

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE BRAND IMAGE OF TEA ENTERPRISES: EVIDENCE FROM CLUSTERED DATA IN THAI NGUYEN PROVINCE

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Abstract: This study aims to identify factors affecting brand image in the specialty tea industry in Thai Nguyen Province. Data was collected from 320 customers of 40 tea enterprises and analyzed using SEM model with two-level cluster data to improve the reliability of the estimates. Five factors were considered: Perceived Quality (PQ), Brand Trust (BT), Perceived Value (PV), Digital Communication (DC) and Distribution Channel Experience (CE), with Brand Image (BI) as the dependent variable. The results show that PQ, PV, BT and DC have positive and statistically significant effects on BI, while CE has no significant impact. The model explains 54% of the variation in BI, indicating a high level of relevance. The study contributes to expanding empirical evidence on branding in the specialty agricultural sector and provides managerial implications related to quality improvement, trust building and digital communication enhancement.

• Keywords: brand image, perceived quality, brand trust, perceived value, digital media, SEM, cluster data, Thai Nguyen.

Date of receipt: 05th Sep, 2025

Date of delivery revision: 10th Oct., 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.71374/jfar.v25.i6.13>

Date of receipt revision: 20th Oct, 2025

Date of approval: 20th Nov., 2025

1. Introduction

The Vietnamese tea industry, especially in Thai Nguyen Province, plays an important role in the specialty agricultural value chain, contributing to local economic growth and farmers' income. As a leading region for high-quality green and hill tea, Thai Nguyen has strong potential for brand positioning. However, increasing competition from domestic and foreign tea brands and rising consumer expectations for quality and experience have made brand image building more challenging for local enterprises.

Brand image reflects consumers' perceptions and associations with a brand, influencing their attitudes and purchasing decisions. A strong image enhances trust, loyalty, and market competitiveness. According to Keller (2013), managing brand image involves not only tangible attributes but also consumer experience, perceived value, and credibility—factors that become critical under intense competition. Prior research shows that perceived quality, brand trust, perceived value, digital communication, and channel experience significantly shape brand image (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2013; An, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2025; Phan et al., 2024). Yet, most studies focus on FMCG or service industries, while specialty agricultural products particularly Thai Nguyen tea—lack systematic investigation, leaving an important research gap.

This study aims to analyze how the five factors (PQ, BT, PV, DC, CE) influence the brand image (BI) of Thai Nguyen tea enterprises. Data were collected from

320 customers across 40 representative enterprises (8 customers per enterprise), allowing the use of SEM with a two-level cluster design to control sampling error and improve estimation accuracy.

The findings are expected to enrich branding theory in specialty agricultural products and provide practical implications for tea enterprises to strengthen competitiveness and enhance brand image in domestic and international markets.

2. Literature review

2.1. Perceived Quality (PQ)

Perceived quality is understood as the consumer's subjective perception of the superior quality of a product or service compared to alternatives (Zeithaml, 1988). This is a core factor that forms trust and positive attitudes towards a brand. Many studies show that perceived quality has a direct and strong influence on brand image (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 2013; Tran & Vo, 2022). In the specialty agricultural products industry such as tea, where customers often do not have full technical information, perceived quality plays a decisive role in forming brand impressions and recognition.

2.2. Brand Trust and Authenticity (BT)

Brand trust is the degree to which consumers are willing to believe in the promises and values that a brand delivers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). When customers trust a brand, they tend to evaluate it positively and engage in a long-term relationship, thereby strengthening the brand image. In the context

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of tea products associated with origin, provenance and production methods, authenticity further increases trust, thereby enhancing the brand image (An et al., 2025).

2.3. Perceived Value (PV)

Perceived value reflects the customer's overall assessment of the benefits that a product brings compared to the costs they have to pay (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). When customers perceive high value, they tend to form positive evaluations, leading to a strengthened brand image. In the tea industry, perceived value is not only about taste and price, but also includes cultural experiences, beliefs about origin and sustainability (Tran & Vo, 2022).

2.4. Digital Communication (DC)

Digital communication includes promotional activities, interactions, product and brand introductions through online platforms such as social networks, websites, e-commerce (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Effective digital communication activities help increase recognition, build trust and emotional attachment, thereby enhancing brand image. In the context of digital transformation of agriculture in Vietnam, digital communication is gradually becoming the main channel to connect local tea products with consumers (Phan et al., 2024).

2.5. Channel Experience (CE)

Channel experience refers to how customers perceive and evaluate the touchpoints in the purchase process including physical stores, product displays, and e-commerce platforms (Verhoef et al., 2009). A good channel experience makes it easier for customers to access the product, increasing satisfaction and positive emotions toward the brand. In the tea industry, this is a key factor in strengthening brand recognition and engagement.

2.6. Brand Image (BI)

Brand image is the set of beliefs, emotions, impressions, and experiences that consumers associate with a particular brand (Keller, 2013). A strong brand image not only enhances recognition but also creates a sustainable competitive advantage. Empirical studies have shown that PQ, BT, PV, DC, and CE all have positive and statistically significant impacts on brand image in various industry contexts (Nguyen & Ngo, 2021; An et al., 2025). However, in the specialty tea industry in Vietnam, this relationship has not been systematically tested, especially with enterprise-scale cluster data.

2.7. Proposed research model and hypotheses

Based on the theoretical basis and the overview of empirical studies, the research model is proposed as follows. The model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Based on the theoretical foundation and empirical evidence, the research hypotheses are developed as follows:

H1: Perceived quality (PQ) has a positive impact on brand image (BI).

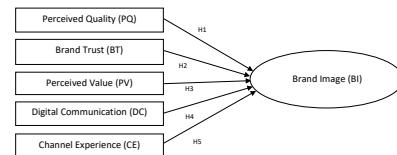
H2: Brand trust (BT) has a positive impact on brand image (BI).

H3: Perceived value (PV) has a positive impact on brand image (BI).

H4: Digital communication (DC) has a positive impact on brand image (BI).

H5: Distribution channel experience (CE) has a positive impact on brand image (BI).

Figure 1: Proposed research model



3. Research methodology

3.1. Research design

The study was conducted using a quantitative method to determine and test the influence of five independent factors - Perceived Quality (PQ), Brand Trust (BT), Perceived Value (PV), Digital Communication (DC) and Distribution Channel Experience (CE) - on the dependent variable Brand Image (BI) in the tea industry in Thai Nguyen Province. The research design followed the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) approach with two-level cluster data, in which customers are the observation unit (level 1) and tea enterprises are the cluster unit (level 2). This method allows controlling errors due to dependence between observations in the same cluster (due to sharing the same characteristics of corporate brands), thereby increasing the accuracy of estimates and hypothesis testing..

3.2. Measurement instrument

The scale of latent variables is built based on inheritance and adjustment from prestigious international studies, ensuring reliability and suitability to the context of the tea industry in Vietnam.

Table 1: Constructs, number of items and sources of measurement

Factor/Code	No of items	Description	Sources of Measurement
Perceived Quality (PQ)	4	Customer perception of product quality (freshness, taste, reliability, stability).	Alhaddad (2015)
Brand Trust (BT)	4	Level of trust in the brand regarding commitment, transparency and credibility.	Alhaddad (2015)
Perceived Value (PV)	4	Overall assessment of benefits and costs, including intangible values such as emotions and sustainability commitment.	Zhang et al. (2024)
Digital Communication (DC)	4	Online communication activities: interactivity, content consistency, multi-channel presence.	Ibrahim et al. (2024)
Channel Experience (CE)	4	Customer experience across physical and online channels (convenience, transparency, good service).	Balbin et al. (2024); Herzig et al. (2025)
Brand Image (BI)	3	Overall perceptions, emotions, and impressions associated with a brand.	Zhang et al. (2024); Ibrahim et al. (2024)

Source: Compiled by the author based on prior studies

3.3. Sample and data collection

The study used a purposive sampling method combined with random sampling to ensure both suitability with the research objectives and to enhance representativeness. First, 40 representative tea enterprises were selected with the support of the Tea Association and local management agencies, based on the following criteria: (i) stable operation for at least 3 years, (ii) having an official distribution channel, (iii) having a stable customer base, and (iv) having a clear brand identity.

At each enterprise, 8 customers were randomly selected at direct points of sale or online distribution channels to reflect the diversity of the consumer group. The total sample size was 320 customers (40 clusters) consistent with a two-level cluster data design.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, including demographic information and items measuring 6 latent variables. The questionnaire was distributed in two forms: a direct survey at the point of sale and a controlled online survey. Before the official survey, the study conducted a pilot survey with 30 customers to calibrate the content. The data collection period was from March to July 2025. Invalid questionnaires were removed to ensure data reliability.

3.4. Data analysis methods

The data analysis process is carried out in three main steps, to ensure the reliability of the scale, the value of the measurement model and the testing of the research hypothesis:

Step 1. Testing the reliability and value of the scale: The data is initially processed using SPSS to test the reliability of the observed variables through the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient and the item-total correlation coefficient. Variables with coefficients < 0.3 will be eliminated. Then, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) is performed to assess the latent structure and the preliminary convergence of the scale.

Step 2. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA): Next, the measurement model is tested using AMOS. The model fit indices used include GFI, CFI, TLI and RMSEA. Convergent validity is tested through AVE and CR, while discriminant validity is assessed using HTMT and the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Only the scales that meet the requirements are included in the structural model.

Step 3. Structural model analysis SEM cluster data: Finally, the structural equation model is estimated using R with the packages lavaan and lavaan.survey. This method allows for adjusting the variance and standard error by cluster (enterprise), helping to accurately test the hypotheses H1-H5. The standardized regression coefficients (β) and statistical significance levels are used to conclude the hypothesis.

The statistical significance level applied is 5% ($p < 0.05$). In addition, the R^2 index of the dependent variable BI is reported to assess the explanatory power of the model. All analysis steps are performed sequentially and strictly controlled to ensure the reliability and scientific value of the research results.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics of respondents

The total survey sample consisted of 320 customers, evenly distributed among business clusters, ensuring representativeness of tea consumers in Thai Nguyen Province and other localities.

Men accounted for 71.3% - reflecting the fact that the main customer group is middle-aged men in hospitality and entertainment activities. The 30-50 age group accounted for the highest proportion (46.3%), followed by over 50 years old (30%) and under 30 years old (23.8%), consistent with the traditional tea consumption characteristics of the middle-aged and elderly groups.

Regarding place of residence: 57.5% of customers live in Thai Nguyen, 33.8% from other provinces, 8.8% international - showing potential for market expansion. Regarding frequency of use: 40.9% use tea daily, 34.1% use regularly.

Education level: 59.7% high school degree or below, 35.3% college-university, 5% post-graduate - reflecting the characteristics of the customer group that mainly consumes traditional agricultural products.

Regarding the level of brand attachment: 49.1% use for more than 3 years, 36.3% from 1-3 years. In general, the survey sample shows the characteristics of core customers: male, middle-aged, regular tea users, long-term attachment, which is an important basis for analyzing factors affecting brand image.

4.2. Descriptive analysis of factors

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix

Factor	Mean (M)	Std. (SD)	PQ	BT	PV	DC	CE	BI
PQ	3.527	0.712	1					
BT	3.528	0.717	.248**	1				
PV	3.331	0.747	.099	.470**	1			
DC	3.462	0.645	.191**	.293**	.367**	1		
CE	3.424	0.717	.079	.169**	.235**	.359**	1	
BI	3.547	0.561	.377**	.514**	.519**	.428**	.355**	1

Note: * $p < .01$

Source: Compiled by the author

The results of descriptive analysis show that the factors in the model all have mean values ranging from 3.33 to 3.55, reflecting the relatively high level of agreement of respondents with the statements in the scale. Specifically, BI ($M = 3.547$) and BT ($M = 3.528$) have the highest mean values, indicating that customers generally have positive assessments of the image and level of trust in the tea brand. Meanwhile, PV ($M = 3.331$) has the lowest mean, implying that

the perceived value of the product still has room for improvement.

The Pearson correlation coefficients are all positive and statistically significant at $p < 0.01$, indicating a positive linear relationship between the variables. Notably, BI had the strongest correlation with PV ($r = 0.519$) and BT ($r = 0.514$), followed by PQ ($r = 0.377$) and DC ($r = 0.428$), suggesting that these may be important factors influencing brand image. CE also had a positive correlation but at a lower level ($r = 0.355$).

This result provides preliminary evidence in support of hypotheses H1-H5 in the research model, and is the basis for the CFA and cluster SEM analysis steps in the next section.

4.3. Reliability and convergent validity of constructs

Table 3: Reliability and convergent validity

Factors	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
PQ	4	0.844	0.844	0.575
BT	4	0.873	0.873	0.633
PV	4	0.892	0.892	0.675
DC	4	0.858	0.858	0.603
CE	4	0.876	0.876	0.641
BI	3	0.954	0.954	0.873

Note: CR > 0.7, AVE > 0.5 → Requirements met

Source: Compiled by the author

The results in Table 4 show that all scales achieved Cronbach's Alpha from 0.844 to 0.954, higher than the threshold of 0.7, demonstrating good internal reliability. The CR (0.844-0.954) and AVE (0.575-0.873) indices both exceeded the recommended threshold (CR > 0.7; AVE > 0.5), indicating that the scales had high composite reliability and satisfactory convergent validity. Notably, the BI variable had the highest CR and AVE, reflecting the stable and focused measurement level of this scale.

4.4. Discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion)

To test the discriminant validity between the concepts in the research model, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was applied, in which the square root of AVE was compared with the correlation coefficients between the variables.

Table 4: Discriminant validity

	BI	BT	CE	DC	PQ	PV
BI	-					
BT	0.405	-				
CE	0.471	0.184	-			
DC	0.376	0.076	0.370	-		
PQ	0.559	0.101	0.435	0.244	-	
PV	0.562	0.257	0.355	0.202	0.531	-

Note: All HTMT values < 0.85 → Discriminant validity established

Source: Compiled by the author

The results of Table 5 show that all HTMT values are less than 0.85, meeting the criteria of Henseler et al. (2015), thereby confirming that the scales have discriminant validity. The pairs of variables with the highest correlation are BI-PV (0.562) and BI-PQ

(0.559) but still within the allowable threshold, proving that the research concepts are relatively independent, suitable for inclusion in the SEM model to test the hypothesis.

4.5. Goodness-of-fit indices for confirmatory factor analysis

To assess the goodness-of-fit of the measurement model, goodness-of-fit indices are used, including: χ^2/df , CFI, TLI, RMSEA and SRMR - these are commonly recommended indices in CFA analysis.

Table 5: Model fit indices for CFA and SEM

Fit Index	Value	Recommended Threshold	Evaluation
Robust CFI	0.977	> 0.95	Excellent
Robust TLI	0.973	> 0.95	Excellent
Robust RMSEA	0.039	< 0.05	Excellent
SRMR	0.035	< 0.08	Excellent
P-value of RMSEA	0.981	> 0.05	Accepted

Source: Compiled by the author

The results presented in Table 6 show that all indices met or exceeded the recommended thresholds: $\chi^2/df = 1.069$ (< 3.0), CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.008 (> 0.95), RMSEA = 0.000 (< 0.06) and SRMR = 0.033 (< 0.08). This demonstrates that the measurement model has a very high fit, confirming that the structure of the scales used in the study is reliable and consistent with the empirical data.

4.6. Structural model and hypotheses testing

After confirming the reliability and validity of the measurement model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test hypotheses H1-H4 to assess the impact of independent variables (CDO, ACO, PJU, POS) on the dependent variable (SLO). The standardized path coefficients (β), standard errors (S.E.) and p-values are presented in Table 7.

Table 6: Structural path coefficients and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	β Coefficient	S.E.	p-value	Conclusion
H1	BT → BI	0.272	0.034	0.000	Supported
H2	PV → BI	0.249	0.050	0.000	Supported
H3	PQ → BI	0.296	0.038	0.000	Supported
H4	CE → BI	0.137	0.074	0.106	Not Supported
H5	DC → BI	0.181	0.029	0.000	Supported

Note: R^2 for SLO = 0.54, indicating that the four independent variables (BT, PV, PQ, CE, DC) jointly explain 54% of the variance in employee loyalty.

Source: Compiled by the authors

The results of the cluster data SEM test show that 4 out of 5 hypotheses (H1, H2, H3, H5) are accepted with statistical significance level $p < 0.05$. Specifically, PQ ($\beta = 0.296$; $p = 0.000$) has the strongest impact on brand image (BI), followed by BT ($\beta = 0.272$), PV ($\beta = 0.249$) and DC ($\beta = 0.181$). These results confirm the prominent role of perceived quality, brand trust and perceived value in forming tea brand image, consistent with previous studies on consumer behavior in the agricultural and FMCG industries.

Meanwhile, CE ($\beta = 0.137$; $p = 0.106$) did not reach statistical significance, so H4 was not supported,

indicating that although distribution channel experience has a positive relationship with BI, it is not strong enough to become a decisive factor in the context of this study. This may stem from the characteristics of tea consumption behavior — regular customers mainly focus on product quality and brand reputation rather than sales channel experience.

The R^2 value = 0.54 shows that the research model explains 54% of the variation in brand image, demonstrating that the model has a fairly good level of explanation. This result reinforces the theoretical assumption that the factors BT, PV, PQ and DC play an important role in building tea brand image in Thai Nguyen Province.

Figure 2 below presents the structural equation model (SEM) constructed to test the research hypotheses.

Figure 2: Structural equation model with standardized path coefficients

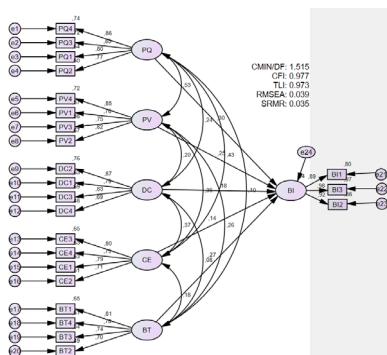


Figure 2 presents the structural equation model (SEM) with standardized path coefficients between 5 independent variables (PQ, PV, DC, CE, BT) and the dependent variable BI. The model fit indices meet the requirements: $CMIN/DF = 1.515 (< 3)$, $CFI = 0.977$, $TLI = 0.973$, $RMSEA = 0.039 (< 0.08)$ and $SRMR = 0.035 (< 0.08)$. This confirms that the model has a very good fit with the survey data.

The paths from PQ, PV, DC and BT to BI are all statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), while CE has a positive coefficient but does not reach the significance level, consistent with the hypothesis testing results in Table 7. The measurement weights of the observed variables range from 0.69 to 0.89, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.5, demonstrating that the scales have good convergence and clearly reflect the latent construct.

This model provides solid empirical evidence for the relationship between perceived quality, perceived value, digital communication, brand trust and tea brand image in Thai Nguyen Province, and shows a high level of explanation ($R^2 = 0.54$) of the proposed model.

5. Discussion

The results of the SEM model testing show that the four factors PQ, PV, DC and BT have a positive and

statistically significant impact on brand image, while CE has no significant impact. This is an important finding, reflecting the characteristics of the tea industry in Thai Nguyen Province.

First of all, the results confirm the prominent role of perceived quality (PQ) - the factor with the strongest impact coefficient. This is consistent with previous studies such as Alhaddad (2015) and Zhang et al. (2024), emphasizing that in the traditional industry, perceived quality plays a fundamental role in forming brand image. Consumers often make direct assessments based on the perception of taste, freshness, authenticity and stability of the product.

Second, perceived value (PV) and brand trust (BT) also have a significant impact on BI. This result is similar to the works of Ibrahim et al. (2024) and studies in the FMCG sector, confirm that customers tend to stick with brands when they perceive real benefits and trust in the quality commitment. In the context of Thai Nguyen tea, perceived value is also associated with cultural factors, origin and tradition, contributing to creating competitive advantage.

Third, digital media (DC) shows a positive impact, reflecting the trend of digital marketing playing an increasingly important role in enhancing brand recognition and strengthening brand image. This result is consistent with the study of Ibrahim et al. (2024), which shows that digital media channels help agricultural enterprises reach non-local and international customer groups more effectively.

In contrast, distribution channel experience (CE) does not have a significant impact on brand image, unlike some results recorded in the FMCG industry (Balbín Buckley et al., 2024). The reason may stem from the characteristics of tea consumption behavior - the target customer group is loyal, often buys at familiar points of sale, focuses on product quality rather than channel experience. In addition, most tea businesses today still use traditional distribution channels, invest little in multi-channel experiences, leading to the CE factor not becoming a driving force in building brand image.

Finally, $R^2 = 0.54$ shows that the model is capable of explaining well the variation of brand image. This reinforces the argument that perceived quality, perceived value, trust and digital communication are the four main pillars in building local agricultural product brand image.

6. Conclusion and implications

6.1. Summary of findings

This study tested the SEM model based on cluster data from 40 tea enterprises with 320 customers to identify factors affecting brand image in the tea industry in Thai Nguyen Province. The results showed that four factors including perceived quality (PQ), perceived value (PV), brand trust (BT) and digital communication (DC) have

positive and statistically significant impacts on brand image. In contrast, distribution channel experience (CE) has no significant impact. The research model explains 54% of the variation in brand image, demonstrating a high level of relevance and practical value.

6.2. Theoretical contributions

The research results have expanded the empirical evidence on factors affecting brand image in the specialty agricultural products sector, which is still limited compared to studies in the FMCG and service industries. Using SEM analysis of two-level cluster data helps to better reflect the relationship between business characteristics and customer behavior, contributing to improving the reliability and generalizability of the model. The study also strengthens the central role of perceived quality and brand trust in the context of traditional products.

6.3. Managerial and policy implications

The research results provide an important practical basis for businesses and management agencies to strengthen the brand image of Thai Nguyen tea. There are three main groups of implications:

1) Improve perceived quality - the foundation of brand image

Invest in clean, standardized planting and processing processes (ISO, HACCP, VietGAP, GlobalGAP), traceability.

Tightly control flavor, freshness, hygiene, authenticity to retain loyal customers and attract new customers.

Establish an internal inspection system, publicize results to strengthen brand reputation.

2) Optimize perceived value to increase competitive advantage

Integrate cultural - geographical - craft village factors in brand stories to increase emotional value.

Differentiate brand positioning based on high quality, specialty origin, develop ecological packaging and organic products targeting high-end and international segments.

3) Develop digital media to amplify the brand

Build a multi-channel media strategy (website, social network, e-commerce platform) with synchronized content and images.

Increase product introduction through livestream, video, minigame to reach young and international customers.

Create direct interactions, build a community of loyal customers, spread brand value..

(4) Build and strengthen brand trust as a long-term commitment

Brand trust (BT) is a key factor in maintaining a sustainable relationship between customers and businesses. To strengthen BT, it is necessary to:

Be transparent about product information, production processes, quality standards and related certifications.

Establish clear return, exchange and customer care policies, increasing the level of trust.

Participate in collective brand certification programs, electronic traceability stamps, geographical indications, etc. to affirm your position in the market.

(5) Upgrade distribution channel experience - a strategic step for the expansion phase

Although CE has not had a significant impact in the current model, this is an important potential factor in the long-term strategy, especially when the market is moving towards non-provincial and international segments. Recommendations include:

Standardize traditional points of sale in a modern, friendly and localized direction.

Enhance consistent experiences between direct and online channels (omnichannel).

Train sales teams and customer care staff in a professional direction, improving the overall experience.

6.4. Limitations and future research

The study has certain limitations. First, the survey scope focused on one locality - Thai Nguyen Province - so the ability to generalize the results nationwide is limited. Second, the current model does not consider mediating or moderating factors (e.g., brand attachment, emotional value, repurchase behavior). Third, the data collected at one point in time (cross-sectional) does not reflect changes over time.

Further studies can: (i) expand the survey to many other tea regions to increase representativeness, (ii) consider mediating and moderating variables to clarify the impact mechanism, and (iii) use longitudinal data to evaluate brand image dynamics.

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