

The Influence of Marketing Mix on Customers' Decision-Making for Small and Medium-Sized Chinese Language Schools (SMEs) in Thailand

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Abstract

The study investigates the relationship between marketing mix factors (4Ps) and customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese Language Schools (SMEs) in the Bangkok Metropolitan Region of Thailand. The proposition of the study will look at whether or not there are some factors that influence customers' decision-making in making their choice. The study also examines the direction of those relationships. A quantitative approach was used to collect data at Chinese language schools located in shopping malls in Bangkok Metropolitan using a self-administered questionnaire as research instrument. The outcomes suggest that entrepreneurs should be concerned with a convenient location as major priority as well as sales promotion to match with Thai people's culture and lifestyle. The study also recommends entrepreneurs or marketers to allocate their marketing mix resources with respect to traditional and/or modern marketing media to meet the challenges of severe rivalry in the shifting era of the digital age.

Keywords:

Marketing Mix;
Decision-making;
Language School;
SMEs;
Thailand.

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1. Introduction

The understanding of customer behavior and the customer purchase decision-making process, in particular, has been dominated by marketers and entrepreneurs. The effect of marketing mix influences have been shown to be one factor affecting customers' purchase behavior aside from psychological (Kotler, Burton, Deans, Brown, and Armstrong, 2013), sociocultural, and situational influences (Armstrong, Adam, Denize, and Kotler, 2014; Kotler et al., 2013). As a marketing mix is perceived to be an internal environmental factor that can be implemented and controlled by a firm, a discussion on the reciprocal point emerged among marketers (Smith and Taylor, 2004). They debate how entrepreneurs can develop an effective alternative marketing mix strategy to achieve a competitive market position, meet their organization's objectives and marketing goals, appropriately influence customer purchase decision-making, and ultimately succeed in business (Pour, Nazari, and Emami, 2013; HaKansson and Waluszewski, 2005). The effect of marketing mix strategies (4Ps) varies depending on the category of products or services, market changes, and consumer consumption changes that shape the various forms of business's marketing strategies (Pour et al., 2013).

In this study, the marketing mix factors affecting customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools in Bangkok Metropolitan Area is investigated. Further, we will identify effective marketing mix strategies to promote the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the language school sector of the Thai market. The researchers selected Chinese language schools for this study because of the increasing importance of Chinese in the 21st century.

The importance of Chinese is increasing due to numerous economic and political reasons. Due to its rapid economic growth, China is seen as a new global economic powerhouse (Ryan, 2014) and it is now the second largest economy in the world after the US (Zhu, 2012). Economists believe that China will surpass the US and emerge as the largest international superpower by 2020 (Importance of Chinese, 2013). Despite the current economic downturn, the Chinese market is still viewed as the largest growing market and a source of cheap labor. To reduce costs and maximize profitability, countless firms have outsourced their production to China. Meanwhile, a number of Chinese businesses also expand into other countries around the world (Best Mandarin Classes, 2013). The IMF World Economic Outlook also attests that Mandarin Chinese is one of the important foreign languages in the world (Phison, 2013). On a political level, the United Nations have accepted Chinese as one of the six official languages, besides Arabic, English, French, Russian, and Spanish (United Nations, 2018). Hence, it is reasonable to forecast that firms will establish collaborations and integrate their business with China in order to be competitive in the severe rivalry of the 21st century's marketplace. This creates a demand for Chinese speakers who can coordinate or negotiate with Chinese firms. Thus, there is an increasing number of Chinese-learners and strong competition among Chinese language schools around the world.

The researchers look at how marketing mix influences play a role to affect customers' decision-making in Thailand. Thailand has the fourth highest GDP per capita (US\$9,900) in ASEAN (CIA World Fact Book, 2012).¹ China is Thailand's largest export partner and the second largest import partner, with 11.7% and 14.9%, respectively (Kotler, Kartajaya, and Huan, 2015). Further, the market value of language schools in Thailand experienced continuing growth for four consecutive years (2012 – 2015). The market value in 2015 is equal to 11,023 million baht with 746 thousand students who studied in small-middle and large language schools (Nimitrattanaporn, 2013). The degree of competition between Chinese language schools in Thailand appears to be high. To survive in this competition, schools should pay attention to their future business and strategic marketing by relying on the 4Cs (change, customer, competition, and company). Entrepreneurs should also focus on customer-centric marketing and learn from this study how marketing mix determinants (4Ps – product, price, place, promotion) influence customer decision-making.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Marketing Mix

Marketing mix can be defined as a set of combined marketing tools (Pour et al., 2013), widely referred to, in academia and practice, as "4Ps". It corresponds to product, price, place or distribution, and promotion (Harrell and Frazier, 1999). Kar (2011) identifies marketing variables in a set of marketing mix determinants and proposes the *Marketing Mix Model*. The model incorporated each element of the 4Ps and their variables as follows:

¹ The other ASEAN countries are ranked as follows: 1. Singapore (US\$62,400), 2. Brunei (US\$54,800), 3. Malaysia (US\$17,500), 5. Indonesia (US\$5,200), 6. Vietnam (US\$4,000), 7. Lao (US\$3,100), 8. Cambodia (US\$2,600), and 9. Myanmar (US\$1,700).

- product is described by variables such as design, uniqueness, quality, package, support, warranty, and brand name;
- price is described by variables such as pricing strategy, discounts, bundling, price discrimination;
- place is described by variables such as transportation, distribution channels, order processing, inventory, location and
- promotion is described by variables such as personal selling, advertisement, public relations, promotion.

Currently, the marketing mix can include other additional Ps like packaging, positioning, people, and politics that can be referred to as the “vital mix elements” (The Economic Times, 2015). These marketing tools can incorporate both controllable (i.e. marketing strategies) and uncontrollable environmental factors (i.e. cultures and technologies) that are managed by firms in their focused target market and can reflect firm’s performance (Newson, Vanslyke, and Kruckerburg, 2000). Due to this study’s focus on small and medium-sized companies that do not have a complicated administration process and a limited budget and time, we will apply the definition of the marketing mix as a combination of four elements of marketing tools: product or service, price, place, and promotion. Each of these elements will be reviewed in this section.

Product or service has been known as the first P that manages what the firms sell and how they manipulate with things such as substitutes and rivalry in running their businesses (Smith, 2011). A product that is provided and offered by a firm should meet demands and satisfy customers’ needs or wants (Kotler, 1998). The first P is of potential concern and should be linked to other marketing decisions when a firm defines marketing strategies to compete in their target market. Hoffman and Bateson (2010) suggest that product in the first element of the marketing mix can be a service. A service is different from a product as it is perceived as intangible, diverse, and unmeasured. Thus, firms should deliberately design their services carefully because they are momentary and varied. The variety of services, particularly services that can create a differentiation from other firms, would be a competitive advantage for firms in satisfying customers’ needs and wants in the target market. The restaurant service industry, the tourism service industry, and the educational service industry appear to be patently visible in differentiating themselves to create competitive advantages and attempt to become superior organizations in their target market. Al-Fattal (2010) also supports that the term product, particularly in the educational sector, can refer to as a program or service. An institution or a school usually launches programs and services into the market and provides them to meet customers’ needs. Competitors may differentiate their related program based on existing programs and quality considerations to seek their own target markets (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Differentiated programs or services can increase value to the schools or institutes and allow them to create an identity making them unique and competitive in the market. Amaral and Magalhaes (2007) assert that experience service such as education can be evaluated based on students’ consumptions or program attendances as well as their perception of course value in terms of quality.

The price element of the marketing mix refers to the value that marketers or firms set up for a product or service based factors such as the cost of goods sold (i.e. production and expenditure costs), market segmentation, market potential, a balance between demand and supply (The Economic Times, 2015). Kotler (1998) indicates price refers to the quantity that customers have to pay for a product or service. Marketers should define an appropriate price for their products or services in their target markets. There are many price policies and strategies that marketers can use as a tool to define the right price for a product or service. Price strategies have revealed their benefits in helping firms to increase their product image by differentiating them to be unique and salient over competitions in the market (The Economic Times, 2015). Barker and Angelopulo (2005) advise that firms may set up their pricing objectives and price charges relied on related factors such as current and potential competition, legal policies, and worth in terms of quality of a product or service compared with its price. They also suggest that the right price for a product or service should be well managed by a company and set by employing effective price strategies such as discounts and allowances. Lamb, Hair, and McDaniel (2011) assert that price refers to a value exchange customers pay to a service provider as well as the tuition fee in exchange for educational services. Connor, Burton, Pearson, Pollard, and Regan (1999) identified that price can affect a firm’s marketing plan due to customers, parents and students, concerns about monetary risks of attending the school. Eckel (2007) supports that customers expect a greater maximized return from their efforts to maximize their investment in tuition fees. Al-Fattal (2010) advises that schools might offer courses at the lowest price possible to avoid that the price-sensitive customer who is concerned with cost-benefit becomes defensive early on. However, this should be implemented with caution because customers usually perceive the value of a product or service based on its quality and price which reflect the enterprise’s image or reputation. Most customers believe that higher price represents better quality or image and increases the value of that product or service (Smith and Taylor, 2004; Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Kotler (1999) asserts that customers tend to prefer a better-known provider or a skilled specialist and willingly pay more for this .

Alternatively, discounts and scholarships are effective pricing strategies used in the educational market and these strategies influence students' choices in selecting their school (Al-Fattal, 2010).

Place or distribution is the third element of the marketing mix, which is known as distribution channels or the method of delivering goods or services (Al-Fattal, 2010). Place also can refer to a point-of-sale that provides goods or services for end users (Dogra, 2010). For the educational industry, Lockhart (2005) indicates that those places are associated with available facilities and ease of travel or accessibility. Al-Fattal (2010) also supports that place relates to the convenience of the location as well as contact points provided for customers. El-Khawas (1999) emphasizes the role of niche markets in the educational industry that allows marketers to meet students' specific requirements in defining products and timing. Jobber (2004) suggests that distance learning, evening or weekend courses are implemented as to satisfy customers' requirements in focused target segmentation.

Promotion is the last element of 4Ps that marketers attempt to communicate to the prospective audiences (Barker and Angelopulo, 2005). Marketing communication tools can refer to the promotion mix, which uses informing, persuading, reminding to create attitudes or consumers' behaviors associated with a product or service. Barker and Angelopulo (2005) recommend that promotion is comprised of advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, publicity or public relation (PR), direct marketing, online marketing and more. Businesses can employ only one or combine several tools to promote their products or services. Promotion nowadays plays a role as a key factor to success in service marketing (Hoffman and Bateson, 2010). Promotion plans are also effective for schools or educational businesses (Oplatka and Jane, 2004). The study of Alipour, Aghamohammadi, Ahmadi, and Hoseini (2013) concluded that effective marketing tools used by private schools consist of traditional marketing strategies like public relations (PR), exhibition or expo (Oplatka and Jane, 2004), and traditional media advertisements such as brochures, school signage, and newspaper articles (Anderson, 2008). Language schools in the study of Anderson (2008) are recommended to use successfully traditionally promotional activities such as discounts (for referrals, sibling or family), referral marketing or Word-of-Mouth (WOM), and modern promotional activities like online marketing through websites and search engines. However, modern customers in the digital age may be approached in different ways and rely on tribes greater than socio-demographic factors (Dahl, 2015). Thus, it is worthy to point out that the trend of modern marketing, specifically advertising through social media,² is deemed to be accelerated in the era of digital transformation (Macarthy, 2013). Traditional WOM has adapted to electronic WOM (eWOM) or online WOM (Dahl and Eagle, 2012) and messages through social media appear to be as widespread as viruses (Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, and Van Wijk, 2007) that can be referred to as viral marketing strategy. Both traditional WOM and eWOM messages can engage positively or negatively with customers (Alexandrov, Lilly, and Babakus, 2013).

2.2 Decision-Making

Customers' purchasing behaviors can refer to a process of customers' responses or their behaviors when purchasing a product or service. This includes searching for, comparing information and eventually making a decision whether or not to buy a specific product or service (Kumar, 2012). Past research shows that factors affecting customers' purchasing behaviors include cultural, social, personal and psychological characteristics (Armstrong et al., 2014). Kotler et al. (2013) suggest that a purchasing decision process incorporates five stages: (1) problem or need recognition; (2) information search such as internal and external information; (3) evaluation of alternatives (4) purchase decision, and (5) post-purchase behavior. These stages help to explain how buyers make their decision in purchasing a specific product or service. The process may be interrupted or stopped by customers at any stage in order to make a decision on that specific product or service (Lamb et al., 2011). Kotler (2009) argues that a stimulus such as the marketing mix or negative feedback from the reference group can either ruin the customers' final purchasing decision or switch their preference to another specific product or service as well as unforeseen or unexpected situations (Kotler et al., 2013).

2.3 Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs)

The term small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are used to classify firms or organizations that employ lesser than 250 people with a financial performance of less than €43 million (European Commission, 2017). However, different countries may define SMEs differently. In regard to SMEs in Thailand, the characteristics of SMEs vary depending on the business sector. For instance, a small-sized enterprise in the

² Social media consists of facebook, line, twitter, instagram, and blogs as well as review sites or video clips.

service industry would have less than 50 employees. Enterprises with 51-200 employees in the same industry would be categorized as medium-sized (The Revenue Department, 2016; Sungkhawan, 2010).

2.4 Small and Medium-Sized Chinese Language Schools in Thai Market

The market for small and medium-sized Chinese language schools in Thailand is growing. This trend can be forecasted from the statistics on the number of Chinese learners compared with Japanese and Korean learners at informal private schools in Thailand between 2011 - 2014. These statistics reveal that there are 16.6, 20.0, 27.6 and 65.1 thousand Chinese learners, respectively. Whereas 13.2, 9.5, 13.6, 26.1 thousand people learn Japanese, respectively. As for Korean, the statistics indicated 5.8, 4.1, 7.4, 7.9 thousand learners, respectively (Office of the Education Council, 2016). This salient growth in Chinese learners occur due to customers believe that the Thai market will inevitably encounter a rise of capital investments from China. Particularly, parents who live in urban areas believe that China has been attempting to pervasively expand its goods to the global market including Thailand. As a consequence, parents encourage their children to learn Chinese as a third extracurricular language beyond their mother tongue and English, the language of communication worldwide (Banlayng, 2011).

At present, there are many established Chinese language schools in Thailand. The Oriental Culture Academy (OCA) of the Thai-Chinese Foundation appears to be the oldest established Chinese language school since 1993. This organization holds up to 26% the largest share of the market. It is followed by another established Chinese language schools which include the Confucius Institute at Chulalongkorn University (CICU) with 21%, the Chinese Language and Culture Institute (CCC) with 19%, the Oriental Knowledge and Language School (OKLS) with 14%, ECC Language Institute (ECC) with 12%, JCC School (JCC) with 5%. The remaining 3% is shared by a number of small schools (Phisaisamonkayt, 2010)

With respect to the features of small and medium-sized Chinese language schools (SMEs) in Bangkok Metropolitan, they may be distinct according to business management, the amount of branch, and employee. Many well-known schools are managed by small groups or corporates and possess many branches such as ECC Language Institute, Inlingua International School of Languages, OKLS, and Siam Computer and Language. They tend to be favorably located in shopping malls. Nevertheless, there are some schools that established only one branch and are operated by the owner. These schools tend to be located in a large gated community instead of shopping malls. Such schools include for examples Knowmore Language School, Chinese House, and Chinese Edutainment Language School (Office of the Education Council, 2016; Thai Publica, 2015; Phisaisamonkayt, 2010).

2.5 Hypotheses

Based on the literature, the research hypotheses for the study were formulated as the following:

Hypothesis H₁: There are some factors that influence the customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools.

Hypothesis H₂: There are positive relationships between significant influencing factors and the customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools.

The testing of the research hypotheses would be conducted for the main study (hypotheses testing analysis) to acquire the salient determinants that help the businesses to forecast what factors would be the major concerns for them and to examine how differences in their relationship direction.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between marketing mix factors (4Ps) and the decision-making of customers to choose Chinese language schools in Bangkok Metropolitan. The conceptual framework for this study focuses on the role of marketing mix determinants that influence customers' decision-making, as well as observing the direction of those relationships whether or not they would appear in a different way.

This study employed a quantitative approach. A questionnaire survey was employed to collect data from Thai customers (i.e. parents and students who were visiting the schools or institutes) who live in Bangkok Metropolitan which is an urban area with business expansion in Thailand. On a theoretical level, a sample size of at least 385 participants was calculated by a formula (McDaniel and Gates, 2010; Zikmund and Babin, 2010). Nonprobability sampling was applied to use as a sampling technique for the study. As a consequence, convenience sampling was conducted with participants who were available to cooperate in responding the questionnaire during fieldwork (Foreman, 1991). The sample used consisted of 548 participants. Researchers collected data from customers at Chinese language schools and institutes located in or around shopping malls in Bangkok Metropolitan Area. The questionnaire was self-administered.

The variables used for the proposed conceptual framework incorporate independent and dependent variables. The independent variables are the marketing mix factors (4Ps), which are comprised of product, price, place, and promotion. While the dependent variable is customers' decision-making. The criteria of measurement for each independent and dependent variable were developed by applying some items that have been used in past studies found in the literature. All items were measured by using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree).

The independent variables of product, price, place, and promotion have been developed based on previous research and relevant theories. The total of 36 items for these variables is shown in Table 1. The measurement of product had been done using nine items such as the variety of products and services (Hoffman and Bateson, 2010; Kotler, 2000), information search (Kotler et al., 2013; Sandhusen, 2000), quality of products and services (Kar, 2011; Amaral and Magalhaes, 2007; Kotler 2000), image or brand or reputation (Kar, 2011; Tyagi and Kumar, 2004; Kotler 2000; Kotler and Fox, 1995), and warranty (Kar, 2011; Kotler, 2000). In regard to price measurement, we applied criteria such as worth (Al-Fattal, 2010; Barker and Angelopulo, 2005), discounts and allowances (Kar, 2011; Al-Fattal, 2010; Barker and Angelopulo, 2005; Kotler, 2000), scholarships (Al-Fattal, 2010), and several choices of payment method including payment channels, payment period, and credit terms (Kotler, 2000). The determinants such as location (Kar, 2011; Al-Fattal, 2010; Kotler, 2000), the environment or the availability of school's facilities (Lockhart, 2005), transportation (Kar, 2011; Lockhart, 2005; Kotler, 2000), and distribution channels (Kar, 2011; Al-Fattal, 2010; Kotler, 2000) were formulated to create the measurement items for place. The last P, which is promotion was measured using criteria related with the aspects of personal selling or direct sales (Smith and Taylor, 2004; Kotler, 2000), advertising (Anderson, 2008; Smith and Taylor, 2004; Kotler, 2000), publicity and public relations (Alipour et al., 2013; Smith and Taylor, 2004; Kotler, 2000), sales promotion (Anderson, 2008; Kotler, 2000), online marketing (Dahl, 2015; Dahl and Eagle, 2012; Anderson, 2008; Dobeles et al., 2007; Kotler, 2000).

The Item-Objective Congruence Index (IOC) technique was used to assert the content validity including the objectives of research instrument and to assure that all questions would easily be understood by participants (Brown, 1996; Rovinelli and Hambleton, 1977). The IOC test was examined based on insights from three academic and business experts. This resulted in useful suggestions for the questionnaire development. In addition, a pre-test on 30 customers was conducted to check the reliability and validity of the tool and variable measurement.

The test of reliability of a whole questionnaire indicates a value of Cronbach's Alpha is equal to 0.91 at a significant alpha level of 0.05 which demonstrated the value greater than 0.70. This means that the questionnaire is a reliable tool for data collection (Bryman and Bell, 2015; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham, 2006; George and Mallery, 2003). To check the measurement of variables in the main study, all of independent variables which are marketing mix factors (4Ps – Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) reveal the value of Cronbach's Alpha of Total Product, Total Price, Total Place, and Total Promotion as equaled to 0.80, 0.88, 0.85, and 0.89 respectively at a significant alpha level of 0.05. Likewise, the observations of each marketing mix factor measurement demonstrate that their 9 criteria items of each marketing mix determinant indicating the value of their Cronbach's Alpha greater than 0.70. Those alpha level results assert that all of measurement criteria items and the overview total aspects of each marketing mix factor be reliable to collect data during fieldwork. Encompassing, those outcomes indicate all of the measurement items for each independent variable of marketing mix factors appear to be appropriate and capture to the construct for the study. The study also enhanced the external validity by introducing objects that were related to the questions through pictures, posters, brochures, and other circumstances which were provided for customers inside the language schools and institutes.

The research used descriptive statistics such as percentage, mean, and standard deviation to explain sample characteristics and employed multiple regression and correlation coefficient as the inferential statistic methods to analyze the data for the main study through a statistical software program.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1 Results of Sample Characteristics

The total samples of 548 respondents were incorporated into a data collection procedure for the study. The majority of participants are female (318), which accounts for 58.00% of samples. The largest group of subjects is aged between 18 to 25 years (52.40%). Participants have attended tertiary education and possess an undergraduate (64.40%) or graduate degree (17.90%). The majority of respondent are students (49.60%) or employees (20.40%). Most respondents are single (68.60%). The majority has an income in the range of 15,001-20,000 baht; below 5,000 baht; and 20,001-25,000 baht, which are 20.4%, 18.1%, and 16.6%, respectively (Table 2).

Table 1: Items Used to Measure the Marketing Mix Factors (4Ps)

Variable	Item
Product	1. Variety of courses for communication and study abroad
	2. Specific course for career purpose
	3. Variety of course times
	4. Information search for course guideline
	5. Quality of courses and methods of teaching,
	6. Quality of materials
	7. Reputation of school
	8. Certificate warranty
	9. Individual expectation assurance.
Price	1. Reasonable price in regard to the course
	2. Reasonable price in regard to study hours
	3. Reasonable price in regard to the materials received
	4. Reasonable price in regard to skills and expectation received
	5. Reasonable price in regard to number student in class
	6. Reasonable price in regard to highly experienced teacher
	7. Discounts and Allowances
	8. Scholarships
	9. Several method choices of payment offered
Place	1. Located in urban areas
	2. Proximity to accommodation
	3. Located in a shopping mall area
	4. Good and clean classrooms
	5. Plenty and clean restrooms
	6. Safe car-parking,
	7. Easy to access with public transportation
	8. Many branches operated in several areas (branch coverage)
	9. Online or E-learning courses channels available
Promotion	1. Personal selling or direct sales
	2. Advertisement through traditional media
	3. Publicity and public relations through events and meetings
	4. Offering consecutive course discount
	5. Offering free materials
	6. Offering free registration
	7. Offering free snacks and drinks
	8. Promote or communicate courses and information via internet (i.e. through school website, website PR, email, intranet, and customer extranet)
	9. Promote or communicate courses and information through social media

4.2 Results of Sample's Attitudes towards Marketing Mix and Decision-Making

Descriptive statistical methods with respect to Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard Deviation (S.D.) were employed to analyze customers' attitudes of their perceptions towards marketing mix factors affecting their

likelihood to select a Chinese language school. The descriptive results are demonstrated in Table 3 as well as the findings of the main study (hypotheses testing). The study anticipates to using those descriptive results to support the outcomes emerged from the main study or make the notices for discussion and managerial implication.

4.3 Results of the Main Study

The research intends to examine the relationship between marketing mix factors and the decision-making of customers to choose Chinese language schools. The hypotheses of the study were formulated to test the following null hypotheses and hypothesis H₁ and H₂:

Hypothesis H₀₁: None of the factors influence the customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools.

Hypothesis H₁: There are some factors that influence the customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools.

Hypothesis H₀₂: There are no positive relationships between the significant influencing factors and the customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools.

Hypothesis H₂: There are positive relationships between the significant influencing factors and the customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools.

The research hypotheses were tested by initially using the Multiple Regression Statistical Analysis. To conduct the mentioned inference statistic method, the Test of Multicollinearity preliminarily should be examined (Aaker, Kumar, and Day, 2007). The results of the above test indicate that Non-Multicollinearity occurred for the study, which means that the Multiple Regression method can be conducted to test the hypotheses of the main study.

Table 2: Characteristics of Samples (n = 548)

Demographic Variables	n	%
Gender		
Male	230	42.0
Female	318	58.0
Age (Years)		
18-25	287	52.4
26-35	151	27.6
36-45	51	9.3
46-55	51	9.3
56 or Over	8	1.4
Education		
Primary Education	4	0.7
Secondary Education	37	6.8
Diploma / Vocational	56	10.2
Undergraduate	353	64.4
Graduate	98	17.9
Occupation		
Student	272	49.6
Government Officer	69	12.6
Employee	112	20.4
Business Owner	87	15.9
Unemployed / Retired	5	0.9
Others	3	0.6
Marital Status		
Single	376	68.6
Married	151	27.6
Widowed	10	1.8
Divorced	11	2.0
Income		

Under 5,000 Baht	99	18.1
5,000 – 10,000 Baht	82	15.0
10,001 – 15,000 Baht	76	13.9
15,001 – 20,000 Baht	112	20.4
20,001 – 25,000 Baht	91	16.6
25,001 – 30,000 Baht	46	8.4
Over 30,000 Baht	42	7.6

Table 3 summarizes the outcome of hypothesis H₁ testing through the Multiple Regression Analysis. The details in Table 3 demonstrate all independent variables, which are the criteria of each marketing mix factor that might impact the dependent variables. The significant results indicate that for the products or services factors of the marketing mix the items influencing customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language school are comprised of information search for course guideline and individual expectation assurance at p -value equaled to 0.019 ($t = -2.357$, $p < 0.05$) and 0.085 ($t = 1.725$, $p < 0.10$) respectively. The only significant item for the price factor that was shown to impact on dependent variable is reasonable price in regard to the course at a p -value of 0.007 ($t = 2.699$, $p < 0.01$). With respect to the aspect of

Table: 3 Results of Marketing Mix Factors Affecting on Customers' Decision-Making

Variable		Mean	S.D.	Customers' Decision-Making
Product/ Service	1.1 Variety of course for communications and study abroad	4.37	0.647	0.861
	1.2 Specific course for career purpose	4.26	0.709	0.283
	1.3 Variety of course time	4.35	0.618	0.082
	1.4 Information search for course guideline	4.28	0.645	0.019**
	1.5 Quality courses and methods of teaching	4.36	0.645	0.25
	1.6 Quality of materials	4.32	0.657	0.641
	1.7 Reputation of school	4.43	0.614	0.596
	1.8 Certificate guarantee	4.38	0.603	0.187
	1.9 Individual expectation assurance	4.26	0.68	0.085*
Price	2.1 Reasonable price in regard to the course	4.34	0.642	0.007***
	2.2 Reasonable price in regard to study hours	4.31	0.66	0.299
	2.3 Reasonable price in regard to materials received	4.35	0.663	0.644
	2.4 Reasonable price in regard to skills and expectation received	4.33	0.645	0.518
	2.5 Reasonable price in regard to student amount in class	4.32	0.676	0.954
	2.6 Reasonable price in regard to higher experienced trainer	4.24	0.728	0.673
	2.7 Discounts and allowance	4.15	0.78	0.98
	2.8 Scholarships	4.22	0.703	0.33
	2.9 Several method choices of payment	4.24	0.714	0.39
Place	3.1 Located in urban areas	4.21	0.666	0.000***
	3.2 Proximity to accommodation	4.39	0.731	0.237
	3.3 Located in shopping mall areas	4.22	0.785	0.866
	3.4 Good environment and clean classrooms	4.21	0.69	0.022**
	3.5 Plenty and clean restrooms	4.19	0.741	0.166
	3.6 Safety car-parking	4.16	0.741	0.591
	3.7 Easy to access public transportation	4.27	0.728	0.098*
	3.8 Many branches operate in several areas	4.1	0.796	0.777
	3.9 Online / E-learning courses channels available	4.14	0.788	0.459
Promotion	4.1 Personal selling / Direct sale	4.12	0.801	0.002***

4.2 Advertising through traditional medias	4.09	0.756	0.568
4.3 Publicity and public relations through events and meetings	4.11	0.811	0.546
4.4 Offering consecutive course or group discounts	4.15	0.727	0.082*
4.5 Offering free materials	4.24	4.15	0.747
4.6 Offering free registration	4.35	0.706	0.002***
4.7 Offering free snacks and drinks	4.24	0.677	0.232
4.8 Promote / communicate courses and information via internet	4.33	0.645	0.406
4.9 Promote / communicate courses and information through social media	4.33	0.665	0.12
Adjusted R ² value			0.231
F-value			5.568***

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

place or distribution, the significant results indicate that the three items of located in urban areas, good and clean classrooms, and easy to access with public transportation affected customers' decision-making to select the school at p -value of 0.000 ($t = 3.654$, $p < 0.01$), 0.022 ($t = 2.295$, $p < 0.05$), and 0.098 ($t = 1.659$, $p < 0.10$), respectively. In addition, the findings with regard to the significant items for the aspect of promotion found three items which include personal selling / direct sale, offering consecutive course or group discounts, and offering free registration that demonstrated to have the impacts on customers' decision-making of their choices' preferences to choose a school at p -value equaled to 0.002 ($t = 3.079$, $p < 0.01$), 0.082 ($t = -1.742$, $p < 0.10$), and 0.002 ($t = 3.092$, $p < 0.01$) respectively.

Therefore, the outcomes above identify some significant factors for every aspect of the marketing mix (4Ps) that influence customers' decision-making preference in school choice. As a result, it is deemed to support the hypothesis H₁, which stated that there are some factors that influence the customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools for customers of SMEs in Thailand in the language school sector (Table 3).

The study supplementary observed the overview results for each total aspect of the marketing mix with respect to Total Product, Total Price, Total Place, and Total Promotion (Table 4). The observation focus on whether or not any of the 4Ps would influence customers' decision-making in selecting language school through Multiple Regression Statistic Analysis. However, the findings showed that there are only two total aspects of the marketing mix that have the significant results of their overview effects towards dependent variables. They consist of Total Place and Total Promotion, which possess a p -value as equaled to 0.000 at significant alpha level of 0.01 and t -value of 5.621 and 3.636 respectively ($F = 32.347$, $p < 0.01$, $df = 4$, Adjusted R² = 0.186, Durbin-Watson = 1.861, VIF < 5.00). The findings with respect to the overview effects of Total Product and Total Price did not show significant impacts on customers' decision-making of their preferred choices to choose Chinese language schools (as demonstrated in Table 4). Nevertheless, some criteria factors of both total aspects of marketing mix have significant effects as indicated in Table 3. This will be thoroughly considered and discussed in the next section.

Table: 4 Overview Results of Each Total Marketing Mix Factor Influences

Consumers' Decision-Making	
Variable	Consumers' Decision-Making
1. Total Product	0.307
2. Total Price	0.294
3. Total Place / Distribution	0.000***
4. Total Promotion	0.000***
Adjusted R ² value	0.186
F-value	32.347***

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

The test of hypothesis H_2 subsequently was executed after finding the effects that some factors have on customers' decision-making in their behaviors to choose small and medium-sized Chinese language schools. This test is anticipated to examine whether or not the relationship between those significant factors and customers' decision-making would occur. The study also inspected the direction of their relationships. Both observations in the test were done by using the Correlation Statistical Method. The results of testing hypothesis H_2 are shown in Table 5.

The outcomes demonstrated in Table 5 indicate a partial support to hypothesis H_2 , which stated that there are positive relationships between the significant influencing factors and the customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools. The findings show a positive relationship between the independent variables and dependent variable for every aspect of the significant influencing factors except for one factor. The significant results acquired to the hypothesis H_2 testing were derived at the significant alpha level of 0.01 and 0.05. The exceptional factor that did not show a correlation among variables observations is information search for course guideline from the products or services aspect. These outcomes will be deliberated in the following section.

Table: 5 Results of Relationship between the Influencing Marketing Mix Factors and the Customers' Decision-Making

Influencing Marketing Mix Factors		Pearson Correlation Value
Product /	Information search for course guideline	0.050
Service	Individual expectation assurance	0.219***
Price	Reasonable price in regard to the course	0.214***
Place	Located in urban areas	0.324***
	Good and clean classrooms	0.233***
	Easy to access public transportation	0.196***
Promotion	Personal selling / Direct sale	0.276***
	Offering consecutive course or group discounts	0.102**
	Offering free registration	0.291***

Note: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.10$

5. Discussion and Managerial Implication

The findings from this study indicate the major concerns of marketing mix factors that small and medium-sized Chinese language school should pay attention to are the place and promotion. Both aspects are significant in the overview results shown in Table 4 and some criteria for measuring each specific marketing mix factor shown in Table 3.

In regard to place, it was found that location, environment and classroom and accessibility with public transportation are the most significant concerns in regards to the place aspect of marketing mix factors. They influence customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language school and have a relationship with customers' preferred choice in a positive way as shown in Table 5. Therefore, entrepreneurs should find a location in or nearby urban areas (i.e. city, business, or downtown areas) for their schools with the benefit of easy accessibility by public transportation. Language schools should also provide a good environment and clean classrooms as this is of significant concern for students. If language schools follow these three major suggestions it would help them to increase customers' satisfaction and positive attitude towards the school. Finally, this will induce the customer to make their decision to select the language school.

Additionally, language schools should pay minor attention to the indicators of place with respect to proximity to accommodations and location in a shopping mall or a department store. Both aspects allow customers to conveniently do other activities such as shopping or dining. Even though the impact of both items

was shown to be insignificant, they were the top-three of the higher level mean scores in the descriptive part of the study that should be subsequently focused on for the place aspect.

Furthermore, entrepreneurs may focus on the availability of online or e-learning course services and the number of school branches. Although the two latter concerns have the two lowest mean values within the place variable, they still exercise a high level of influence on customers' decision-making. Entrepreneurs should include these concerns as issues of minor potential because (1) the development of the economy and (2) the fact of customers' demands from a business. The economic increasingly evolves to digital platforms. The offering of online marketing activities such as providing online or e-learning courses are of greater importance for effective marketing strategies (Anderson, 2008) that place or distribute products or services with speedy delivery and accuracy in the future (Reedy and Schullo, 2004). Past studies also suggest that online offerings increasingly play an important role as service delivery form to satisfy customers' needs (Al-Fatta, 2010; Jobber, 2004). Likewise, opening many branches and operating in several areas would help language schools to serve customers wants and needs by allowing them to choose a convenient study location. Previous studies have indicated that the location and its accessibility are important factors for promoting schools' competitive advantage (Al-Fatta, 2010; Kotler and Fox, 1995). The study of El-Khawas (1999) also supports that places, which can provide customers with conveniently accessible locations or service times, would enable schools to differentiate themselves from challengers. Nevertheless, entrepreneurs should be aware of the risks in investing and expanding branches to serve customers' convenience. Entrepreneurs of small and medium-sized language schools or startup may avoid financial risk like spending more money on buildings, purchasing lands or renting expensive outlets by employing the concepts of Pop-up stores as a modern marketing strategy to create awareness and associations for the school's brand. For instances, entrepreneurs may open a pop-up store in commercial areas to allow customers to try out the school's services for a short period of time or other specific purposes (i.e. Chinese level testing or short lesson conversation kiosk practice). This modern marketing strategy would enable customers with the hurried lifestyle of working people or the new generations to easily and conveniently feel familiar or participate with the school in any activities and ultimately use school's services.

Apart from place, the promotion aspect of the marketing mix factors should also be a major priority for small and medium-sized Chinese language schools. The results show that personal selling or direct sale, offering free registration and offering consecutive course or group discounts are significant factors that influence customers' decision-making in selecting small and medium-sized Chinese language schools as shown in Table 3. They affect customers' decision-making in a positive way, as shown in Table 5. These results imply that traditional marketing strategies like personal selling or direct sale,³ and sales promotion⁴ are currently still important and successful marketing strategies for language schools to attract customers.

Online marketing or internet marketing that promote or communicate courses and information via either the school's website or social media⁵ does not show a significant impact on customers' likelihood to choose a school. However, they demonstrate a higher value of mean scores compared with advertising through traditional media such as TV or radio as well as publicity and public relations through events and meetings as shown in Table 3. In part this insignificant result of online marketing may be due to the research method, the use of props (i.e. brochures, materials, visual classrooms) during the data collection may have led to a stronger impression in favor for direct sale methods and, thus, concealed the role of online marketing. More importantly, we can explain the outcomes for online marketing item with the characteristics of the respondents in terms of occupation and age (Table 2). Firstly, there is a lesser share of the sample that is made up of students (49.60%) and other occupations presumably adults (50.40%). It can be assumed and used for describing the insignificant result of online marketing that adults are concerned with more deliberate thinking in their perceived financial risk and their privacy on the internet (Hawkins, Best, and Coney, 2004) than students when purchase goods or services online, thus, resulting in adult's defensiveness when participating in online marketing. Secondly, the higher level of mean value for the online marketing item can be explained by the age (18-25 years) of respondents with 52.40% being teenagers and youngsters compared with 47.60% of the rest samples (presumably adults with aged over 25 years). Accordingly, younger customers' preferred promotion channels are online marketing strategies rather than traditional promotion strategies as has been suggested by Armstrong, et al. (2014). Younger customers in the digital age have a greater interest in online advertising, undoubtedly, traditional promotion sources or mass marketing approaches would receive less attention (Armstrong, et al.,

³ These traditional marketing strategies include sales presentation by salesperson or agent, sales meetings, telemarketing, incentive program for salesperson.

⁴ Sales promotions include discount, free registration, and other programs of sales promotion: trade-in allowances, free sampling, premiums and gifts, rebates, couponing, lotto, contest, games, sweepstakes, fair and trade shows exhibitions, demonstrations, low-interest financing, and entertainment.

⁵ Social media here refers to facebook, line, instagram, and blogs.

2014) unlike elders or older generations (Hawkins, et al., 2004). Alipour, et al. (2013) also indicates that traditionally promotional activities are far less influential. Furthermore, Anderson (2008) asserts that online marketing is successful in promoting educational activities. As a result, marketers should also focus on modern marketing strategies like online marketing through the internet or social media as a minor factor that influences customers' decisions especially, in our digital era.

In regard to the other two aspects of the marketing mix factors - product and price - the findings did not show significant overall results. The insignificance of the product on customer's decisions may be due to a lack of perceived difference between Chinese language schools. Likewise, customers consider studying Chinese if the product or service meets their specific needs and impressions (Kotler, 1998). However, the outcome should be interpreted with care because services are perceived as intangible and unlike products (Hoffman and Bateson, 2010). Entrepreneurs might increase customers' satisfaction by providing an excellent service or differentiation in order to create competitive advantage and sway the customers' choice to select their school.

Thus, entrepreneurs may pay attention to product factors with respect to information search and guideline by providing information search through various sources such as search engines, websites, and reference groups and assurance of attaining individual expectation such as passing a test or getting a job. These two factors were shown to have significant influences on customers' decision-making. Especially, the assurance of attaining individual expectation induces customers to choose a school and there is a positive relationship between this factor and decision-making. The implication of the mentioned findings could suggest that if entrepreneurs or marketers put more efforts into guaranteeing customers that they will meet their individual expectations, customers' likelihood to select a school or institute will increase. In addition, entrepreneurs may be concerned about the other the factors with the highest mean values for the product or service aspect of the marketing mix. Those are reputation or image of the school, certificate, and variety of courses for communication and study abroad. These outcomes suggest that entrepreneurs should employ a branding strategy to build awareness and reputation, and variety of products or services to serve customers' needs.

The price aspect was shown to be insignificant due to similar reason as the product aspect. Customers usually decide to purchase a product or service at the right price, thus customers may perceive the prices to be similar. In other words, the price may not influence customers' decision-making in selecting the school if customers perceive the value of products or services as similar and equally priced. This is the explanation for the insignificance of price.

Nevertheless, previous research asserts that the price factor has a significant effect on decision-making in attending schools or institutes (Eckel, 2007; Connor et al., 1999). Thus, entrepreneurs should focus on the price aspect. This study shows that reasonable price in regard to the course with respect to the course level or teaching quality are the only significant factors of price. Noteworthy, the other two factors for price, which should be considered due to their higher mean scores are reasonable price in regard to materials received and reasonable price in regard to skills and expectation. From these results, we see that customers evaluate a product or service based on its price and value on the basis of comparison among competitors (Barker and Angelopulo, 2005). As a consequence, entrepreneurs should set a reasonable price for their products or services by considering the price setting to be related and suitable for the course quality, materials, and the beneficial returns like language skills and ability to meet customers' expectations.

To sum up, the salient and essential marketing mix features affecting customers' decision-making in choosing small and medium-sized Chinese language schools in Thailand are shown in Table 6 and 7. In addition, the discussed implications are other recommendations of marketing strategies implementations have been included in these tables.

6. Limitations and Future Research

Due to time and budget limitations, this study was carried out only in Bangkok Metropolitan Area with a cross-sectional time period for the survey. To broaden the areas covered within Thailand and to collect more samples would enable the study to gain results that can be used for generalization. In addition, the longitudinal study at different times could be beneficial for tracking the study and identifying changes. Since external environment factors such as social value, culture, and technology might induce changes in consumer behaviors when the time goes by. For instances, a likely change is that traditional marketing through television and radio will lose interest and potential for younger customers. This is because those prospects increasingly change a transition to a digital platform like social media .

Examining of other determinants beyond marketing mix factors, for instances, lifestyle, personality, previous language experiences, or even external environment factor like the economic situation)Perreau, 2015; Kumar, 2012 (could be included for further research. Various factors would enable the researchers to deeply understand how and why customers select small and medium-sized Chinese language schools. Alternatively, policy research may be useful in order to encourage Chinese language education to move from the private to the public educational system. Likewise, the Thai government may develop an educational policy that integrated Chinese as a foreign language for the secondary level of Thai basic education.

7. Conclusion

The study found that place and promotion are the main priorities of marketing mix consideration for small and medium-sized Chinese language schools in Thailand. Entrepreneurs should pay attention to select a convenient location in the city, business district or shopping mall areas with caution towards the worth of the financial risks of their investments. Pop-up store concepts might be one method to help to alleviate the risks. It would also increase the awareness of the school and other benefits to the locations if they are located in a good

Table: 6 Summaries of the First Priority Concerns of Marketing Mix Factors Influencing Customers' Decision-Making

First Priority Factor concerns for Language Schools			
Marketing Mix Factor	Role of Impact	Correlation Direction	Suggestions for Marketing Strategies and Tactics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PLACE (Total Place Aspect) Major Concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Location - Environment and classroom - Accessibility with public transportation Minor Concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Proximity to accommodations - Located in shopping mall or department store - The availability of online or e-learning course services - The number of school branch 	Sig. Sig. Sig. Sig. Higher Higher High High	n/a Positive Positive Positive n/a n/a n/a n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Convenience of location, retail store selection, and transportation (i.e. located in city, business, or downtown and easy to access with public transportation). - Employ "Pop-Up Store" as alternative choice of modern marketing strategy. - Variety of service channels and times. • Branch Coverage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expanding branches to cover a larger area and serve customers' convenience and accessibility.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PROMOTION (Total Promotion Aspect) Major Concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal selling or direct sale - Offering free registration - Offering consecutive course or group discounts Minor Concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote or communicate courses and information via the internet - Promote or communicate courses and information through social medias 	Sig. Sig. Sig. Sig. Higher Higher	n/a Positive Positive Positive n/a n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional Marketing Strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal selling or direct sale (i.e. sales presentation, sales meeting, telemarketing, incentive program). - Sales promotion (i.e. discount, free registration, trade-in allowances, free trial, premiums and gifts, rebates, couponing, lotto, contest, games, sweepstakes, fair and trade shows exhibitions, demonstrations, low-interest financing, and entertainment). • Modern Marketing Strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Online marketing via the internet (i.e. school's website, web PR, email, intranet, and customer extranet). - Electronic marketing through social medias (i.e. advertising via facebook, line, instagram, blogs, viral marketing). - Mobile marketing strategy by employing mobile web and/or social media apps to attract customers' interests, increase school brand awareness and association, and drive sales volume. - Edutainment marketing - Sport marketing - Experiential marketing

Table: 7 Summaries of the Second Priority Concerns of Marketing Mix Factors Influencing Customers’ Decision-Making

Second Priority Factor concerns for Language Schools			
Marketing Mix Factor	Role of Impact	Correlation Direction	Suggestions for Marketing Strategies and Tactics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PRODUCT OR SERVICE (Total Product or Service Aspect) Major Concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Individual expectation assurance (i.e. pass a test or get a job) - Information search for guideline Minor Concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reputation (or image) of the school - Certificate guarantee - Variety of courses for communication and study abroad 	Non-Sig. Sig. Sig. Higher Higher Higher	n/a Positive n/a n/a n/a n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing an excellent service or differentiation to increase customers’ satisfaction and meet their specific needs. • Individual Expectation Warranty Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Guarantee individual expectation (i.e. pass a test or get a job). • Variety of Information Sources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing various sources of information search for guideline (i.e. search engines, websites, web PR, links, reference group, WOM, eWOM). • Branding or Internet Branding Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create school’s brand awareness and associations to build school image or reputation through marketing activities. - Building school brand through the internet (i.e. websites, web PR, advertising and sponsored content (banner ad), email, intranet, and customer extranet). • Product Warranty Strategy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Certificate guarantee • Variety of Products or Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providing various choices of product or service.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PRICE (Total Price Aspect) Major Concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reasonable price in regard to the course (i.e. course level or course-teaching quality) Minor Concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reasonable price in regard to materials received - Reasonable price in regard to skills and expectation 	Non-Sig. Sig. Higher Higher	n/a Positive n/a n/a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Price Policies and Strategies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Setting the price by using price policies and strategies to suit for the business, economic situation, competition, course quality, materials, and the other beneficial returns (i.e. language skills or customers’ expectations). • Total Quality Management (TQM) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concerning the quality in every aspect of organization (i.e. courses, services, administration, employees, costs of goods sold, and asset utilization).

environment, easy to access with public transportation and nearby accommodation rather than many branches or virtual schools expansion. This is because Thai culture and lifestyle still love the convenience of a shopping mall complex or city for shopping, meeting, and parties. Thais prefer to be taken care of and sales promotion as could be seen from the findings that the personal selling or direct sale by salesman or agent approach is a salient factor as well as free registration and course discounts. Additionally, minor concerns like promoting and communicating courses and information through the internet and social media should also be paid attention to. Particularly, young customers consume products or services online and spend much time on websites or social networking sites instead of using traditional mass media. The findings also advise that entrepreneurs should be concerned with minor aspects of the marketing mix, which are product and price, and employ a products or services warranties strategy to meet individual expectation, providing information search through various sources, branding, variety of goods or services, and reasonable price setting to meet customers' needs and wants. Additional suggestions would be the use of marketing media to help small and medium-sized Chinese language schools to promote their competitiveness. Marketers or entrepreneurs may employ both traditional and modern marketing media in order to apply new complex marketing mix strategies to encounter the challenges of a market shift to a digital economy.

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