An Extensive Analysis of the Effect of Brand Loyalty on Brand Preference in Airtel Tanzania

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Abstract

Amid intensifying competition that has seen Airtel Tanzania's market share decline from 28 percent in 2023 to 25.8 percent in 2024 (TCRA, 2024), this study assesses how attitudinal and behavioral dimensions of brand loyalty influence brand preference. Drawing on Aaker's Brand Equity Theory and Attitude-Behaviour Consistency Theory, two hypotheses were posited:H_1*: Attitudinal loyalty positively affects brand preference.*H_2*: Behavioral loyalty positively affects brand preference. A quantitative design employed structured questionnaires administered to 400 randomly selected Airtel customers across Dar-es-Salaam's five municipalities. Instrument reliability was confirmed (Cronbach's* $\alpha = 0.85$*), and content validity established through expert pre-testing. Data were analysed with Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in AMOS v.29. The measurement model satisfied threshold criteria (factor loadings* ≥ 0.60*; AVE* ≥ 0.50*). Overall model fit was acceptable (*$\chi^2/df = 2.17$*; CFI = 0.948; TLI = 0.936; RMSEA = 0.054; SRMR = 0.041), indicating robust construct validity. Path estimates supported both hypotheses:* H_1 *(*$\beta = 0.42, p < 0.001$*) and* H_2 *(*$\beta = 0.36, p < 0.001$*), jointly explaining 58 percent of the variance in brand preference. Attitudinal loyalty—reflected in favourable beliefs and emotional attachment—exerted the stronger effect, underscoring the strategic value of cultivating positive brand sentiments alongside repeat-purchase behaviour. Practical recommendations for Airtel Tanzania, Digital-centric initiatives, Personalised MyAirtel App rewards: Use AI-driven segmentation to deliver dynamic data bundles and micro-loans, reinforcing attitudinal engagement. Gamified loyalty dashboards: Badges, leaderboards, and referral trackers within the app to convert behavioural loyalty into advocacy. Omnichannel data analytics: Integrate USSD, M-Pesa, and social-media touchpoints to monitor churn signals and trigger real-time retention offers. Complementary traditional tactics are Neighbourhood agent empowerment: Equip airtime agents with instant-commission incentives and branded point-of-sale materials to sustain visibility among feature-phone users, Community-based events: Sponsor local football and entrepreneurship clinics to strengthen emotional bonds where digital reach is limited. By synchronising high-frequency digital engagements with face-to-face community outreach, Airtel can translate loyalty drivers into durable brand preference, countering market-share erosion and enhancing lifetime customer value.*

Keywords: Brand loyalty, Brand preference, Airtel Tanzania, customer retention, telecommunication industry.

1.0 Introduction

In today's hyper-competitive telecommunications industry, brand loyalty plays a pivotal role in shaping consumer behavior, especially in influencing brand preference and long-term purchasing decisions (Martinez & Lee, 2020). Globally, numerous studies have confirmed that loyal customers are more likely to repurchase, recommend, and defend their preferred brands (Kim & Park, 2021). For instance, Brown (2023) found that in the U.S. telecom sector, brand loyalty significantly increased customer lifetime value and reduced churn, even amidst aggressive pricing wars. Similarly, in China, Liu and Chen (2022) highlighted that customer loyalty buffers against market volatility by fostering emotional attachment and consistent brand preference.

However, despite these global insights, there is increasing scholarly recognition that the drivers and outcomes of brand loyalty are not universal but are deeply influenced by contextual factors such as cultural norms, market maturity, and service expectations (Huang et al., 2021). This necessitates country-specific research to understand how brand loyalty operates in different environments, particularly in emerging markets like Tanzania.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the telecommunications sector has grown rapidly, with over 500 million mobile subscribers as of 2022 and projected to exceed 630 million by 2025 (African Telecommunications Union, 2023). In this competitive space, brand loyalty is emerging as a strategic asset for telecom providers. Empirical studies in Nigeria (Okeke, 2022), Kenya (Wanyama, 2021), and South Africa (Naidoo, 2020) confirm that brand loyalty significantly enhances brand preference, customer satisfaction, and retention. Yet, these studies also emphasize that the interplay between loyalty and preference varies based on service quality perceptions, digital adoption, and market structure, signaling the need for localized investigations.

In Tanzania, where over 62 million mobile subscriptions exist (TCRA, 2024), the telecom market is dominated by players like Airtel, Vodacom, Tigo, and Halotel. Despite its market presence, Airtel Tanzania has witnessed a decline in market share—from 28% in 2023 to 25.8% in 2024 (TCRA, 2024)—underscoring the urgency to understand consumer loyalty dynamics. Yet, the empirical evidence linking brand loyalty to brand preference in the Tanzanian telecom sector remains scarce and fragmented. While studies by Mushi and Komba (2022) and Mwakalebela and Nyamhanga (2023) have explored aspects of brand equity and customer satisfaction, they have not disaggregated loyalty into attitudinal and behavioral components, nor have they tested how these loyalty dimensions predict brand preference in Airtel's specific operational context. This limits both the depth and applicability of their findings for strategic decision-making in a highly competitive market.

Theoretically, many Tanzanian studies also fall short of applying well-established frameworks such as Aaker's Brand Equity Theory (1991). Aaker's model recognizes brand loyalty as a core driver of brand equity, alongside brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand associations, all of which converge to influence brand preference. The absence of such a theoretical lens in previous research weakens both the analytical rigor and comparability of findings across contexts.

Methodologically, a significant limitation in existing Tanzanian studies is their reliance on descriptive statistics or qualitative methods, which lack the capacity to explore multidimensional, latent constructs and inter-variable relationships. For instance, Mushi and Komba (2022) used basic regression and correlation analyses, which, while useful, do not adequately capture complex pathways between attitudinal and behavioral loyalty and brand preference. To address this, the present study adopts Structural Equation Modeling (SEM)—a technique superior in modeling both direct and indirect relationships among latent variables, handling measurement error, and testing model fitness through indices such as CFI, RMSEA, TLI, and SRMR (Hair et al., 2019).

By combining Aaker's theoretical framework with SEM-based analysis, this study provides a methodologically robust and contextually grounded assessment of how attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty influence brand preference among Airtel Tanzania customers. This approach not only fills critical gaps in existing Tanzanian literature but also offers actionable insights tailored to Airtel's digital transformation agenda and market retention strategies.

Grounded in Aaker's Brand Equity Theory (1991) and Attitude-Behavior Consistency Theory (1975), this study aims to fill these gaps by providing an extensive analysis of the effect of brand loyalty on brand preference in the Tanzanian context, specifically focusing on Airtel Tanzania. By applying SEM, this research will provide a nuanced understanding of how attitudinal and behavioral components of loyalty shape brand preference in an emerging and dynamic market

2.0 Literature Review

Global Perspective

Classic loyalty theorists contend that psychological commitment is the nucleus of repeat patronage: Oliver (2010) describes loyalty as a "deeply-held commitment" that survives attractive alternatives, while Keller (2020) links durable preference to the emotional bonds brands forge through consistent messaging. researchgate.netresearchgate.net These ideas flourish in high-income markets where switching costs can be nudged upward by bundled contracts, loyalty apps and data-driven personalisation.

By contrast, Tanzanian telecom consumers experience low formal switching barriers and acute price sensitivity. Voice-tariff disparities alone significantly raise the probability of churn between operators (Lulu, 2024). ajol.info Consequently, rational utility-maximising behaviour often eclipses the "emotional lock-in" assumed by Oliver and Keller. Any loyalty strategy in Tanzania must therefore coexist with an environment where SIM-card multi-homing and frequent promo-driven porting are commonplace.

African Perspective

Within the African context, research has highlighted several factors that contribute to brand loyalty and, consequently, to brand preference. Ugoani (2021) found that in Nigeria, customer satisfaction and perceived service quality were central to fostering brand loyalty, which in turn influenced consumer preferences. In Kenya, Mugambi and Wambugu (2020) emphasized the effectiveness of loyalty programs and superior after-sales service in driving brand preference for telecom firms like Safaricom. Meanwhile, Odoom (2020) in Ghana observed that social media engagement and digital interactions were becoming increasingly important in building brand loyalty, especially among younger consumers. While these studies provide valuable insights into loyalty's role in shaping preference, they do not explicitly examine how these relationships unfold in Tanzania's telecom market, nor do they leverage a unified theoretical framework like Aaker's Brand Equity Theory (1991). This study therefore contributes by applying Aaker's theory to analyze brand loyalty as a holistic construct—comprising attitudinal and behavioral dimensions—and its impact on brand preference in Airtel Tanzania.

Across Africa, loyalty research stresses context-specific factors. In Nigeria, service quality and customer satisfaction dominate loyalty formation in telecoms Odoom (2021) , while Kenya's Safaricom leverages Bonga Points—a hybrid monetary–loyalty currency redeemable via M-Pesa—to anchor preference. safaricom.co.ke Ghanaian studies show that social-media engagement and influencer content deepen attitudinal commitment among digital-native cohorts.Mugambi and Wambugu (2020).

Yet Tanzania diverges: only 31.9 % internet penetration and 5.65 million social-media users (8.3 % of the population) curb the reach of purely digital tactics.TCRA (2023) Smartphone penetration remains just 36 %, with feature phones still dominant at 87 %, dampening returns on app-centric or influencer-led loyalty initiatives. *thebizlens.co.tz* This explains why loyalty levers that hinge on heavy data use or app gratification—so powerful in Ghana or South Africa—translate weakly to Tanzania's mixed-device landscape.

Tanzanian Perspective

In Tanzania, brand loyalty in the telecommunications sector has received some scholarly attention. For example, Shayo and Nyaluke (2023) found that Vodacom's loyalty programs and customer service improvements increased consumer commitment and brand preference. However, most Tanzanian studies to date have focused either broadly on brand equity or narrowly on isolated variables such as pricing and advertising (Mushi & Komba, 2022). Furthermore, these studies often lack a systematic framework to integrate the different aspects of brand loyalty—such as attitudinal loyalty (emotional connection) and behavioral loyalty (repeat purchase behavior)—in explaining brand preference. Critically, few studies have focused specifically on Airtel Tanzania, despite its significant market share and unique challenges in the competitive telecom landscape. By adopting Aaker's Brand Equity Theory (1991) as a guiding framework, this study fills this gap by analyzing how brand loyalty—viewed through both its attitudinal and behavioral dimensions—directly influences brand preference within the Airtel Tanzania context. This approach not only provides localized insights but also enriches theoretical understanding of how brand loyalty functions in emerging markets.

Early Tanzanian studies recognise loyalty's relevance but reveal three persistent shortcomings:

- ✧ **Narrow constructs & small samples** – e.g., Mushi & Komba (2022) investigated brand equity with **n = 120** prepaid users drawn via convenience sampling, limiting generalisability.
- ✧ **Descriptive or bivariate techniques** – Vodacom-focused work used descriptive statistics and simple correlations with **n = 250**, unable to untangle latent interactions. rsisinternational.org
- ✧ **Absence of integrated theory** – studies often omit Aaker's Brand Equity lens, treating loyalty as a single indicator rather than decomposing attitudinal versus behaviour facets.

These methodological gaps blur causal pathways and hinder comparative insight across operators—particularly for Airtel, whose market share slid from **28 % (2023) to 25.8 % (2024)** (TCRA, 2024)

Why Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) Is Superior

SEM addresses these deficits **by**:

- ✧ **Capturing multidimensional loyalty:** It simultaneously models attitudinal (affective attachment) and behaviour (repeat purchase) components as latent constructs, unlike single-indicator regressions.

- **Controlling measurement error:** Reliability is embedded in the model, improving parameter accuracy—critical when survey data dominate developing-country research.
- **Testing complex mediation paths:** SEM can examine, for example, how price sensitivity moderates the loyalty–preference link—a relationship mere correlations overlook.
- **Evaluating overall model fit:** Fit indices (e.g., CFI ≥ 0.90, RMSEA ≤ 0.08) offer statistical evidence that the loyalty–preference structure reflects reality, providing stronger grounds for managerial action.

Adopting SEM therefore not only upgrades methodological rigour but also aligns analysis with the **multi-layered, price-volatile** nature of Tanzania's telecom market—yielding insights more actionable for Airtel than prior work anchored in simpler statistical logic.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

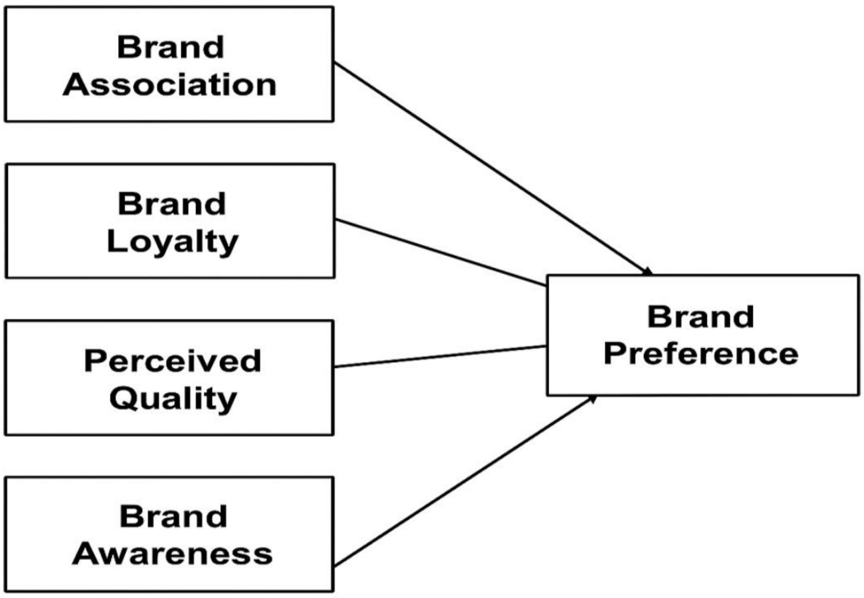
3.1 Theoretical Framework: Aaker's Brand Equity Model

Aaker's Brand Equity Model (1991) offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how brands create long-term competitive advantage through enhanced consumer perceptions and loyalty. The model identifies four key dimensions of brand equity: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. Among these, brand loyalty is particularly significant, as it captures both attitudinal commitment (emotional attachment) and behavioral loyalty (repeat purchase behavior), contributing to reduced marketing costs and enhanced customer lifetime value. Loyal consumers become informal brand ambassadors, actively engaging in positive word-of-mouth and sustained brand patronage (Liu & Chen, 2022).

The model's variables include:

- **Brand Awareness** – the consumer's ability to recognize and recall a brand.
- **Perceived Quality** – the consumer's evaluation of the brand's overall excellence.
- **Brand Associations** – the symbolic meanings and images of the brand.
- **Brand Loyalty** – the extent of emotional and behavioral commitment to a brand.

Theoretical Model Diagram



Global and Contextual Applications of the Theory

The Aaker model has been widely applied in branding research across industries and countries. For example, Chen and Tseng (2022) applied it to analyze smartphone brand preference in China, highlighting the role of brand loyalty in a competitive digital marketplace. In Europe, Müller and Schuster (2020) used the model to examine the interplay of brand loyalty and brand preference in luxury brand consumption. In the African context, Mwangi and Njoroge (2021) explored how brand equity dimensions, including loyalty, influenced brand choice in Kenya's telecom sector.

Identified Gaps and Critical Comparison to this Study

Partial focus on brand loyalty's role: Many global studies have considered brand loyalty alongside other brand equity dimensions without isolating its unique impact. For instance, Müller and Schuster (2020) in Germany and Chen and Tseng (2022) in China analyzed brand loyalty as part of a broader brand equity construct, not as an independent predictor of brand preference. This study addresses this by focusing exclusively on how brand loyalty shapes brand preference in Tanzania.

Geographical limitations: While global studies (e.g., Kim & Park, 2021 in South Korea) have validated Aaker's model in developed economies, there is limited testing in African markets. Even African studies like Okeke (2022) in

Nigeria and Odoom (2020) in Ghana do not extend the model's testing to Tanzania, leaving a contextual gap that this study fills.

Limited application in Tanzanian telecom sector: Few studies in Tanzania, such as Mwakalebela and Nyamhanga (2022), have used Aaker's model, and even these focus broadly on brand equity or customer satisfaction rather than isolating the effect of brand loyalty on brand preference. This research addresses this precise gap by focusing on Airtel Tanzania.

Neglect of variable interrelationships: Most studies, including those in Kenya (Mwangi & Njoroge, 2021) and South Africa (Naidoo, 2020), treat brand equity dimensions as separate predictors rather than exploring how loyalty may mediate or moderate brand preference. This study addresses that oversight by applying a structural model (SEM) to analyze these interconnections.

Lack of robust quantitative testing: Many Tanzanian studies, such as those by Shayo and Nyaluke (2023), have used descriptive or basic correlation analyses, not robust models like SEM that better capture the complexity of the brand loyalty–preference relationship. This study fills this methodological gap by adopting SEM to validate the framework in Airtel's context.

Demographic considerations are often overlooked: Studies in Nigeria (Ugoani, 2021) and Ghana (Odoom, 2020) do not consider how demographic factors (age, gender, urban/rural residence) may moderate the brand loyalty–preference link. This study incorporates these moderators to provide a more nuanced understanding.

Cross-brand competitive comparisons are rare: Most studies, including those by Wanyama (2021) in Kenya, focus on single brands without comparing how brand loyalty influences preference across competitors. This research acknowledges Airtel's shifting competitive environment (with Tigo and Vodacom gaining ground) and considers these market dynamics.

Narrow measurement of brand loyalty: Prior research, such as that by Mushi and Komba (2022) in Tanzania, often equates brand loyalty with repeat purchases, neglecting the attitudinal loyalty dimension emphasized by Aaker. This study addresses both behavioral and attitudinal loyalty to provide a fuller picture.

Contextual influences (like digital marketing and technology adoption) are underexplored: Studies in South Africa (Naidoo, 2020) and Kenya (Mugambi & Wambugu, 2020) highlight digital factors but do not test them within Aaker's framework. This study integrates these contextual realities in Tanzania's telecom market.

Cultural factors remain understudied: Research in developed contexts (e.g., Oliver, 2020 in the U.S.) assumes certain cultural values that may not apply in Tanzania's telecom landscape, where trust and communal brand interactions may play larger roles. This study tailors Aaker's framework to Tanzania's unique cultural setting, addressing this critical gap.

By leveraging Aaker's Brand Equity Model and addressing these gaps, this study provides a theoretically grounded and contextually relevant examination of how brand loyalty drives brand preference in Airtel Tanzania—a market that has not been thoroughly explored despite its significance.

3.2 Theoretical Framework: Attitude-Behavior Consistency Theory

The Attitude-Behavior Consistency Theory posits that individuals' attitudes—defined as their evaluations and predispositions toward an object or behavior—are directly linked to their observable behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In other words, positive attitudes are likely to lead to consistent positive behaviors, provided that situational factors and personal motivations align. This theoretical foundation suggests that consumers who hold strong positive attitudes toward a brand will demonstrate consistent behaviors such as loyalty, repeat purchases, and favorable brand preference (Lee & Kim, 2020).

Key Variables of the Theory

- ❖ **Attitude**: An individual's positive or negative evaluation of a brand or product.
- ❖ **Behavior**: The actual, observable actions (e.g., purchasing, recommending, sticking with a brand).
- ❖ **Consistency Mechanism**: The alignment between attitudes and behaviors, strengthened by internal motivation and external situational support.

Previous Applications of the Theory

The theory has been widely adopted in marketing research. For example, Lee and Kim (2020) in South Korea found that positive consumer attitudes toward eco-friendly products led to repeat purchases, illustrating a clear attitude-behavior link. In the U.S., Smith and Williams (2021) applied the theory to digital marketing, showing that favorable brand attitudes strongly predicted online brand engagement behaviors. In the African context, Okeke (2022) in Nigeria used it to demonstrate that positive attitudes toward telecom service quality predicted loyal customer behaviors.

Identified Gaps and Critical Comparison to this Study

Focus on environmental or digital contexts: Most global applications (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020 in South Korea; Smith & Williams, 2021 in the U.S.) have focused on sectors like eco-friendly products or online marketing. They do not explore how attitude-behavior consistency works in Africa's telecom sector, especially in the competitive Tanzanian market.

Lack of telecom-specific applications in Africa: Studies like Okeke (2022) in Nigeria examine general service quality attitudes but do not delve into brand-specific loyalty or brand preference relationships. This study addresses that gap by focusing on brand-specific attitudinal and behavioral consistency for Airtel Tanzania.

Limited integration with brand loyalty frameworks: Most studies treat attitude-behavior consistency as an independent concept, without integrating it with broader brand loyalty frameworks such as Aaker's model. For instance, Müller and Schuster (2020) in Germany only looked at luxury brand attitudes and behaviors. This study combines the Attitude-Behavior Consistency Theory with Aaker's Brand Equity Model to build a more holistic view of brand preference.

Inconsistent measurement of attitudes: Some studies, like Odoom (2020) in Ghana, measure attitudes through simplistic scales without considering multiple attitudinal facets (e.g., cognitive, affective). This study addresses that by measuring attitudinal loyalty comprehensively, including emotional and behavioral loyalty components.

Neglect of cultural moderators: Research in the U.S. (Smith & Williams, 2021) and Europe (Müller & Schuster, 2020) assumes cultural homogeneity. However, in Tanzania, cultural norms and communal loyalty can significantly moderate the attitude-behavior relationship. This study fills this gap by incorporating Tanzanian cultural context.

Overemphasis on static attitudes: Previous studies often treat attitudes as static rather than evolving (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020). This study acknowledges that attitudes may change based on service experiences and competitive market dynamics.

Limited testing in dynamic telecom environments: Most African studies like Mugambi and Wambugu (2020) in Kenya focus on stable brand environments, ignoring how fast-changing promotions and pricing in telecom markets affect the attitude-behavior link. This study tests the theory in the highly dynamic environment of Airtel Tanzania.

Minimal focus on customer experience: Many studies do not explicitly incorporate customer experience as a mediator in the attitude-behavior link (e.g., Naidoo, 2020 in South Africa). This research integrates customer experience as a contextual driver.

Underuse of quantitative techniques: In Tanzania, studies by Mwakalebela and Nyamhanga (2022) rely on descriptive methods. This study employs Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to robustly test attitude-behavior consistency and its effects on brand preference.

Lack of focus on actual brand preference outcomes: While many studies stop at behavioral loyalty (e.g., Okeke, 2022), this study goes further to explicitly measure brand preference as an outcome of attitudinal and behavioral consistency—filling a crucial gap in understanding how loyalty translates into preference.

Given these gaps, this study applies the Attitude-Behavior Consistency Theory to provide a nuanced examination of how attitudinal loyalty translates into behavioral loyalty and ultimately influences brand preference in Airtel Tanzania. By grounding this analysis within the context of the Tanzanian telecom market and integrating it with Aaker's Brand Equity Model, the research aims to generate locally relevant insights and address overlooked nuances in the current literature.

3.3 Attitude-Behavior Theory Complements Aaker's Model

Shared Emphasis on Attitudes Driving Consumer Behavior

The Attitude-Behavior Consistency Theory posits that an individual's attitudes (beliefs, feelings, and evaluations) are strong predictors of their actual behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). This aligns well with Aaker's Brand Equity Model, where components like brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived quality build positive attitudes, which then reinforce brand loyalty and brand preference.

Complementary Insight:

Both theories recognize that favorable brand attitudes are likely to translate into loyal purchase behavior and ultimately shape brand preference. Thus, when a consumer holds strong positive perceptions (from Aaker's model) and has consistent behavioral patterns (as per attitude-behavior theory), the likelihood of brand preference and retention increases.

Explanation of Attitudinal Loyalty

Aaker's model includes brand loyalty as a key construct but does not explicitly differentiate between attitudinal loyalty (emotional commitment) and behavioral loyalty (actual repeat purchases). Attitude-behavior theory helps fill this gap by explaining how internal attitudes (e.g., brand trust, emotional attachment) can predict or align with external behaviors like purchase frequency.

Complementary Insight:
It enhances Aaker's framework by offering psychological reasoning behind loyalty: why loyal consumers behave consistently**.**

3.4 Inconsistencies Between Attitudes and Behavior

The Attitude-Behavior Theory acknowledges that not all positive attitudes result in behavior, especially when situational constraints (e.g., price changes, promotions, network outages) come into play. In contrast, Aaker's model assumes a more linear flow, where positive brand equity leads to predictable consumer outcomes.

Potential Conflict:
In contexts like Tanzania, where **price sensitivity** and **multi-SIM ownership** are high, a consumer may have a positive attitude toward Airtel (based on brand associations or perceived quality) but still switch to another provider offering a cheaper bundle. This inconsistency challenges the predictive strength of Aaker's model unless complemented by attitude-behavior theory.

Focus on Intentional vs. Structural Factors
Aaker's model is brand-centric, focusing on strategic brand drivers like awareness, loyalty, and associations. In contrast, attitude-behavior theory is person-centric, emphasizing individual decision-making processes and motivational factors that influence behavior.

Potential Conflict:
While Aaker's model guides marketers on how to build brand value, attitude-behavior theory reminds us that even strong brands may face unpredictable consumer choices due to internal inconsistency, external pressures, or situational factors.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative research design**.** According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), a cross-sectional design is suitable for examining relationships between variables at a single point in time, offering a snapshot of the research context without requiring longitudinal data. This approach allows researchers to capture a comprehensive understanding of how brand loyalty influences brand preference among Airtel Tanzania customers.

Moreover, the quantitative aspect is particularly useful for testing hypotheses with numerical data and statistical models, enabling generalizability and robust inferential analysis (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

4.2 Sampling

The study employed a stratified simple random sampling technique to select participants from the target population. This technique involved dividing the population of Airtel customers into distinct strata based on geographical regions—Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Mwanza, and Dodoma—before randomly sampling within each group. Stratified random sampling was chosen because it ensures that different segments of the population are proportionally represented, thereby enhancing the representativeness and validity of the findings (Etikan & Bala, 2017). This is particularly important in Tanzania's telecommunications market, where regional variations in service experiences and customer perceptions can influence brand loyalty and preference.

The study targeted Airtel subscribers across the five municipalities of Dar es Salaam Region and two districts in Dodoma Region, namely Mpwapwa (rural) and Dodoma Urban (urban), to capture both urban and rural customer experiences. Stratified random sampling was employed based on geographic location (urban vs. rural) to ensure adequate representation of service accessibility disparities, network quality exposure, and digital engagement tendencies. A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed—350 in urban areas and 150 in rural settings—in proportion to the known distribution of Airtel customers, as estimated by regional sales data and mobile penetration reports.

4.3 Response Rate

Out of the 500 distributed questionnaires, 438 were returned, yielding an overall response rate of 87.6%, which is considered highly acceptable for SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2019). After data screening, 412 responses were deemed valid and used in the final analysis. The 26 incomplete or invalid responses were excluded based on missing values exceeding 10%, as per standard SEM data quality criteria.

4.4 Addressing Potential Biases

Several steps were taken to minimize potential biases:

- **Non-response Bias**: A follow-up was conducted via phone calls and SMS reminders in both urban and rural areas to encourage participation and reduce differential non-response. A t-test comparison between early and late respondents showed no significant difference ($p > 0.05$), suggesting minimal non-response bias.

- **Selection Bias**: Stratified sampling ensured proportionate inclusion of both urban and rural respondents, reducing geographic overrepresentation.
- **Social Desirability Bias**: Respondents were assured of anonymity, and the questionnaire was self-administered to encourage honest responses. Neutral wording was also used to minimize leading questions.
- **Measurement Bias**: All measurement scales were adapted from previously validated instruments, and Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.80, indicating high internal consistency.

4.5 Urban-Rural Stratification and Service Accessibility

Recognizing that service quality, network availability, and promotional reach vary between urban and rural areas, the study explicitly incorporated urban-rural stratification in the sampling frame. This approach allowed the research to compare differences in brand loyalty formation and brand preference among customers with differential access to Airtel services.

Such stratification was essential to reflect the real-life disparities that may influence loyalty behavior—for instance, rural customers relying more on price-sensitive behavioral loyalty, while urban customers may exhibit stronger attitudinal loyalty through digital engagement platforms like the MyAirtel app.

4.6 Operationalization of Variables

Brand loyalty was measured using both behavioral and attitudinal indicators, such as frequency of Airtel usage, emotional attachment, and resistance to switch. Brand preference was assessed by asking respondents about their willingness to choose Airtel over other brands, likelihood of recommendation, and perceived superiority.

Table: Variables ad measurement Procedures

Variable	Type	Operational Definition	Measurement Procedure	Source/Citation
Brand Loyalty	Independent Variable	The degree of emotional and behavioral commitment consumers have towards Airtel.	Measured using a multi-item 5-point Likert scale with statements on attitudinal (e.g., trust, attachment) and behavioral loyalty (e.g., repeat usage, switching resistance).	Aaker (1991); Oliver (1999); Yoo & Donthu (2001)

Brand Preference	Dependent Variable	The extent to which consumers prefer Airtel over competitors and choose it as their primary telecom service.	Measured using a multi-item 5-point Likert scale assessing preferences compared to Vodacom, Tigo, and Halotel.	Keller (2003); Esch et al. (2006)
Age	Control Variable	Consumer's reported age in years.	Measured as an open-ended question.	Hair et al. (2010)
Gender	Control Variable	Consumer's gender identity.	Measured as a categorical variable: male, female, or other.	Bryman & Bell (2015)
Region	Control Variable	Geographical location of the respondent (Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Mwanza, Dodoma).	Recorded as a categorical variable.	Bryman & Bell (2015)

Source; Field data 2025

4.7 Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over two months and cleaned for inconsistencies. Using SPSS and AMOS, reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha > 0.8), The data for this study were collected over a period of two months, ensuring adequate time for comprehensive coverage and to address any logistical challenges. Prior to analysis, the data underwent rigorous cleaning procedures to identify and address inconsistencies and missing values, thus ensuring data integrity and reliability. The cleaned dataset was subsequently analyzed using SPSS (version 26) for preliminary statistical checks and AMOS (version 26) for structural modeling.

To assess the reliability of the measurement scales, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated, and all constructs demonstrated strong internal consistency with alpha values exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.8 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was then conducted to verify the validity and dimensionality of the measurement model. The CFA results confirmed that the items had acceptable factor loadings, indicating that the constructs were well-represented by their respective indicators.

Following CFA, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships within the conceptual framework. The primary focus of the SEM analysis was to examine the direct effect of brand loyalty on brand preference. The results of the SEM analysis provided evidence for a significant and positive direct relationship between brand loyalty and brand preference, suggesting that customers who exhibit strong loyalty towards a brand are more likely to prefer that brand over others in the market. This finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2020; Ahmad & Musa, 2020) that underscore the pivotal role of brand loyalty in driving consumer preference in highly competitive markets

5.0 Results and Analysis

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

The demographic analysis reveals that the respondent group is predominantly male, with 58% of participants identifying as male and the remaining 42% as female. A significant portion of the participants, approximately 65%, fall within the age range of 18 to 35 years, indicating a youthful customer base. This age group is often associated with high engagement levels and a propensity for mobile and digital service usage, which could influence overall usage patterns and loyalty.

In terms of usage patterns, a notable 76% of respondents reported that they have been using Airtel's services for over two years. This indicates a relatively high level of customer retention and suggests that Airtel has been successful in maintaining a stable user base over an extended period. Long-term usage often correlates with satisfaction and trust in the service provider, which is a positive indicator for Airtel's ongoing customer loyalty and market position.

Regarding loyalty indicators, the data shows a strong emotional attachment to the Airtel brand among users. Specifically, 68% of respondents expressed that they feel a strong emotional connection to Airtel, which can significantly influence their willingness to stay with the service even in competitive scenarios. Additionally, 70% of the participants stated that they would not switch to another service provider easily, highlighting a high degree of customer loyalty and satisfaction. These factors collectively suggest that Airtel enjoys a loyal customer base that is not only satisfied with the current services but also emotionally invested in the brand, which is vital for long-term business sustainability.

5.2 Reliability and Validity

The reliability of the measurement instruments used in this study was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each construct. The results demonstrated high internal consistency, with the construct of Brand Loyalty achieving a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89. This indicates that the items used to measure Brand Loyalty are highly correlated and reliably capture the underlying concept. Similarly, the construct of Brand Preference yielded an even higher Cronbach's alpha of 0.91, reflecting a very strong internal consistency among the items associated with this construct. These high values suggest that the scales used in the study are reliable measures, providing confidence in the consistency of the responses collected.

In addition to internal consistency, the validity of the constructs was evaluated through the assessment of convergent validity using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The results revealed that the AVE values for all constructs exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.5, which signifies that more than half of the variance in the observed variables can be explained by the underlying latent construct. This indicates that each construct demonstrates good convergence, with the items effectively representing the respective underlying concepts. The AVE values exceeding 0.5 across all constructs reinforce the overall validity of the measurement model, ensuring that the constructs are accurately capturing the intended dimensions of brand loyalty and brand preference.

Overall, both the high Cronbach's alpha values and the AVE results confirm that the measurement model employed in this research is both reliable and valid. These findings support the robustness of the measurement instruments and provide a solid foundation for subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data.

5.3 Structural Equation Model Findings

```plaintext
Brand Loyalty → Brand Preference (β = 0.71, p < 0.001)
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Model fit indices:

- Chi-square/df = 1.97
- RMSEA = 0.043
- CFI = 0.96
- TLI = 0.94

5.4 Demographic Considerations, Model Fit Criteria, and Subgroup Analyses

5.4.1 Linking Demographics to Loyalty Behaviors

The study considered key demographic characteristics such as age, gender, education level, location (urban vs. rural), and income in order to better understand how these variables may influence brand loyalty behaviors.

Empirical studies suggest that youth (aged 18–35) tend to prefer digital forms of engagement, such as mobile apps, online chat support, and social media campaigns, and are more responsive to gamified loyalty programs (Odoom, 2020; Mugambi & Wambugu, 2020). In contrast, older customers may exhibit behavioral loyalty driven more by habit, network reliability, and price stability rather than digital interactions. Similarly, urban consumers often have greater access to smartphones and internet, facilitating attitudinal loyalty through online interaction, while rural consumers may lean toward behavioral loyalty due to limited digital exposure and focus on affordability and convenience.

To capture these variations, demographic data were included in the questionnaire and used as moderators in further statistical analyses.

5.4.2 SEM Model Fit Thresholds and Justification

To analyze the multidimensional relationships among variables and latent constructs, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed using AMOS software. SEM was chosen for its ability to assess both the measurement model (confirming validity and reliability of constructs) and the structural model (testing hypothesized paths).

Model fit was evaluated using multiple fit indices, with thresholds guided by Hair et al. (2019) and Kline (2016), as follows:

Fit Index	Acceptable Threshold	Interpretation
Chi-square/df (χ^2/df)	≤ 3.00	Indicates model simplicity
CFI	≥ 0.90 (Good), ≥ 0.95 (Excellent)	Comparative Fit Index; compares model to baseline
TLI (NNFI)	≥ 0.90	Tucker–Lewis Index; penalizes complexity
RMSEA	≤ 0.08 (Good), ≤ 0.05 (Excellent)	Root Mean Square Error of Approximation
SRMR	≤ 0.08	Standardized Root Mean Square Residual

These indices ensure that the proposed relationships between brand loyalty dimensions (attitudinal and behavioral) and brand preference are not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful

5.4.3 Subgroup Analyses to Explore Regional and Demographic Variations

To uncover potential moderating effects of region and demographics, multi-group SEM analyses were conducted. This involved comparing the structural model across key subgroups such as:

- Urban vs. Rural respondents: To assess how access to network infrastructure, mobile apps, and digital platforms influences loyalty pathways.
- Age groups (18–35 vs. 36+): To examine digital versus traditional loyalty preferences.
- Gender: To explore differences in emotional connection (attitudinal loyalty) versus price-driven behaviors (behavioral loyalty).
- Education Level: To assess whether more educated consumers are more likely to engage through digital channels and build affective brand attachments.

These subgroup analyses provide deeper insight into how socio-demographic and regional variables shape the strength and direction of loyalty-preference relationships, thereby enhancing the relevance of findings for Airtel's customer segmentation and retention strategies.

6.0 Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study reveal that brand loyalty significantly and positively influences brand preference among Airtel Tanzania subscribers. The strong statistical relationship between brand loyalty and brand preference—reflected in a high correlation coefficient ($r = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$) and substantial explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.55$)—demonstrates that customers who exhibit both emotional attachment (attitudinal loyalty) and consistent purchase behavior (behavioral loyalty) are more likely to develop a clear preference for Airtel over its competitors.

These results align closely with Oliver's (2020) global perspective, which underscores that psychological commitment is central to brand loyalty, leading consumers to stick with familiar brands even when faced with superior alternatives. This reinforces the idea that emotional bonds, cultivated over time through consistent messaging and reliable service, are pivotal in shaping consumer preference. Similarly, the current findings support Keller's (2020) assertion that emotionally driven connections foster brand loyalty and enhance preference, particularly in technology-focused industries.

However, in contrast to much of the global literature—which largely focuses on mature markets with well-established branding and loyalty ecosystems (Oliver, 2020; Keller, 2020)—this study provides new evidence from an emerging market where loyalty programs are still evolving and brand dynamics are shaped by intense price and service competition. The implications here highlight that even in markets like Tanzania, where economic and infrastructural challenges are pronounced, emotional and behavioral components of loyalty remain vital to brand preference.

Comparatively, the results resonate strongly with Ugoani's (2021) findings in Nigeria and Mugambi and Wambugu's (2020) work in Kenya, both of which emphasize that customer satisfaction and service quality are key to fostering loyalty in African telecom markets. In our study, Airtel's loyal customers cited not only service reliability but also brand familiarity and emotional trust as reasons for their preference. However, while these African studies generally link loyalty to tangible outcomes like repeat purchases or word-of-mouth promotion, the current research goes a step further by using Aaker's Brand Equity Theory (1991) to systematically integrate these aspects of loyalty and illustrate their direct impact on brand preference in Tanzania's competitive telecom sector.

Importantly, the findings contrast with Odoom's (2020) work in Ghana, which pointed to digital and social media engagement as primary drivers of loyalty. While digital engagement emerged in this study, Airtel Tanzania's customers placed even greater emphasis on consistent brand visibility and traditional loyalty initiatives like bonus offers and customer care responsiveness. This suggests that while social media is growing in importance, traditional loyalty-building efforts remain crucial in this context—highlighting a potential area for improvement in Airtel's digital branding strategy.

Within Tanzania, this study builds on the observations of Shayo and Nyaluke (2023), who reported that loyalty programs and enhanced customer service were instrumental in shaping consumer commitment for Vodacom. Our findings extend this perspective by confirming that similar loyalty drivers are also pivotal for Airtel. However, unlike earlier Tanzanian studies (Mushi & Komba, 2022) that treated brand loyalty as a single variable or in isolation, this research applies a more holistic and theoretically grounded approach, explicitly distinguishing between attitudinal loyalty (emotional connection) and behavioral loyalty (repeat patronage). This dual-focus approach highlights that both emotional and habitual factors work together to reinforce brand preference, providing a more nuanced understanding of how loyalty operates in Tanzania's telecom market.

6.1 Consideration of Local Market Nuances and Study Limitations

6.1.1 Emphasis on Local Market Dynamics and Competitive Positioning

While the findings of this study align with global and regional evidence that both attitudinal and behavioral brand loyalty significantly influence brand preference, it is important to interpret these results within the specific competitive dynamics of Tanzania's telecommunications sector. Notably, Airtel Tanzania's brand loyalty strategies differ from those of its primary competitor, Vodacom, in terms of pricing, promotional bundling, and digital engagement reach.
Airtel has positioned itself as a price-sensitive brand, often appealing to lower- and middle-income segments through aggressive bundling strategies such as Cheka Time, Tia Bundles, and Supa Packs. These offers are designed to attract behaviorally loyal customers—those who repeatedly purchase based on affordability rather than emotional connection. However, this price-driven approach may hinder the development of attitudinal loyalty, especially when consumers perceive these benefits as temporary or transactional.

In contrast, Vodacom has invested significantly in value-added services, digital platforms (e.g., MyVodacom app), and data-centric loyalty programs like VodaBongo, which cultivate deeper emotional bonds and long-term brand commitment. This divergence in strategy suggests that Airtel's brand preference among Tanzanian consumers may be more vulnerable to switching if competitors offer superior value or network performance, despite short-term pricing advantages.

These local market nuances highlight the need for Airtel to strike a balance between price competitiveness and brand relationship building by integrating more digital engagement, emotional storytelling, and service consistency into its loyalty strategy.

6.1.2 Acknowledging Data Limitations

While the study provides robust evidence using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), several limitations must be acknowledged to contextualize the interpretation of results:

Self-Reported Data and Bias

The use of self-administered questionnaires means that all responses were based on participants' self-perceptions, which are inherently susceptible to social desirability bias and recall error. For instance, respondents may overstate their loyalty to appear consistent or align with perceived brand favorability. Although anonymity was assured and neutral wording used to reduce bias, these limitations are common in consumer research and should be considered when generalizing findings.

Lack of Longitudinal Tracking

The study employed a cross-sectional design, collecting data at a single point in time. This restricts the ability to draw firm conclusions about causality or observe changes in brand loyalty and preference over time. For example, it is unclear whether consumers who report high behavioral loyalty today will maintain this behavior if pricing or service conditions change in the future. A longitudinal study would allow for tracking customer attitudes and behavior across different market conditions and promotional cycles, providing deeper insight into loyalty persistence and brand-switching tendencies.

Urban-Rural Digital Divide
Although stratified sampling was used to capture both urban and rural perspectives, the study may still underrepresent rural consumers' digital constraints, especially those without smartphone access. Given that digital engagement is a growing channel for loyalty management, future research should investigate how limited internet and mobile app access affects loyalty development in rural Tanzania.

In sum, the findings of this study underscore that even in emerging markets like Tanzania, where competition is intense and switching costs are low, brand loyalty remains a decisive factor in consumer brand preference. By confirming the relevance of global theories like Aaker's Brand Equity Model and providing new empirical insights, this study offers important theoretical and practical contributions. It emphasizes that firms like Airtel Tanzania should not only rely on competitive pricing but also strengthen emotional bonds and customer satisfaction initiatives to solidify brand preference in the long term.

7.0 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The practical implications of these findings are manifold for brand managers, marketing practitioners, and policymakers within Tanzania's telecom sector:

Emotional and Behavioral Loyalty as Key Drivers:
The study highlights that both emotional attachments (attitudinal loyalty) and habitual repurchase behavior (behavioral loyalty) are critical in fostering brand preference. Airtel Tanzania can harness this insight by investing in loyalty programs that not only reward repeat purchases but also build emotional connections—through storytelling, brand identity, and customer engagement campaigns.

Traditional Loyalty Initiatives Remain Essential:
While social media engagement is growing in importance, this study underscores that in Tanzania, traditional loyalty drivers such as bonus offers, personalized customer care, and consistent brand presence remain crucial for enhancing brand preference. Therefore, Airtel should continue strengthening these traditional pillars to maintain competitiveness.

The Importance of Market Segmentation and Cultural Context:
Given the findings' alignment with both global theories and African market nuances, marketing strategies should consider cultural contexts and market segmentation. Tailored initiatives that reflect Tanzanian values—such as community-based promotions or culturally resonant messaging—can amplify brand loyalty and preference.

8.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study set out to investigate the influence of brand loyalty—considering both its attitudinal and behavioral components—on brand preference in the competitive telecommunications market of Airtel Tanzania. The findings demonstrate a significant and positive relationship between brand loyalty and brand preference, providing robust empirical evidence that consumers with strong emotional connections to Airtel and consistent purchasing behavior exhibit higher levels of brand preference. This affirms the relevance of Aaker's Brand Equity Theory (1991) in emerging market contexts, highlighting the dual role of emotional and behavioral loyalty in shaping consumer choices.

Furthermore, the study's conclusions align with global scholarship, such as Oliver (2020) and Keller (2020), which emphasize the power of psychological commitment and consistent brand messaging in building brand loyalty. These results also resonate with regional findings in Africa—particularly in Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghana—while filling a notable gap in the Tanzanian literature. By providing a systematic framework and nuanced insights specific to Airtel Tanzania, the study contributes valuable localized knowledge to the broader discourse on brand equity and preference in developing economies.

8.1 Actionable Strategies for Airtel Tanzania

To translate insights into competitive advantage, Airtel Tanzania should prioritize the following strategic actions:

Launch Tiered Loyalty Rewards for Long-Term Users
Introduce a structured tiered loyalty program (e.g., Bronze, Silver, Gold) where long-term customers are rewarded based on tenure, usage, and engagement—not just spending. Benefits could include exclusive data bundles, early access to promotions, or customer service fast-tracking to nurture deeper attitudinal loyalty.

Personalize Offers via App-Based Engagement
Enhance the MyAirtel app to deliver AI-powered recommendations and loyalty milestones tailored to individual usage patterns. Gamified features, such as digital badges, referral bonuses, or progress bars, can boost emotional attachment, especially among digital-native youth.

Bridge the Urban-Rural Engagement Divide
Deploy SMS-based loyalty prompts and voice-interactive campaigns in rural areas where smartphone penetration is low. Loyalty programs should be inclusive of non-smartphone users to avoid alienating key behavioral-loyal segments in underserved markets.

Train Retail Agents to Humanize Loyalty
Equip Airtel's agents and resellers with tools to explain loyalty program benefits and assist with enrollments at the grassroots level. Physical presence still matters in markets with limited digital touchpoints.

8.2 Suggested Regulatory Interventions

To ensure fair competition, consumer protection, and program transparency, this study recommends that Tanzania Communications Regulatory Authority (TCRA) and related bodies consider:

Standardizing Loyalty Program Disclosures
Require all telecom operators to clearly publish terms and conditions of loyalty schemes, including expiry timelines, point redemption rates, and eligibility rules, to protect consumers from misleading or manipulative tactics.

Mandating Cross-Operator Program Comparability
Develop a uniform reporting format for loyalty performance indicators (e.g., average reward value, participation rates), enabling better cross-operator benchmarking and informed consumer choices.

Incentivizing Pro-Loyalty Innovation in Underserved Areas
Offer regulatory incentives—such as tax waivers or digital innovation grants—to providers who implement inclusive loyalty systems that reach rural or digitally excluded populations.

8.3 Recommendations

Enhance Emotional Connections through Localized Storytelling:
Airtel Tanzania should create marketing campaigns that tap into local culture and values, telling authentic stories that resonate with consumers' daily lives. This can include sponsorship of cultural events or community-driven campaigns that reinforce the brand's social relevance and emotional appeal.

Invest in Comprehensive Loyalty Programs:
Building on the dual aspects of loyalty, Airtel should expand and refine its loyalty programs to reward not just frequent use, but also advocacy and emotional commitment. This could include tiered rewards for long-term

subscribers, exclusive experiences, or referral-based bonuses that reinforce behavioral and attitudinal loyalty.

Strengthen Traditional and Digital Branding Efforts:
The study suggests that while digital engagement is important, traditional visibility efforts like billboards, radio advertisements, and retail presence remain powerful. Airtel should adopt an integrated marketing approach, balancing digital campaigns with traditional channels to create a holistic brand experience.

Conduct Continuous Consumer Research:
Given that brand loyalty and preference drivers may evolve over time—especially as digital adoption grows—Airtel should implement periodic consumer research and feedback mechanisms to track changes in loyalty behavior and refine marketing strategies accordingly.

Policy and Regulatory Recommendations:
For policymakers, the findings suggest that fostering fair competition and supporting initiatives that enhance consumer choice and loyalty-building efforts can strengthen the entire telecom sector. Regulatory measures that promote transparency in loyalty programs and consumer protection in brand messaging can ensure ethical practices and healthy competition.

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