



The Mediating Effect of Digital Transformation on Organizational Agility and Strategic Decision-Making in the UAE Retail Industry

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ABSTRACT:

The primary objective of this research is to examine the mediating role of digital transformation in the relationship between organizational agility and strategic decision-making within the UAE retail industry. A quantitative research approach will be employed to ensure a systematic and data-driven examination of these relationships. The Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework will serve as the guiding model, providing a comprehensive lens for assessing digital transformation adoption. Data will be collected through structured questionnaires targeting retail professionals across diverse retail organizations, including multinational chains and small-to-medium enterprises. Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) will be used as the primary statistical technique due to its effectiveness in handling complex relationships, testing mediation effects, and analyzing latent variables. This approach is particularly suitable for studies with relatively small to moderate sample sizes and exploratory research contexts, ensuring robust and reliable results. This research will contribute significantly to the literature UAE retail industry by encouraging digital transformation integration, to maintain organizational agility towards strategic decision-making within the organization.

Keywords: Digital Transformation, Organizational Agility, Strategic Decision-Making, Retail Industry, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This chapter introduces the study's context, scope, and rationale by examining the accelerating digital transformation within the UAE retail industry and its influence on organizational agility and strategic decision-making. It begins with a comprehensive **background** outlining the rapid growth of the UAE's retail sector, highlighting key statistics, market dynamics, and the increasing need for digital integration amidst evolving consumer expectations. The **problem statement** then identifies core issues, emphasizing inconsistent digital adoption, limited agility, and underutilization of digital tools in strategic processes, thereby justifying the study's relevance. The **purpose of the study** follows, clarifying the research intent to investigate the interplay between digital transformation, agility, and strategic decision-making to offer actionable insights for industry stakeholders. The chapter then presents clearly defined **research objectives, questions, and hypotheses**, focusing on key variable relationships, including a mediating effect.

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A well-founded **conceptual framework**, grounded in the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) model and supported by theories such as Dynamic Capabilities and Institutional Theory, is outlined to guide the analysis.

1.2 Background of the Research

The retail industry in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has experienced significant growth and transformation, primarily driven by digital innovations and shifting consumer expectations. In 2023, the UAE's retail market was valued at approximately US\$138 billion, with projections to reach US\$219 billion by 2032, reflecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.30% during the forecast period. The sector encompasses various sub-sectors, including food and beverage, fashion and apparel, electronics, luxury goods, and home furnishings, catering to both local and international consumers. Notably, the fashion retail segment experienced a 31% growth in 2023, driven by increased sales in fashion and accessories. Similarly, the electronics sub-sector saw a remarkable 33% growth over the previous year. Prominent players such as Majid Al Futtaim, Lulu Group International, and Landmark Group operate across these sub-sectors, underscoring the diversity and competitive nature of the UAE retail landscape. In 2023, consumer spending in the UAE rose by 13% year-on-year, propelled by a 14% increase in retail spending. Lulu Group International, for instance, reported revenues of \$7.3 billion in 2023 and initiated a significant initial public offering (IPO) in October 2024, aiming to capitalize on the \$100-billion market opportunity in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) retail sector. UAE merchants must match their plans with new trends and technology to fully realize the promise of digital transformation. Retailers now have more opportunities than ever to innovate and meet changing customer expectations because of trends like big data analytics, the Internet of Things (Iota), and block chain (Savioz, (2024). Retailers may improve customer experiences, optimize marketing campaigns, and obtain deeper insights into consumer behavior by using these technologies.

1.3 Problem Statement

The retail industry in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is undergoing a significant transition, fueled by economic diversification, increased consumer demand, and substantial investments in infrastructure and technology (Antwi-Boateng, & Al Jaber, 2022). However, this growth has not been matched with consistent digital adoption across the sector. Many retail firms are hesitant to fully embrace digital transformation due to limited technological familiarity, high perceived costs, and uncertainty about return on investment (Al Jaber et al., 2019). This technological lag creates disparities in operational efficiency and responsiveness, thereby weakening firms' ability to maintain a competitive edge in an increasingly digital and globalized marketplace. A key area where this shortfall becomes visible is in the realm of organizational agility and strategic decision-making, where rigid structures prevent firms from responding quickly to market changes or making informed, forward-looking decisions. Although both agility and strategic decision-making are recognized as crucial for success, the extent to which agility directly contributes to improved strategic decision-making in the UAE retail context remains under explored (Alnuaimi, & Eni, 2025). Understanding this relationship is essential for firms striving to align internal capabilities with long-term strategic goals in a volatile market.

Equally important is the relationship between organizational agility and digital transformation, which has received limited scholarly attention in the UAE retail context. Organizational agility, defined as a firm's ability to swiftly sense and respond to environmental changes, often depends on how well digital technologies are embedded within business operations. However, many retail firms in the UAE continue to operate with traditional business models that lack the technological infrastructure needed for real-time responsiveness (Walter, 2021). This misalignment suggests that agility is hindered not by lack of intent but by a weak foundation in digital systems and processes. The relationship between agility and digital transformation must be investigated to determine whether agile firms are more likely to pursue and successfully implement digital initiatives, or if digital transformation itself is a prerequisite for enabling organizational agility. Clarifying this connection would help businesses identify the directionality of influence and strategically prioritize investments in capabilities that unlock agility.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- To examine the relationship between organizational agility and strategic decision-making.
- To examine the relationship between organizational agility and digital transformation;
- To examine the relationship between digital transformation and strategic decision-making;
- The examine the mediating effect of digital transformation between organizational agility and strategic decision making.

1.5 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to bridge the knowledge gap on how digital transformation can enhance organizational agility and strategic decision-making in the UAE retail sector. By analyzing the current state of digital technology adoption—including automation, e-commerce, and data analytics—this research seeks to understand the extent to which these technologies impact the agility and decision-making capabilities of UAE retail companies.

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The links between the variables under investigation are represented visually by the conceptual framework (Marseille et al., 2021). It serves as an analytical tool that helps to clarify the relationships between various factors and the study issue. The conceptual framework, which was created based on well-established concepts and goals, makes it easier to solve problems and investigate possible solutions. Effective research findings are guided by the researcher's emphasis and values, which are made clear during the inquiry. Research efficiency is increased using conceptual frameworks, which organize the connections between major areas of interest.

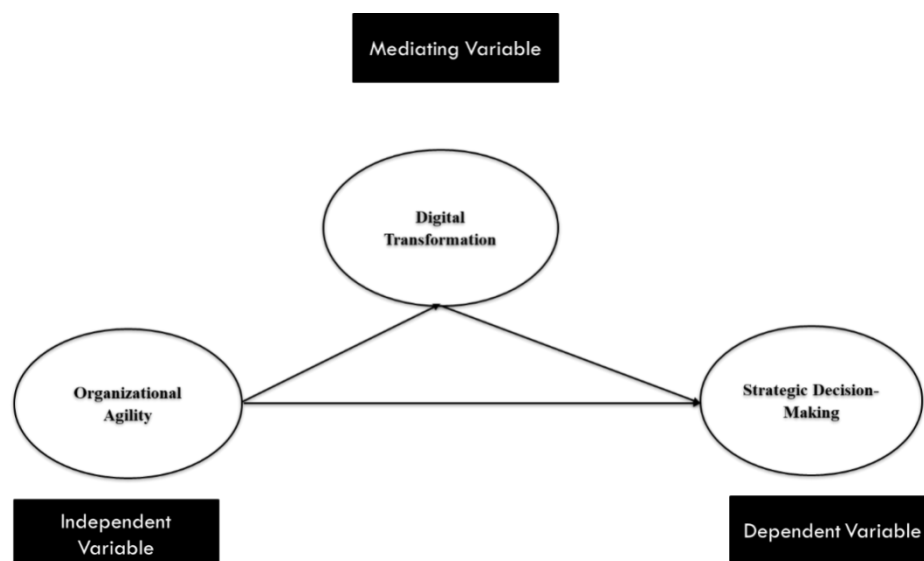


Figure 1.1 : Conceptual Framework

1.7 Research Questions

1. Do organizational agility and strategic decision-making have a significant relationship?
2. Do organizational agility practices influence digital transformation efforts in organizations?
3. Do digital transformation initiatives affect strategic decision-making?
4. Does digital transformation mediate the relationship between organizational agility and strategic decision-making?

1.8 Research Hypothesis

- **H1:** There is a significant relationship between digital transformation and organization agility in the UAE retail industry

- **H2:** There is a significant relationship between digital transformation and strategic decision-making in the UAE retail industry.
- **H3:** There is a significant relationship between digital transformation and strategic decision-making in the UAE retail industry.
- **H4:** Digital transformation mediates the relationship between organization agility and strategic decision-making in the UAE retail industry.

1.9 Operational Definition

• Digital Transformation

The term "digital transformation" describes how digital technologies are integrated and used in all business domains to change operational procedures and accomplish organizational objectives. In other definition of the strategic integration of digital technology across business processes in the UAE's retail industry is referred to in this report as "digital transformation." By implementing digital platforms and technologies, it seeks to increase productivity and accomplish corporate goals. (Kraus et al., 2021).

• Strategic Decision Making

Decision making is the act of finding the best option among options, recognizing a decision, and obtaining information are all steps in the decision-making process. Thus, to use the words of others, the process of analyzing the positive and negative aspects of many options and choosing the best one is called decision-making. It entails realizing when a choice is necessary, obtaining pertinent data, and estimating possible results. (Eller et al., 2020; Saarikko et al., 2020).

• Organizational Agility

Thereby, organizational agility in this study refers to the ability of UAE retail organizations to rapidly and effectively adapt to internal and external changes while meeting customer demands and expectations, ensuring sustained competitiveness and responsiveness in a dynamic and evolving market environment.

1.10 Study Limitations

There could be some restrictions on the significance of the results and generalizability. First off, there's the risk that the study's dependence on industry participants willing to supply relevant data would lead to sample bias, which might distort the picture of the UAE's larger retail market. Additionally, because of possible respondent resistance or inadequate information supplied, the methods used for data collection—such as interviews and self-reported techniques—may create limits that affect the quality and accuracy of the data. Furthermore, resource limits, such as time and financial ones, which might prevent a full investigation of pertinent parts of the retail business, may limit the study's breadth and depth. Moreover, contextual factors unique to the shop scene in the United Arab Emirates may limit the external validity of the findings and restrict the applicability of the findings to other geographic areas or industrial sectors. In addition, despite efforts to reduce such biases through awareness and honesty, inherent researcher biases or assumptions may still affect how data are interpreted, thereby adding subjectivity to the study. To guarantee an open evaluation of the study's bounds and probable limits and to support the validity and dependability of the research findings, these restrictions should be acknowledged.

1.11 Importance of the Research

Enhanced client experiences, better managerial decision-making skills, cost optimization, and operational efficiency are only a few advantages that come with digital transformation in the retail sector (Castagna et al., 2020). This study offers insightful information about the operational efficiency attained in the retail industry as a result of the adoption and application of digital technology. In the current business environment, knowing this subject is essential since digital transformation improves customer satisfaction, boosts operational effectiveness, makes strategic decision-making easier, and allows for cost reduction, all of which contribute to increased profitability (Saarikko et al., 2020). The integration of digital solutions enables retailers to adapt to consumer expectations, stay ahead of competitors, and optimize their supply chains, further contributing to business success. With the advent of technologies like the Internet of Things (IoT) and blockchain, retailers can

now offer greater transparency and real-time inventory management, streamlining operations and improving customer trust.

1.12 Summary

An outline of the study topic is given in the first chapter, which also highlights the importance of incorporating digital transformation and how it helps the retail business. It presents the research questions and hypotheses as well as the research objectives, lining them up with the study subject. The chapter also emphasizes the significance of the study by going over operational definitions and research constraints. In order to graphically express the variables being studied, a conceptual framework is supplied.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on the mediating role of digital transformation in enhancing organizational agility and strategic decision-making within the UAE retail sector. The chapter explores the dynamic nature of the UAE retail industry, driven by economic growth, technological advancements, and evolving consumer expectations. It examines key concepts—organizational agility, strategic decision-making, and digital transformation—and their interactions in retail settings. Additionally, it highlights significant developments and market trends in the UAE retail landscape and discusses relevant theories and models, such as the Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) framework and Dynamic Capabilities Theory. This comprehensive review provides the theoretical foundation for understanding the study variables and lays the groundwork for subsequent empirical investigation.

2.2. The UAE Retail Industry

The UAE's retail industry has emerged as one of the most dynamic and fast-growing sectors in the region, driven by demographic, economic, and technological factors. According to Beaver stock (2012), the increasing expatriate population, coupled with rising per capita income, has significantly contributed to the growth of the retail sector. The influx of expatriates has created a diverse consumer base with varied preferences, which has expanded the market for retail goods and services. Additionally, the increase in consumer spending, fueled by high levels of disposable income and employment opportunities, has further bolstered the sector.

2.3. The Concept of Digital Transformation

Digital transformation refers to the integration of digital technologies into all aspects of an organization's operations, fundamentally altering the way businesses deliver value to customers, streamline processes, and achieve strategic objectives. It goes beyond mere adoption of technology to encompass a cultural shift that drives innovation and agility across the organization (Vial, 2021). This process involves rethinking traditional business models and aligning them with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), big data analytics, cloud computing, and the Internet of Things (IoT) to meet evolving consumer demands and remain competitive (Kraus et al., 2021).

2.4. The Concept of Strategic Decision-Making

Strategic decision-making refers to the process by which organizations determine long-term courses of action that align with their overarching objectives and vision. These decisions are pivotal as they shape an organization's ability to navigate competitive markets, address operational challenges, and ensure sustainable growth (Mishra et al., 2021). Effective strategic decisions require comprehensive analysis, including evaluating internal capabilities, market dynamics, and technological advancements.

2.5 The Concept of Organizational Agility

Organizational agility is defined as the ability of an organization to rapidly adapt to both internal and external changes while meeting the evolving needs and expectations of its customers (Walter, 2021). This concept extends beyond mere responsiveness to encompass the capacity for continuous improvement in processes, outcomes, and organizational culture, all of which contribute to maintaining a competitive advantage. Agility allows organizations to effectively pivot in response to market dynamics, ensuring sustained relevance and customer satisfaction.

2.6 Theories and Models

2.6.1. The Accelerating Change Theory

Rodgers (2006) Accelerating Change Theory introduces the concept of Helicy, which emphasizes the stochastic, creative, and continuous variation of human and environmental field patterns. At the core of this theory is the principle of integrality, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between human ingenuity and environmental changes. This theory underscores the inevitability of change and the necessity for organizations to adapt proactively to remain competitive and thrive in a dynamic environment (Butcher, 2021).

2.6.2. The Configurational Theory

Ruth Benedict developed the Configurational Theory in 1934. It creates connections between different objects or components in different domains. According to this theory, in order to produce a particular outcome of interest, a variety of causally significant combinations of circumstances must be connected. As opposed to emphasizing individual things, this paradigm highlights combinations as the primary unit. Retailers need to know how to mix and market their services to clients in an efficient manner because of the wide range of products that various firms sell and the different target audiences that they serve. Retailers may decide which products to integrate and how to offer them to their target audience by integrating digital transformation technology (Dzhulay, 2021).

2.6.3. The Organizational Learning Theory

Chris Argyris and Donald Schon's Organizational Learning Theory posits that learning occurs when errors are identified and corrected, leading to knowledge creation and continuous improvement within organizations. This theory emphasizes the role of social interactions and feedback mechanisms in facilitating organizational learning, as individuals collaboratively identify problems, analyze them, and implement solutions. It highlights the importance of acquiring new knowledge to enhance processes and achieve better outcomes (Brandt & Elkjaer, 2016).

2.6.4. Dynamic Capabilities Theory

Developed by Teece et al. (1997), the Dynamic Capabilities Theory explores how organizations can develop and sustain a competitive advantage in rapidly changing environments. The theory highlights the importance of operational, administrative, and governance capabilities that enable businesses to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external resources to address dynamic market conditions. These dynamic capabilities are crucial for fostering innovation, strategic agility, and long-term resilience (Egodawele et al., 2022).

2.7 Discussion on Construct Relationships and Hypothesis Development

This section explores the relationships between the key constructs of this study—organizational agility, digital transformation, and strategic decision-making—based on existing literature. The discussion is organized according to the study objectives, highlighting how these constructs interact within the UAE retail sector and how digital transformation serves as a mediating factor.

2.8 Summary

The literature study in Chapter 2 explores how organizational agility and strategic decision-making in the retail industry in the United Arab Emirates are mediated by digital transformation. It starts by looking at how the UAE retail industry is changing due to a number of variables, including customer preferences, economic growth, and the use of digital technologies. The chapter explains the core ideas of digital transformation, strategic decision-making, and organizational agility. It also discusses the importance of these ideas and how they interact in retail settings. It also examines the unique characteristics of the retail business in the United Arab Emirates, highlighting noteworthy advancements, market segmentation, and the power of major companies in the sector. The chapter establishes the foundation for comprehending and assessing the intricate dynamics of the digital transition in retail environments by providing a thorough analysis of pertinent ideas and models. Moreover, by combining the most recent research findings and offering a foundation for further analytical and empirical studies, it advances our understanding of the significance of the study issue for the retail sector in the United Arab Emirates.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed to investigate the mediating effect of digital transformation on organizational agility and strategic decision-making within the UAE retail sector. This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the research design, which serves as the blueprint for systematically addressing the research questions and objectives. It begins by establishing the philosophical perspective underpinning the study, offering a rationale for adopting a positivist paradigm to ensure an objective and empirical examination of the constructs. The research approach, primarily quantitative, is justified for its ability to measure relationships and test hypotheses with numerical data. Sampling strategies are carefully designed to ensure the representation of professionals within the UAE retail sector who possess relevant expertise and insights. Furthermore, the data collection process is explained, with an emphasis on structured questionnaires tailored to capture perceptions and practices related to digital transformation, organizational agility, and strategic decision-making.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Philosophical position:

The positive stance taken by this research is based on the conviction that social phenomena may be measured and observed empirically to get an objective understanding of them. Establishing causal linkages between variables and evaluating hypotheses are crucial, according to positivism

3.2.2 Research approach:

This study employs a quantitative research strategy to systematically collect and analyze numerical data, ensuring a structured approach to measuring relationships between key variables. By utilizing this methodology, the research statistically examines the mediating role of digital transformation in the relationship between organizational agility and strategic decision-making within the UAE retail industry. This approach enables hypothesis testing and provides empirical insights into the extent and significance of these relationships, ensuring objective and data-driven conclusions.

3.3 Population and Sampling

The study population comprises professionals and stakeholders in the UAE retail sector, including managers, decision-makers, and employees with relevant experience in digital transformation, organizational agility, and strategic decision-making. These individuals are selected because they possess the knowledge and insights necessary to evaluate the impact of digital transformation on the industry. To justify the overall population, secondary data from industry sources such as the UAE Retail Association, Dubai Chamber of Commerce, and business intelligence platforms were reviewed. These sources collectively indicate that the UAE retail sector comprises over 100,000 employees, out of which approximately 10–15% are involved in digital strategy, IT operations, or managerial decision-making. This translates into an estimated study-relevant population of 10,000–15,000 individuals. This estimation will be supported by a graphical chart (Figure 1) illustrating sector-wise segmentation and role-based population approximations.

3.4 Unit of Analysis

The main unit of analysis in this study is the individual retail industry professionals. The research endeavors to acquire a complete knowledge of how digital transformation impacts organizational agility and strategic decision-making in the retail industry by concentrating on the perspectives and experiences of individual professionals. This unit of analysis is appropriate because the constructs under investigation—digital transformation, organizational agility, and strategic decision-making—are rooted in individual perceptions, experiences, and behaviors.

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

The data for this study will be collected from a carefully selected group of professionals in the UAE retail sector who have relevant experience in digital transformation and strategic decision-making. Participants will be chosen using a structured selection process from a predefined list, ensuring balanced representation across roles and organizations. A structured questionnaire will be distributed online via platforms such as Google Forms, Qualtrics, or SurveyMonkey.

3.6 Instruments

The primary instrument for this study is a structured questionnaire designed to collect quantitative data related to digital transformation, organizational agility, and strategic decision-making in the UAE retail sector. The questionnaire incorporates previously validated scales from existing literature to ensure reliability and validity.

3.7 Pioneer Study

A pioneer study is conducted to validate the questionnaire and refine the research process. The pilot study involves 20 participants from the UAE retail sector to test the feasibility, clarity, and reliability of the instrument. The following steps are taken:

1. Pilot study (two weeks trial run):

It is a pilot study that was conducted prior to the actual research. It relies on the same data collection procedures (surveys, interviews, or experiments) as those that the actual study will involve. This is aimed at determining whether the procedures flow well, and to pre-empt any issues.

2. Check of pilot results validity and reliability:

Once the pilot data has been gathered the researcher evaluates whether the questions are in fact measuring what they are supposed to measure (validity) and whether the results can be reliably reproduced by the entire group (reliability). In case certain questions are ambiguous or failing to generate any relevant information then they are modified.

3. Strengthen or eliminate weak items:

Survey or test items with poor reliability (e.g., low Cronbachs alpha) or not found to relate well with constructs they are intended to measure are either revised to make them more comprehensible or completely dropped to enhance the overall instrument.

4. Normal tests and other preliminary statistical tests:

The researcher will test the data to adhere to the required statistical assumptions (e.g., normal distribution, linearity, no multicollinearity, etc.) before using any advanced methods such as regression or mediation. Assuming that it is met, it guarantees that the data is appropriate to the primary analyses to be made.

3.8 Data Analysis Procedures

Data collected through survey were analyzed by using software as SPSS (22) and PLS 3.2.7. In the present study, SPSS 22 was employed to carry out the descriptive statistics analysis; data was screened, descriptive and validity checking done for entry. It followed that we used software known as Smart PLS which is a method of regression analysis. Same as measurement for an internal and structural for an external. In this study, SPSS and SmartPLS were used in a complementary manner to ensure thorough and accurate data analysis. SPSS (Version 22) was utilized primarily for preliminary data screening, including checking for missing values, outliers, normality, and conducting descriptive statistics to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents. This step ensured the dataset's cleanliness and readiness for advanced analysis. Following this, SmartPLS 3.2.7 was employed to perform Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which allowed for simultaneous assessment of both the measurement model (to evaluate the reliability and validity of the constructs) and the structural model (to test hypothesized relationships between variables). This dual-software approach ensured methodological rigor by first validating data integrity through SPSS and then applying PLS-SEM for robust model estimation and hypothesis testing.

Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was selected over Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM), such as AMOS, due to the exploratory nature of the current study and its focus on prediction and theory development. PLS-SEM is particularly suitable when the research model is complex, includes multiple constructs, and the primary goal is to maximize explained variance in the dependent variables. Moreover, the study involves a relatively modest sample size ($n \approx 400$), which is more compatible with the statistical power requirements of PLS-SEM than AMOS, which generally demands larger samples for reliable estimation. PLS also handles non-normal data distributions more effectively, making it a robust choice for real-world datasets. Additionally, PLS-SEM allows simultaneous assessment of both the measurement model (reliability and validity) and the structural model (hypothesis testing), making it well-suited for studies like this one that integrate mediating effects and formative-reflective constructs.

3.9 Summary

Chapter 3 outlines the comprehensive methodology employed in this study to investigate the mediating effect of digital transformation on organizational agility and strategic decision-making within the UAE retail sector. The research adopts a positive paradigm and a quantitative approach, using a structured questionnaire as the primary instrument. Systematic sampling ensures a representative sample of retail professionals, while rigorous data collection and analysis procedures guarantee the reliability and validity of the findings. This methodological framework is designed to address the research objectives and provide actionable insights for the UAE retail industry.

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