

Original Paper

Tourist Satisfaction in Kashmir: An Empirical Assessment

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Abstract

Tourist satisfaction is one of the most important concerns of competitive destinations as it considerably influences the tourist's choice of a destination, the consumption of products and services and the decision to visit the destination in the future. With the increasing role of tourism in the global economy and growing competition in the global tourism market, the importance of enhancing the satisfaction level of tourists is being recognized as a way to expand and maintain a large and loyal customer base for long-term success. Satisfied tourists bring success to the tourism business. They are likely to revisit and recommend the destination to their families and friends. On the other hand, dissatisfied tourists may not return to the same destination and may not recommend it to other tourists. Even worse, dissatisfied tourists may express negative comments about a destination and damage its market reputation. In view of the growing importance of tourist satisfaction for tourism promotion, present study is an attempt to measure the satisfaction level of tourists in Kashmir Valley. Based on data gathered from three hundred forty (340) tourists, the study brought to light four interpretable service quality dimensions for tourism services: Assurance, Tangibility, Responsiveness and Reliability. Findings are analyzed and suggestions for improving tourists' satisfaction have been discussed.

Keywords

Customer Satisfaction, Measurement of Customer Satisfaction, Service Quality, Service Quality Dimensions, SERVPERF.

1. Introduction

The travel and tourism industry has evolved to become one of the largest and most dynamic industries of the global economy. Since 1950, the phenomenon of tourism has been remarkable in terms of growth, spread and diversification. The international tourist arrivals since then have grown from mere 25 million to reach 940 million in 2010 (Government of India, 2011). The fast growth and spread not only resulted the globalization of people's movements as never before but also contributed in creating a vibrant industry and opportunities for millions of people. During 1990-2010, international tourist arrivals grew from 435 million to 940 million, recording an average annual growth of 5.8%. During

this period, the International receipts also recorded considerable growth from US\$ 262 billion to US\$ 919 billion and its average growth has been more than double to that of the arrivals at about 12.54%. Regionally, international arrivals can be seen growing faster in emerging economies at a rate of about 7% compared to the world average of 4.45% during 2005-2010 (Table 1).

Table 1. Regional trends in international tourist arrivals

Region/Year	International Tourist Arrivals (Million)				Market Share (%)	Average Annual Growth (%)
	2005	2008	2009	2010	2010	05-10
World	798	917	882	940	100	4.45
Advanced Economies	753	495	474	498	53	2.48
Emerging Economies	345	421	408	442	47	7.0

(Government of India, 2011)

A WTTC (World Travel and Tourism Council) study has estimated in 2010 that the contribution of travel and tourism to the world GDP was to the tune of 9%, whereas, its total employment effect was more than 235 million jobs, representing 8% of global employment. Further, the employment effect of international tourism appears to be optimistic in the medium to long-term. According to the UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) 2012, forecasts, the sector is expected to provide nearly 296 million jobs by 2019 given that there would be sustained growth of global tourist arrivals and the major economies maintain its momentum.

Tourism has been seen as the driving force for regional development. Successful tourism can increase destination's tourist receipts, income, employment and government revenues (Chen and Tsai, 2007). Foreign exchange earnings in this industry has a high added value for national economy of any country, that is why many countries consider this growing industry as the main source of income, an opportunity for employment, private sector growth and economic infrastructure strengthening (Haghkhah et. al., 2011).

In India, the tourism industry is substantial and vibrant, and the country is fast becoming a major global destination. The total contribution of travel and tourism to India's GDP for 2011 is estimated to be about 4.5%. As regards to employment generation in 2011, the sectors' total contribution worked out to be 7.5% in the country's total employment pie (WTTC, 2010).

Tourism is one of the largest net earners of foreign exchange for the country, recording earnings of Rs 64889 Crores in 2010, a growth of 18.1% over 2009, (Government of India, 2011). The Foreign Tourist Arrival (FTA) has increased from 2.65 million in 2000 to 5.58 million in 2010 and have registered a growth of 8.1% in 2010 over 2009 (Table 2).

Table 2. Foreign tourist arrivals (FTAs) and foreign exchange earnings from tourism in India, 2000- 2010

Year	FTAs(in Millions)	Percentage(%) change over the previous year	FEE from tourism in India (in US\$ million)	Percentage(%) change over the previous year
2000	2.65	6.7	3460	15.0
2001	2.54	-4.2	3198	-7.6
2002	2.38	-6.0	3103	-3.0
2003	2.73	14.3	4463	43.8
2004	3.46	26.8	6170	38.2
2005	3.92	13.3	7493	21.4
2006	4.45	13.5	8634	15.2
2007	5.08	14.3	10729	24.3
2008	5.28	4.0	11832	10.3
2009	5.17	-2.2	11394	-3.7
2010	5.58	8.1	14193	24.6

(Source: Government of India, 2010)

Tourism in India is the largest service and one of the most profitable industries in the country. The tourism industry provides various types of services – Accommodation services, Hotel and Railway Booking, Restaurant services, Hospitality, Guide service, Recreational services, Communication and Transportation. To manage all aspects of tourism implies retaining customers by providing appropriate services to them in time. Therefore, it becomes necessary to enhance the service efficiency of tourism industry. Enhancing lifetime value of tourism customers and developing a relationship with profitable customers should be the central focus of tourism company's strategy. The tourism enterprises, either private or public need to improve their service offerings by understanding the needs of their target groups. They have to understand the customer expectations, word of mouth, customer current knowledge and past experiences in order to improve service quality and achieve customer satisfaction (Eraqi, 2006). It is a process of expectations and perceptions whereby a satisfied tourist develops a positive change in attitude towards the service (Jadhav and More, 2010). Satisfied tourists bring success to the tourism business. They are likely to revisit and recommend the destination to their families and friends. Therefore, understanding the satisfaction level of tourists becomes indispensable in today's competitive business environment. The present study, therefore, is aimed to measure the satisfaction level of tourists visiting Kashmir Valley with the following objectives:

1.1 Objectives of the Study

- To measure the satisfaction levels of tourists in Kashmir Valley, and

- To suggest, on the basis of study results, ways and means for improving the level of tourist satisfaction so as to achieve tourists' loyalty and retention.

1.1.1 Review of Literature

Tourist Satisfaction-Concept and Measurement

Past researches have revealed that customer satisfaction is an important theoretical as well as practical issue. For most marketers and consumer researchers, customer satisfaction is regarded as a marketing tool to attract the most variable segments of the market. Satisfaction refers to the perceived discrepancy between prior expectation and perceived performance after consumption – when performance differs from expectation, dissatisfaction occurs (Oliver, 1980). It can be defined as the degree to which one believes that an experience evokes positive feelings (Rust & Oliver, 1994). Bitner and Hubbert (1994) describe customer satisfaction as a feeling or an attitude of a customer towards a service after it has been used. According to Spreng and Mackoy (1996), there is no clear definition of satisfaction, although most definitions would involve “an evaluative, affective or emotional response”. Hansemark and Albinson (2004) also believe that satisfaction is an overall customer attitude towards a service provider, or an emotional reaction to the difference between what customers anticipate and what they receive, regarding the fulfillment of some need, goal or desire. In tourism context, satisfaction is primarily referred to as a function of pre-travel expectations and post-travel experiences. Tourist's satisfaction is an emotional state after experiencing the trip (Baker and Crompton, 2000). When experiences compared to expectations result in feelings of gratification, the tourist is satisfied. However, when they result in feelings of displeasure, the tourist is dissatisfied (Reisinger & Turner, 2003).

According to Kozak and Rimmington (2000), satisfaction is important to successful destination marketing. Philip and Hezlett (1996) also acknowledged that an increasing concentration of customer satisfaction is one of the strategic routes used by leisure firms in gaining competitive edge. They also seem to be in agreement about the fact that, customer satisfaction influences the choice of destination, the consumption of products and services and the decision to return. High tourists satisfaction is likely to contribute to enhanced reputation of tourism product providers and of the whole destination, increased consumer loyalty, reduced price elasticities, lower cost of future transactions and improved productivity (Anderson et. al., 1994). Studies have revealed that customer satisfaction is likely to produce positive behavioral intentions from customers such as positive word-of-mouth and repeat purchases (Saleh and Ryan, 1991; Barsky, 1992; Bojonc and Rosen, 1994; Kozak and Rimmington, 2000; Yuksel, 2001; Gursoy et. al., 2003; Karatepe, 2006; Andaleeb and Conway, 2006; Neal and Gursoy, 2008). Other investigations have revealed that a dissatisfied customer will not likely return to a company, and that repeat purchases impact directly on the finances of a business given that obtaining a new customer costs more than keeping an existing one (Dube et. al., 1994; Stevens et. al., 1995; Oh and Mount, 1998). Similarly, in the tourism business, the satisfied tourists may revisit a destination, recommend it to others, or express favorable comments about the destination. On the other hand,

dissatisfied tourists may not return to the same destination and may not recommend it to other tourists. Even worse, dissatisfied tourists may express negative comments about a destination and damage its market reputation (Reisinger and Turner, 2003). Hence, customer satisfaction results in the reduction of marketing costs (Rosenberg and Czepiel 1983, Haywood 1989) and achieving customer satisfaction are a cost-effective way to run a business (Murray, 1992).

Managers in tourism strive to improve the level of customer satisfaction by improving the quality of their services in the belief that this effort will create loyal visitors. According to Campo and Yague (2009), tourist's perception of quality has a positive and significant effect on his or her satisfaction. As per Salazar et. al., (2004), tourist satisfaction, the intention to return and the intention to recommend the destination are strongly influenced by service quality. Rahman et. al., (2010), mentioned that overall good service quality does bring about customer satisfaction. Al-alak and Alnawas (2010), stated that enrichment of service production and delivery can create customer satisfaction which in turn leads to customer revisit intention. Therefore, in order to achieve customer satisfaction, tourism organizations should pay more and more attention on service quality and must first of all know the expectations of the customers and how they can meet such expectations as customer satisfaction helps in customer loyalty and retention (Ojo, 2010).

Measurement of customer satisfaction with leisure and recreation fields has been an important topic within the related literature (Dorfman, 1979). Different approaches to the measurement of customer satisfaction have been explored extensively during the past three decades, but a consensus approach has not yet been reached. The marketing literature has mainly reflected two approaches to customer satisfaction research. The American school, led by Parasuraman, et. al., (1985), considers customer satisfaction as a negative or positive outcome resulting from a comparison process between initial expectations and perceived performance of products and services. The Nordic school, led by Gronroos (1990), brings a completely different perspective for measuring customer satisfaction by stating that it is only an outcome of the actual quality of performance and its perception by consumers. There has been an extensive debate in the marketing literature regarding the nature and determinants of customer satisfaction and how it is best measured (Oh and Parks 1997). These approaches have also been applied to researching customer satisfaction within tourism and travel (Duke and Persia, 1996 – Parasuraman, et. al.'s expectation-perception gap model; Pizam and Milman, 1993 – Oliver's expectancy disconfirmation theory; Chon and Olsen, 1991 – Sirgy's congruity model; Pizam, et. al., 1978 – performance based model). According to Whipple and Thach (1988), the evaluations of both attractions and levels of service quality (supply side) are regarded as crucial in determining overall tourist satisfaction (demand side). Bitner and Hubbert (1994) argued that although the SERVQUAL items of Parasuraman et. al., (1988), when measured at the level of the firm's services, appear to be good predictors of service quality, it is also possible that the 22 items of SERVQUAL, when measured as a function of multiple experiences with the firm, may be good predictors of overall service satisfaction.

1.1.1.1 Sample Profile

Present study has been carried out at Kashmir, a unique tourist destination known for its scenic beauty and often referred as paradise on earth, situated on the northern most part of India. The sample for the study comprises of three hundred forty (340) respondents, which includes 221 domestic respondents (65 percent) and 119 foreign respondents (35 percent). The study was conducted in the months of April to July, 2012. Simple random sampling procedure was followed for the present study. All important demographic characteristics, like age, gender, level of education, length of stay, nationality and purpose of visit were taken into consideration while seeking responses from the tourists regarding quality of tourism services. The resulting respondent profile was deemed to be distributed fairly, encompassing all the categories possible.

The gender of respondents was fairly distributed, with 55.3 percent males and 44.7 percent females. A considerable number of respondents (37.9 percent) belonged to the age group of 31-40 years followed by 29.7 percent in the age group of 20-30 years. Lowest participation of respondents (9.4 percent) belonged to the age group of above 51 years followed by the age group of 41-50 years (22.9 percent). Respondents with graduation were largest in number (43.5 percent) followed by post graduates (39.1 percent) and the remaining (17.4 percent) were undergraduates. Respondents who stayed for 1-6 days in Kashmir were highest in number (44.4 percent) followed by those who stayed for 7-12 days (26.5 percent) and those who stayed for more than 19 days were the least (12.4 percent) followed by those who stayed for 13-18 days (16.8 percent). Maximum number of participants were leisure/holiday tourists (78.8 percent) followed by tourists visiting friends/relatives (12.4 percent) whereas tourists visiting for business purpose were the least (0.9 percent) followed by pilgrimage tourists (7.9 percent).

2. Research Methodology

For carrying out the present study, a modified SERVPERF scale relevant to measure the level of tourist satisfaction developed by Bhat (2012) was used. The items chosen for the questionnaire were modified and rephrased in terms of both wording and contextual applications to suit the present research purposes. After carrying out in-depth interviews on tourism services with tourists, nine more items were added and each item was checked once again to reflect the need of the study. All the items in the questionnaire were then rearranged alphabetically to later identify the underlying satisfaction dimensions and those items that were highly related to the same dimension using factor analysis. After the addition, elimination and paraphrasing of several questions, the final questionnaire was prepared containing twenty eight questions. Level of satisfaction was measured on a ten point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = highly dissatisfied to 10 = highly satisfied) and all questions were phrased positively as suggested by Parasuraman et.al., 1994. The data was then put into the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 13.0 and analyzed using exploratory factor analysis and reliability tests.

2.1 Reliability and Validity

In order to determine the dimensionality of the construct, Factor Analysis on 28 items was performed (Table 3). R-mode Principal Component Analysis with a Varimax Rotation and Eigen value equal to or more than 1 (Kinnear and Taylor, 1987) were used for the present study. In order to get clear factorial design, 3 items with factor loadings of less than 0.50 were dropped and loadings equal to or above 0.50 were retained. The dropped questions were: staff responds to tourists' requests quickly; fluent and understandable communication with tourists; and, best tourist interest at heart, bearing question numbers 16, 25 and 28 respectively. Hence, the factor analysis on the 28 satisfaction items showed 4 factors with 25 items and explained 70.75% Variance. Every factor among the 4 factors was labeled as per the items loaded onto it. Factor 1 was labeled as Assurance; Factor 2 as Tangibility; Factor 3 as Reliability; and, finally Factor 4 as Responsiveness.

The suitability of factor analysis was validated with the help of Barlett's Test of Sphericity that revealed a Chi-square at 7489.047, $p < 0.000$ and verified that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy reported KMO = 0.917 which is higher than the suggested 0.6 value (Tabachnik and Fidell, 2001). The Cronbach's Alpha test was used to determine the internal consistency. The coefficients ranged from 0.78 (Factor 4) to 0.92 (Factor 1), indicating an acceptable level of reliability.

Table 3. Dimensions of Tourism Services: Factor Analysis Results and Reliability Coefficients

Q. No.	Dimensions of Tourism Services	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Assurance					
21	The behaviour of employees reinforces tourists' confidence.	0.727			
24	Experienced and competent tour and hotel escorts.	0.718			
23	Employees are credible and courteous with tourists.	0.666			
17	Willingness to help tourists and advice on how to use free time.	0.624			
26	Cultivation of friendly relationship with tourists.	0.588			
27	Understanding specific tourists needs.	0.561			
Tangibility					
4	Destinations are visually aesthetically attractive.		0.842		
3	Unspoiled nature.		0.739		
2	Appealing accommodation facilities.		0.706		
5	Overall cleanliness of the destination.		0.692		
7	Availability of information documents and notes.		0.654		
8	Physical appearance of tour and hotel escorts (tidiness etc.).		0.635		

1	Modern and technologically relevant vehicles.	0.594		
6	Personal safety and security.	0.552		
9	High-quality meals.	0.544		
	Reliability			
14	No sudden increase in tour cost.	0.767		
10	Performing the service/s at the promised time.	0.764		
12	Insisting on error-free service.	0.764		
11	Performing the service/s right the first time.	0.721		
15	Provision of adequate information about the service delivered.	0.694		
13	Meeting the tour schedule.	0.592		
	Responsiveness.			
19	Sincere interest in problem-solving of tourist's.		0.765	
22	Tourists are being served quickly by the appropriate personnel.		0.72	
20	Sponsors act on participants' suggestions.		0.643	
18	Provision of information on local events/entertainment.		0.519	
Eigen Values		12.911	2.221	1.72
Percentage of Total Variance		21.22	19.055	15.841
Cumulative Percentage of Variance		21.22	40.276	56.117
Cronbach's Alpha		0.921	0.847	0.9
Number of Items Per Factor		6	9	6

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy	0.917
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (approx. Chi Square)	7489.047
Cronbach's Alpha	0.952

*At 1% Significance Level

3. Results of the Study

In line with the objectives, the present study seeks to find out the level of tourist satisfaction in relation to quality of tourism services and its dimensions (Assurance, Tangibility, Reliability and Responsiveness). As mentioned earlier, tourist satisfaction was measured on a ten point Likert type (highly dissatisfied/highly satisfied) scale. Mean scores and standard deviation were calculated and

ranks were assigned accordingly (on the basis of mean) on each element/ dimension. The result of all this is shown in Tables 4 and 5.

3.1 Overall tourist satisfaction

In order to assess the overall tourist satisfaction, mean scores were calculated on each element. The element-wise mean scores were then averaged on all dimensions to get overall tourist satisfaction score. It is obvious from the data that tourists are satisfied with the tourism services of Kashmir Valley (7.06). The analysis clearly reveals that tourists are satisfied with tourism services as is reflected by the respective mean scores on all dimensions of tourism services – Assurance (7.29), Tangibility (7.27), Reliability (6.71) and Responsiveness (6.96) respectively. However, higher degree of satisfaction is reported on Assurance (7.29) followed by Tangibility (7.27) while as reliability (6.71) followed by responsiveness (6.96) is reported low relatively.

Table 4. Tourist Satisfaction Scores Averaged on all Dimensions

Mean Score/Rank	Dimensions of Tourism Services				Over-all Tourist Satisfaction
	Assurance	Tangibility	Reliability	Responsiveness	
Mean Score	7.29	7.27	6.71	6.96	7.06
Rank	1	2	4	3	

3.1.1 Dimension wise Analysis

Data on Table 5 shows a SERVPERF score of 7.29 on **Assurance** dimension which indicates that the service personnel of Kashmir Valley are competent and well mannered. It's element-wise analysis reveals higher satisfactory score on 'cultivation of friendly relationship with tourists (7.71)' followed by 'experienced and competent tour and hotel escorts (7.53)'. However, least satisfactory score was reported on 'willingness to help tourists and advice on how to use free time (6.62)' followed by 'the behaviour of employees reinforcing tourists' confidence (7.23)'. The items that fall in between include: 'understanding specific tourists' needs (7.39)' and 'employees being credible and courteous with tourists (7.29)'. **Tangibility** shows comparatively high SERPERF score of 7.27, which indicates that Kashmir Valley as a tourist destination is visually aesthetically attractive. The element wise analysis of the said dimension clearly shows the higher mean score on 'destinations are visually aesthetically attractive (8.53)' followed by 'unspoiled nature (8.16)' whereas relatively lowest score (6.22) is reported on 'modern and technologically relevant vehicles' followed by 'availability of information documents and notes (6.44)'.

Table 5 shows comparatively low SERVPERF score (6.71) on **Reliability** dimension which implies that Kashmir Valley needs to improve the promised service dependably and accurately. Item-wise analysis reveals relatively lowest score on 'no sudden increase in tour cost (6.55)' followed by 'insisting on error-free service (6.57)'. The said dimension shows comparatively highest score on

‘provision of adequate information about the service delivered (6.82)’ followed by ‘performing the service/s at the promised time (6.81)’. However, the SERVPERF score on **Responsiveness** dimension in Table 5 is 6.96 which implies that Kashmir Valley is providing prompt services to tourists. Its element-wise analysis brings to light higher levels to tourist satisfaction on ‘tourists being served quickly by the appropriate personnel (7.37)’ followed by ‘sincere interest in problem solving of tourists (7.32)’. Though, said dimension shows relatively low score (6.45) on ‘provision of information on local events/ entertainment’ followed by ‘sponsors act on participants’ suggestions (6.70)’.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

The current study has employed performance based approach (SERVPERF) of service quality for measuring tourist satisfaction. The SERVPERF instrument, which was modified and empirically tested, identified four interpretable service quality dimensions – assurance, tangibility, responsiveness and empathy. Since, the dimensions of any service quality model depend on the type of the service sector, consequently, only four tourism service dimensions were found in the present study. The study provides good theoretical background and empirical evidence of the facts related to tourism services. However, it is subject to several limitations: First, the study measures the satisfaction level of foreign and national tourists together as differences in nationality might have an impact on attitudes and perceptions (Kozak and Rimmington, 2000); and, second, data gathered from different places where the survey was conducted has different characteristics which also influence the results of the present study.

Overall tourists are satisfied with tourism services as provided by Kashmir Valley. The SERVPERF score (7.06) clearly indicates higher levels of tourist satisfaction. Results have confirmed that out of four tourism service dimensions, Assurance dimension is a significant contributor of overall tourist satisfaction. The present study supports the findings of Bhat (2012) who suggested improvement in Reliability and Responsiveness dimension to improve overall quality of tourism services. Similarly, it is put forwarded that management must pay attention to these two dimensions where the SERVPERF scores are relatively low so as to improve the overall tourist satisfaction and achieve overall tourism competitiveness.

Also, it is worth to mention that an important outcome for a tourism service provider is a satisfied tourist who intends to return to the destination. A lack of some attractive services is a not necessarily a big concern, but if some forms of attractive services are provided, it may possibly be a tourists’ favorite service and may become a key to exceed their expectations. Therefore, the study suggests that tourism service providers must focus on how to create attractive elements in the tourism services so as to increase tourist satisfaction and gain tourist loyalty and retention.

Table 5. Dimensions of Tourism Services

Q. No.	Elements of Tourism Services	Mean Score	Standard	Rank
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			Deviation	
Assurance				
21	The behaviour of employees reinforces tourists' confidence.	7.23	1.66	5
23	Employees are credible and courteous with tourists.	7.29	1.83	4
24	Experienced and competent tour and hotel escorts.	7.53	1.5	2
26	Cultivation of friendly relationship with tourists.	7.71	1.82	1
27	Understanding specific tourists' needs.	7.39	1.91	3
17	Willingness to help tourists and advice on how to use free time.	6.62	2.36	6
Total		7.29		
Tangibility				
1	Modern and technologically relevant vehicles.	6.22	1.7	9
2	Appealing accommodation facilities.	7.09	1.64	6.5
6	Personal safety and security.	7.35	1.81	4
7	Availability of information documents and notes.	6.44	1.94	8
9	High-quality meals.	7.41	1.82	3
5	Overall cleanliness of the destination.	7.13	2.12	5
8	Physical appearance of tour and hotel escorts (tidiness etc.).	7.09	1.91	6.5
3	Unspoiled nature.	8.16	1.74	2
4	Destinations are visually aesthetically attractive.	8.53	1.19	1
Total		7.27		
Reliability				
10	Performing the service/s at the promised time.	6.81	1.92	2
11	Performing the service/s right the first time.	6.7	2.13	4
12	Insisting on error-free service.	6.57	2.05	5
13	Meeting the tour schedule.	6.8	2.25	3
14	No sudden increase in tour cost.	6.55	2.2	6
15	Provision of adequate information about the service delivered.	6.82	1.79	1
Total		6.71		
Responsiveness				
19	Sincere interest in problem-solving of tourist's.	7.32	1.92	2
20	Sponsors act on participants' suggestions.	6.7	1.65	3
22	Tourists are being served quickly by appropriate personnel.	7.37	1.6	1

18	Provision of information on local events/ entertainment.	6.45	2.22	4
Total		6.96		
Overall Tourist Satisfaction (Average)		7.06		

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