

# A GROUNDED THEORY INVESTIGATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF A 'POSITIVE VISUALISATION COURSE' IN BRAND IDENTITY ON FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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DOI: 10.52846/MNMK.20.2.03

## *Abstract:*

*Branding is a well-known concept in the business field, and its application in the higher education sector has been introduced in recent years. Higher education branding is an effective strategy which has received considerable attention in recent years, and a growing number of articles on the subject have begun to appear in the literature. However, an apparent gap within the literature indicates that students' perceptions of university brand images have not been thoroughly researched. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to investigate the impact of a positive visualisation course in brand identity on the perception of freshmen students of a university brand image. A qualitative approach has been selected as the most suitable for this study, and the methodology for the study of the aforementioned area is grounded theory. The research findings revealed that the positive visualisation course in brand identity can positively affect freshmen students' perceptions of the university brand image.*

*Keywords: higher education marketing, perception, branding, brand image, higher education branding.*

## **1. Introduction**

Universities are currently operating in a highly competitive environment and the competition between them is very intense. Given this dynamic situation and the acknowledgement that branding is a powerful tool that enables universities to compete effectively, the Higher Education (HE) sector is becoming more and more marketable. In the modern era, these challenges have led professionals to focus on developing their brand because a strong brand is considered a powerful tool for efficiently competing in this extremely antagonistic environment (Rutter et al., 2017). A strong brand is the main aim of many universities and is considered to be a key factor for success. It is also regarded as a core competency that leads to profitability. Marketers focus on developing the university brand to offset declining enrolments,

retain existing students, compete effectively, enhance a university's image and prestige, and increase revenue (Williams and Omar, 2014).

HE marketing research has been previously recognised as underdeveloped, however, more branding theories have been introduced recently. As a result of this interest, the HE branding has received considerable attention, and an increasing number of research articles have begun to appear in the literature. For example, the research conducted by Hemer et al. (2019), examined the factors that shape students' perceptions of the overall campus climate. Additionally, Yang (2019) investigated the role of social media engagement in international student recruitment, along with strategies concerning the ways social media content can be utilised by university marketing managers to improve students' engagement. In addition, Khoshtaria et al. (2020) conducted a study to examine the impact of brand equity dimensions on university reputation. Yet, there is insufficient research assessing the way students' perceptions of university brand image can be affected by marketing strategies.

To fill this gap, the present study aims to investigate how a positive visualisation course in brand identity can affect freshmen students' perceptions of university brand image. The term positive visualisation course in brand identity refers to a course through which the university's achievements, awards, mission, history are presented. Investigating this topic is of paramount importance as it will provide new insights into freshmen students' perceptions. Thus, the study expands on the existing literature by offering a theoretical model which will guide future research on this subject. Moreover, the findings entail relevant managerial implications. In particular, universities can apply the Formation of Perception model (FOP) to gain the competitive advantage.

## 2. Literature review

According to Keller (2020), branding is defined as the combination of a distinctive name and symbols that identify products or services of a brand and constitutes a strong tool that differentiates them from the competitors' products or services. Kotler and Keller (2019) define branding as the process of offering products and services. More precisely, brand image is the general perceptions and feelings of consumers towards brands, and it has a significant impact on consumer behaviour (Zhang, 2015). Based on another definition, brand image represents the picture of a certain brand as well as a description of feelings and emotions as these have been shaped by the customer after visualising and thinking about a particular brand. Last but not least, brand image is a result of the evaluation made by consumers about a brand that can significantly affect their purchasing decisions (Wu and Chen, 2019).

When it comes to university content, a brand represents the perception and reputation developed in students' minds regarding the university (Dollinger et al., 2017). Likewise, Alcaide-Pulito et al. (2014) support that brand image refers to the students' mental perceptions, which can encourage them to express either a positive or a negative opinion about the university. In other words, it is the reaction that occurs in people's minds when they hear or see the name of a university. As a result of this incredibly competitive environment, the HE sector is evolving into a more marketised status, with the concept of brand building playing a vital role in the university's strategic plans (Guilbault, 2018; Williams and Omar, 2014). The benefits obtained from a strong brand image are enormous, allowing companies to increase their market shares, which in turn leads to significant profitability (Chapleo, 2015). A strong university brand image

has the potential to attract more intelligent students (Aghaz et al., 2015). Notably, when students have a positive perception of the university's brand image, this will positively affect the Word-of-Mouth (WOM; Herold et al., 2017). Although there are various instruments through which HE institutions can promote themselves, such as academic programme, quality of professors, facilities, campus life, and services (Pinar et al., 2011), the most important strategy that guarantees a competitive advantage is called corporate branding (Gupta et al., 2020).

Branding in the HE sector plays an integral role in its growth and survival. A positive brand perception can positively affect the recruitment of students and create goodwill (Panda et al., 2019). Over the last few years, the HE sector has become extremely powerful, not only because it has managed to grow economically, but also because it has challenged the traditional approaches to business. Branding plays a vital role since it can affect students' feelings and behaviour in the first place, and secondly, it can affect prospective students' university choices. Additionally, branding gives students a sense of belonging to a community (Rutter et al., 2016). Similarly, Clark et al. (2019) emphasise the vital role of branding in HE institutions and suggest that branding adds value to universities as well as provides more satisfaction to students. Rather et al. (2018) state that, although universities are complex in nature, branding can simplify things and create loyal customers. The role of brand image during the student's selection process is vital, since it can have an impact on the willingness of students to apply to a certain university and thus may increase enrolments (Rudhumbu et al., 2017). Furthermore, branding provides an identity and distinguishes it from its main competitors (Alzaydi et al., 2018). From the students' point of view, the brand serves as a promise to meet their expectations and make it easier for them to decide which university to attend (Rudhumbu et al., 2017). Since universities are intangible, branding can act as an indication of predetermined quality before consumption. Girard et al. (2021) argue that in order to achieve successful branding in HE, a company should focus on understanding the perceptions of its key stakeholders, such as students, employers, alumni, and the general public. It is, therefore, essential that universities employ effective marketing strategies to empower their brands and attract more students (Dollinger et al., 2017).

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Data collection and research sample**

Taking into consideration the research question, qualitative research has been selected as the most suitable method for carrying out the research for this study. More specifically, the Grounded Theory methodology was employed so as to conduct semi-structured interviews which would in turn provide an in-depth understanding concerning the way freshmen students formulate their perceptions. Grounded theory is appropriate when a respective theory is not available to explain or understand a process and this theory is generated from the data. Grounded theory method is based on a systematic analysis of empirical data in order to develop and expand theory regarding brand building in HE (Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2018). Therefore, grounded theory was considered the most appropriate methodology to answer the research question since there were no other relevant theories which could interpret how a positive visualisation course in brand identity can affect freshmen students' perceptions of university brand image.

Regarding the research sample in qualitative research and especially in grounded theory, the generation of enough data is pivotal in identifying patterns, concepts, categories, properties, and dimensions of the given phenomena (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Hence, it is important to obtain a suitable sample which will generate sufficient data. The question that arises though, is what the appropriate sample size is. The answer to this question is given by the concept of 'theoretical saturation' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The concept of theoretical saturation was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1999). Theoretical saturation occurs in the data collection process when 'no new data about a category seems to be emerging, when the category is well-developed in terms of its properties and dimensions and thus shows variability, and when the correlations among categories are well-established and validated' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.212). In other words, saturation arises when more participants are added to the study, but this does not result in additional perspectives or information. Even though theoretical saturation had already been reached in the first interviews, the researcher decided to include more participants in the research because this is a longitudinal study and the researcher would be observing the same sample for the following year. It was thus expected that some students would decide not to proceed with the research any further. Hence, the researcher aimed for a bigger population to guarantee accurate results.

The sample identification emerged through the use of the snowball technique. Snowball sampling refers to the process during which research participants recruit other participants for a certain study (Ghaljaie et al., 2017). Therefore, potential interviewees were asked to recommend other candidates who they believed could contribute to the field of study. Before confirming their willingness to participate, all candidates had been informed about the purpose of the research as well as the experiment procedure.

### **3.2. The Participants**

Forty-two students have participated in the research among which twenty-five women and seventeen men. After taking into consideration the factor 'programme of study', the participants were divided into two groups; the experimental and the control groups. The participants of the experimental group attended the positive visualisation course in brand identity, while the control group's participants did not attend the course.

### **3.3. Research Design**

A more detailed experimental procedure is provided in Table 1.

Stage 1: Pre-Course Semi-Structured Interviews: Prior to the course, semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to identify students' perceptions of the university brand image. Forty-two semi-structured interviews were carried out face-to-face in March 2020.

Stage 2: Implementation of the Course: The 'positive visualisation course' was carried out with the participants of the experimental group. During the course, the students had been presented with the historical background of the university, its past achievements, recognition and values, and the awards it had received.

Stage 3: Post-Course Semi-Structured Interviews:

Part 1: One week after the course, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with the participants of the experimental group in order to examine whether students' perceptions were affected by the course. Twenty-one online semi-structured interviews were implemented in March 2020.

Part 2: Four months after the course, semi-structured interviews were conducted online among the participants of both groups in order to identify whether the students' perceptions had changed. In total, thirty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted online in July 2020. Six students withdrew from the study prior to these interviews.

**Table 1. The experiment**

The experiment		
	<b>Experimental Group</b> The participants of the experimental group attended the positive visualisation course in brand identity	<b>Control Group</b> The participants of the control group did NOT attend the positive visualisation course in brand identity
Stage 1	Pre-course semi-structured interviews	Pre-course semi-structured interviews
Stage 2	Implementation of the course	/
Stage 3	<b>Post-course semi-structured interviews</b>	<b>Post-course semi-structured interviews</b>
	Stage 3/Part 1 One week after the course	/
	Stage 3/Part 2 Four months after the course	Four months after the first interview

**3.4. Data Analysis**

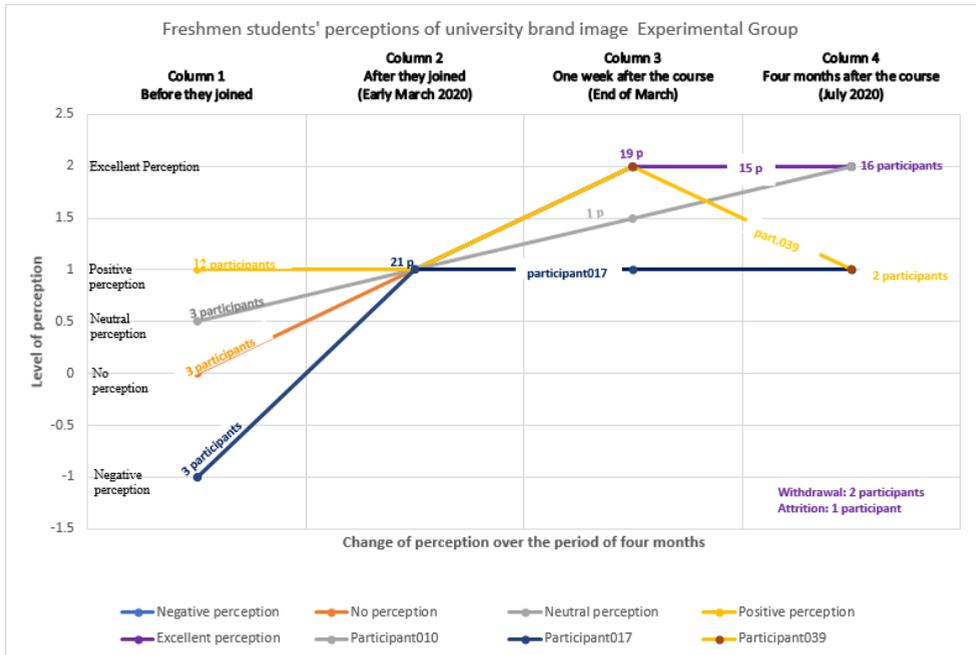
Data analysis for grounded theory research is an ongoing process which commences simultaneously with data collection and continues in parallel. Following the Glaserian Grounded Theory principles, the coding process used for the data analysis is a combination of two main stages: substantive and theoretical. Substantive coding is the first stage of grounded theory's coding process and is comprised of two levels: open and selective coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Open coding is the initial stage of theoretical analysis in grounded theory and the first level of substantive coding (Glaser, 1978), which begins immediately after the first interview. Open coding involves the researcher listening to the digital recordings, reading and re-reading interview transcripts and field notes, and then coding each line of the transcript. Selective coding is the second level of substantive coding and occurs when open coding has concluded with the identification of categories and their properties. Theoretical coding is the final level of coding, where theoretical codes are used to "conceptualise how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory" (Glaser, 1978, p.72).

**4. Findings**

The analysis of the data reveals five categories of students' perceptions; (1) negative, (2) no perception, (3) neutral, (4) positive, (5) excellent.

*Experimental group*

Figure 1 illustrates freshmen students' perceptions concerning the university's brand image and how these have been affected within a period of four months.



**Figure 1. Freshmen students' perceptions of the university's brand image-experimental group**

Students' Perceptions Before joining

The results show that three out of twenty-one students in the experimental group had a negative perception of the university before joining because, as they explained, they undervalued private universities.

*Participant 033: Basically, I have heard some misconceptions before enrolling, one of them being that private universities are undervalued.*

In addition, three students had no perception, another three participants had a neutral perception, and twelve students had a positive perception due to the other students' recommendations and positive word-of-mouth.

*Participant 034: I had no image in mind because I did not know anything about the university.*

*Participant 041: I had a positive perception; this is a good university indeed.*

Students' Perceptions After Joining (Beginning of March 2020)

Students' perceptions had changed after entering and interacting with the university. It is worth noting that the negative perceptions of three students changed into positive ones after their enrolment. The factors that contributed to this change include university facilities, the amicable environment, staff behaviour, and the support they received from the faculty and consultants. Similarly, three students with no perceptual awareness and three students with neutral perception reported a positive perception after joining the university. Considering the twelve students who

had a positive perception before they joined, their perception remained the same, according to their statements, the university had met their expectations.

#### Students' Perceptions One Week After the Course (End of March 2020)

The analysis of the results indicates that after students had attended the positive visualisation course in brand identity, their perceptions were positively influenced, except for two students. To be more precise, nineteen out of twenty-one students pointed out that their perceptions improved significantly after being exposed to more information about the university's awards, achievements, and history.

*Participant 026: My perception has been improved, going from this to this (performing gestures with her hands). To me this is the best university after everything I have heard.*

*Participant 012: I knew that it was a respectable university, but now I realise that it is even better than I thought. I discovered a lot of new information. As a result, after the course was implemented, my perception of the university changed for the better (impressed).*

#### Students' Perceptions Four Months After the Course (July 2020)

Fifteen students maintained excellent perceptions four months after the course, and one student held the same positive perception. However, a perceptual transformation has been observed with two participants. Participant 039, who had an excellent perception, slightly changed to a positive perception at that stage because of the pressure they received during online classes. In contrast, participant 010, who had a positive perception, stated that their perception was improved because they appreciated the way the university switched to online education during the lockdown.

*Participant 012: My perception changed. Even though my perception was positive, the presentation aided in its enhancement...*

*Participant 020: At first, I had a positive perception, but now I have a better perception.*

*Participant 010: My perception is better after seeing how the university handled the COVID-19 lockdown.*

#### Control group

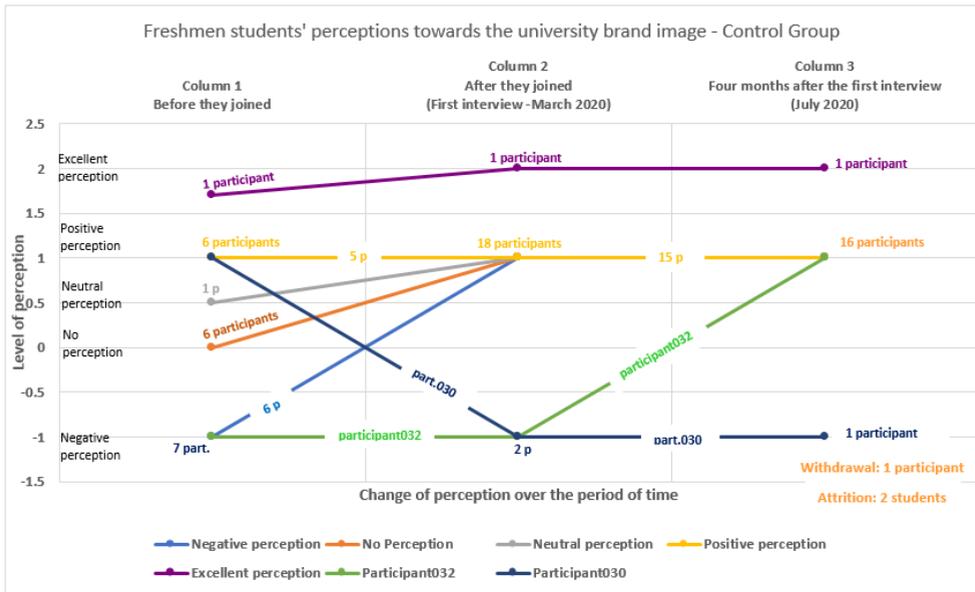
Figure 2 presents students' perceptions concerning the university's brand image and how these were affected within a four-month period.

#### Students' Perceptions Before They Joined

Seven students in the control group formed a negative perception before joining the university due to the fact that they underestimated the level of private universities in Cyprus. Six students had no perceptual awareness, one student had a neutral perception, and six students had a positive perception. A particular participant had an excellent perception of the university because they were acquainted with the history of the university, its previous achievements, recognitions, and awards.

*Participant 020: I had a positive perception due to the fact that my sister is studying at this university, then I decided to enrol as well.*

*Participant 034: I had no image in mind because I did not know anything about the university.*



**Figure 2. Freshmen students’ perceptions of the university’s brand image - control group**

Students’ Perceptions After Joining (First Interview – March 2020)

The results show that participant 002 maintained an excellent perception after entering the university. Initially, the participant had formed an excellent perception stemming from the university’s awards and achievements. However, the factor contributing to the sustainment of this perception at exceptional level was the student’s overall interaction with the university. Five out of six participants who had a positive perception before joining, maintained this perception, while participant 030 claimed that their perception was negative since they believed that the university was disorganised.

*Participant 030: My perception is not that positive [laughing nervously] because I feel like they are really disorganised... the majority of the teaching staff is very organised, but there are some exceptions.*

The participants who had a neutral perception before joining, pointed out that their perception became positive after enrolling at this university. Six participants with no perception stated that their perception became positive after joining. Considering the seven participants with a negative perception before joining, six of them stated that their perception had improved as a result of their overall experience with the university. In contrast, one participant expressed their negative perception since they did not like the environment.

*Participant 036: My perception was negative before joining. After entering the university and meeting people, advisors and professors, I realised that everyone is excellent. So, my actual experience was the main factor which managed to change my opinion about the university.*

Students' Perceptions Four Months After the First Interview (July 2020)

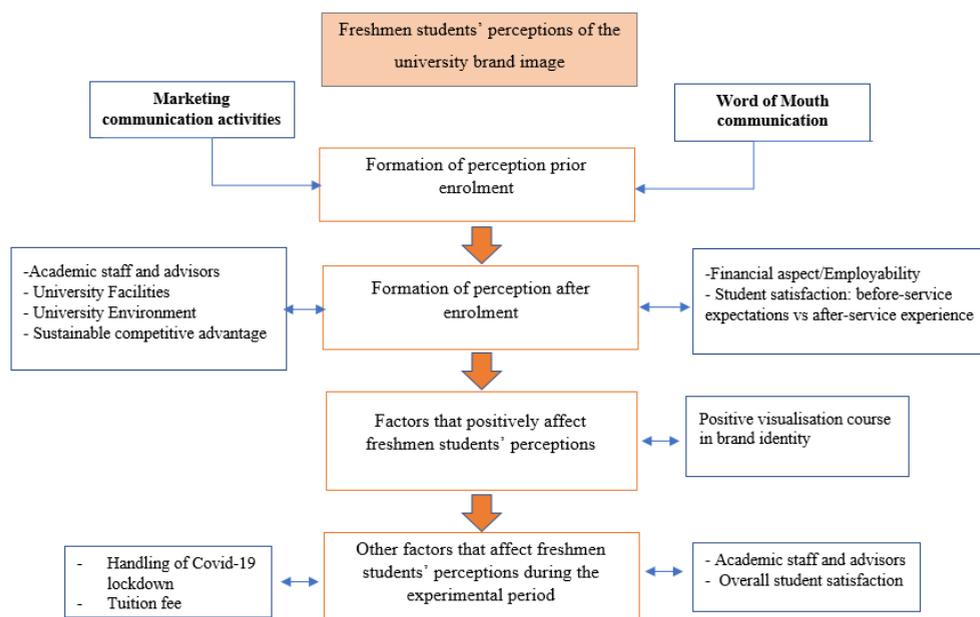
Four months after the first interview, participant 002 maintained the same excellent perception, fifteen students retained their positive perception, and two students had the same negative view (participant 030, participant 032).

*Participant 037: My perception has changed after entering. It is positive now. I expected it to be worse, but it turned out to be better than I expected.*

*Participant 030: As I mentioned in my previous interview, my perception is not good.*

Theory building

The Formation of Perception Model (FOP MODEL) which is presented below (Figure 3) was designed in order to both explain how freshmen formulate a perception and the factors that affect their perception.



**Figure 3. FOP MODEL**

This is an ongoing process that consists of four stages which are explained in detail below:

Formation of Perception before they joined: This is the first step in the formation of the perception during which freshmen students shape a perception before joining a university. The factors that contributed to the formulation of students' perceptions were affected by the positive/negative WOM or/and marketing communication activities.

Formation of Perception after they joined: After students had joined the university a change was noticed in their perception either in a positive or negative way due to the following factors: (1) university facilities, (2) academic staff and advisors, (3) financial aspect and employment opportunities, (4) university environment, (5) comparison of the university with other universities, (5) students' overall satisfaction.

Formation of Perception after attended the positive visualisation course: The results indicate that the perceptions of the students who attended the course, changed in a positive way. Apparently, the course had a strong impact on freshmen's perception of the university brand image.

Formation of Perception over the period of time: The data reveals that the students who attended the course maintained the same excellent perception four months after the course. However, other factors were identified to affect their perception of the university over the period of time. These factors include aspects such as the tuition fee, academic staff and advisors, satisfaction, university environment, and handling of COVID-19 pandemic.

## 5. Discussion

Branding in HE has proven to be an effective strategy for a university's success and has received considerable attention in recent years. However, the impact of students' perceptions of university brand image has not been extensively researched yet. The primary aim of this study was to investigate the impact of the positive visualisation course in brand identity upon freshmen students' perceptions of the university brand image. The main conclusion drawn strongly suggests that a positive visualisation course can positively affect students' perceptions of university brand image.

Notably, the present study entails relevant theoretical and managerial implications. Considering the theoretical contribution, this study expands on the existing literature by presenting a theoretical model which provides an in-depth understanding of how students formulate a perception, the impact of a positive visualisation course, as well as the factors that influence students' perceptions during a four-month period.

In regard to the managerial implications, the emergent theoretical model (figure 1) provides useful insights to university marketers concerning the different stages that a student goes through when forming and developing their perceptions. More specifically, the model presents the factors that affect students' perceptions before joining (i.e., WOM and marketing communication) and the factors which influence students' perceptions after joining (i.e., academic staff and advisor, facilities, environment, competitive advantage, financial aspect, employability, satisfaction). Furthermore, the introduction of the positive visualisation course in brand identity, which was delivered to the participants of the present study, is evidence that students' perceptions can irrefutably change favourably. Finally, other factors that contribute to the formation of students' perceptions over a period of four months (i.e., tuition fees, academic staff and advisors, satisfaction, and handling of COVID-19 lockdown) are also shown. Therefore, it is time university marketers proceeded with the appropriate actions in order to positively influence and guide students' perceptions at different stages of the perceptual process.

### *Suggestions for future research*

Based on the outcome and the conclusions of this study several opportunities exist for further research on the impact of a positive visualisation course in brand identity on students' perceptions of a university's brand image. In addition, the effect of a positive visualisation course in brand identity on high school students might prove an important area for future research investigating whether such a course plays a role in students' choice of university.

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