)	4.96 (1.15)	4.12 (1.17)	4.38 (1.03)	5.18 (0.87)	18.29	<.001

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<b>Community-Driven</b>	5.01 (1.20)	5.11 (1.26)	5.00 (1.11)	4.67 (1.26)	5.02 (1.20)	1.77	n.s
<b>Sincerity</b>	4.73 (1.07)	4.64 (1.19)	4.89 (0.95)	4.46 (0.95)	4.98 (0.77)	3.30	<.05

Note.<sup>a</sup> 1 = Not at all Descriptive; 7 = Extremely Descriptive

Post-hoc tests indicated that those who listed hockey teams were significantly different from those who listed basketball ( $p < .05$ ) on the Success dimension. Specifically, respondents who listed hockey teams rated the Success characteristic higher than those who listed basketball teams. Post-hoc tests also revealed that those who listed football teams were significantly different than those who listed baseball ( $p < .01$ ) and basketball ( $p < .01$ ) teams on the Classic dimension. Those that listed basketball teams were significantly different from those who listed baseball teams ( $p < .001$ ), and those that listed baseball team were significantly different from those who listed any other sport team (football,  $p < .01$ ; basketball,  $p < .001$ ; hockey,  $p < .05$ ). Additionally, those that listed hockey teams were significantly different from those who listed baseball teams ( $p < .05$ ) on the Classic dimension. The Rugged factor post-hoc tests indicated significant differences between that those who listed football teams and those who listed baseball ( $p < .001$ ) and basketball ( $p < .001$ ) teams. Those who listed baseball teams were also different from those who listed hockey teams ( $p < .001$ ). The post-hoc comparisons for the Sincerity dimension indicated that those who listed basketball teams were significantly different from those who listed baseball ( $p < .05$ ) and hockey teams ( $p < .05$ ), while those who listed baseball teams were significantly different from those who listed basketball teams ( $p < .05$ ).

### ***Discussion and Implications***

While the BPS scale does need additional alterations and stronger validity testing, this study provides a basis for that development, as the data did adequately fit the model. Ultimately, these findings provide a platform through which the continued development of the BPS scale can provide a tool through which both theoretical and practical implications may be drawn. Post-hoc tests

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on these factors provided preliminary evidence to support the general claim that sports have distinct characteristics associated with them, seen by sport marketers as well as sport consumers.

For the factors that significantly differed by sport (Success, Classic, Rugged and Sincerity), the majority of the highest mean scores were associated with hockey and baseball. While this may seem logical to the untrained eye, marketers often veer from traditional characteristics when trying to think outside of the box and develop unique tactics to attract consumers. As the competition for the sport consumer dollar increases, the need to find new and innovative promotional strategies is also heightened. These strategies could be utilized to develop new customers through the manipulation of brand personality dimensions, as well as aid in the positioning of the brand as compared to rival leagues. In fact, branding theory suggests differentiation from competitors might be the key to developing new customers and retaining existing customers (Cornwall, Roy, & Steinard, 2001).

One point of differentiation for these leagues is brand personality, and thus discovering where these differences occur is vitally important. By investigating current personalities that leagues possess, sport marketers can either augment or strengthen specific BPS dimensions to achieve marketing objectives. For example, the current research identified baseball teams as holding a stronger characteristic of the Classic factor than any of the other Big Four sport teams. Marketers for specific MLB teams, or even the League itself, could utilize promotional strategies that emphasize elements of being old-fashioned and traditional. In fact, the MLB All-Star game is often referred to as the Summer Classic, thus perpetuating the Classic brand personality attributes. Additionally, the findings that linked hockey with the characteristic of Rugged could influence the NHL to continue, and increase, pursuits such as the Winter Classic, pitting two teams against one another in open-air competition. In addition to Rugged, hockey was also linked to the characteristics of Success and Sincerity. Recently, the NHL tried to capitalize on the factor of (anti)Success, immediately delivering an e-mail to fans whose teams were eliminated from the playoffs, promoting the NHL shop's supply of licensed golf paraphernalia

(Rogers, 2012). While the players themselves might have hit the links shortly after the game ended, this would not be a recommend strategy to reach out, and seemingly mock, individuals who are highly identified with your league and its teams. On that same note, Sincerity regarding the league's interest in the fan's level of identification with the team, and sport, can be questioned. This type of marketing tactic forces a consumer to question the league's purpose as a whole. Do they seem them as an invested fan? Or is this individual simply a dollar sign with no emotional connection to the team that they identify with? Perhaps a connection to the concept of Sincerity would have helped the NHL as they progressed through their lockout on the way to a shortened season? While these are only a few examples of the way in which leagues are already (and potentially inadvertently) using these particular characteristics, continued research in this area will provide a stronger sense of the characteristics that the ever-coveted consumer associates with particular sports and sporting entities, as well as whether or not the adaptation of the two non-discriminant factors (i.e., Sophistication, and Community-Driven) (Braunstein & Ross, 2009) will provide a greater sense of the characteristics associated with sport.

We believe that these findings are vital to the further development of both the theoretical framework and application of the BPS scale. As such, they provide a sound preliminary exploration of the operationalization of brand personality in sport. In addition to expanding upon current theories and applications in this area, this work subscribes to the belief that a scale for both practitioners and academicians can be used to develop a more effective marketing mix for individual sport entities. As the current economic climate continues to impact sport, and marketing budgets are slashed, the further development of tools that provide the opportunity for marketers to take a strategic approach will prove beneficial to academicians as well as practitioners.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

The first and perhaps most important limitation associated with the current research is the use of one specific brand personality scale. Much debate has occurred over the appropriate method to

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assess BP along with the validity and reliability of existing scales. For exploratory work, these findings were positive; however, as the data only adequately fit the model, and there were concerns with both the AVE values and the discriminant validity of certain factors, there is certainly room for improvement. For further development, it is suggested that additional BP scales, and those similar to the BPS, are reviewed to address both concerns with the model and various unique aspects of the sports industry.

This research also utilized only one previously developed BP/BPS scale, and is limited in the results based on this narrowly defined conceptualization of sport brand personality. As this study only relied on this one measure of BPS, we believe that future work could benefit from other measures as well as various approaches to investigating this topic (i.e., exploration beyond traditional “American” sports). Future research should also seek to validate these findings by comparing BP using other previously developed scales, as well as alterations of the BPS.

The sample used as our participant pool (i.e., students) can be seen as a limitation as well. While it has been noted that this is an appropriate group for the purpose of this study, as this age range is made of up significant consumers of sport (e.g., Biswas & Sherrell, 1993; Ross, 2008), it does limit the applicability of our findings. As the characteristics of sport consumers are so diverse, this should be taken into account in the future. Additionally, the location of these samples, while varying in geographic locations, could have factored in to the sports selected as well as these individual’s connections and/or beliefs regarding their personalities.

Due to the methodology of this particular study, the focus was on the Big Four professional leagues (i.e., baseball, basketball, football, and hockey), and future research should also seek to examine the BP from sports other than the traditional Big Four. This research is limited to only these sports, and additional studies could identify potential differences across other sports. While this allowed us to begin examining the general characteristics of sport entities, it is quite limiting. As many sport entities have their own unique personalities that have been carefully crafted and promoted through their own branding, or positioning, process (Reis & Trout, 1969), it

is difficult to generalize the characteristics of a league onto all of their teams, as cities and regions have their own unique characteristics or “personalities” that have been reflected through their own adaptation of this process. For example, while the New York Yankees align with the Classic dimension very well (e.g., uniform, history, logo), there are other MLB clubs (e.g., Houston Astros, Tampa Bay Rays) who may not reflect the dimension in the same way due to the evolution of their image. As such, it is vitally important to understand these differences, potentially using this work as a foundation for further exploration among professional leagues, collegiate conferences, and individual teams.

Auto racing (specifically, NASCAR) has grown to epic popularity in the past several years and might offer consumers a different type of outlet for sport consumption. This sport offers a great opportunity to expand BP research outside of the popular American sports. In a related manner, sports that have greater followings on a global level would offer a great opportunity to examine cross-cultural and international perspectives on BP. The sports of soccer, rugby, and cricket are three logical settings to conduct similar research to the current study. Fast growing niche sports also lend themselves well to the expansion of this research topic. It is therefore suggested that this line of work expands beyond “traditional” sports and assess its application with both non-traditional (e.g., action sports, mixed martial arts) and individual sport (e.g., golf, tennis, boxing, swimming) athletes, events, and tours. While this study provides us with a solid platform from both theoretical and practical perspectives, there is much work to be done in order to have a greater understanding of the role that brand personality in sport impacts leagues, teams, and individuals.

### ***Conclusion***

This purpose of this study was to assess the validity and begin the shift of the BPS scale from theory to practice. While additional review and testing will be necessary, we believe that this provides a strong foundation to fulfill an identified need to determine if there are differences in the “personalities” (i.e., characteristics) of leagues. In addition to the academic component of this work, it

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provides “new” elements that sport industry professionals can focus on in developing sound and targeted marketing practices.

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