



Antecedents of School Branding: A School Leaders' View to Develop School Branding Model

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Abstract

Branding is a process to communicate with the prospective consumers about the features, attributes, characteristics and benefits of the product and service. Branding of k-12 schools, especially in developing countries is quite unique in nature as it encompasses both tangible and intangible aspects. There are several parameters which impact the school branding and hence school-choice criteria of the parents. This paper explores the linkages and hierarchy of these parameters impacting the overall school brand from school leaders' perspective. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are conducted to identify school branding parameters along with inputs from the existing literature. Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM) is used to create hierarchical model among the factors and interpret the linkages and cross-linkages between them. Hierarchical model of school branding parameters is developed as perceived by the school leaders. This model along with the similar model from parents can be utilized by schools to bridge the brand gap and develop an effective school brand.

Keywords: Branding, K-12 Schools, Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM), School-choice criteria

Introduction

Brand is not a new concept; it has existed since ancient times when potters used to make their products with their initials (Hieronymus and Dirim 2003) and farmers used to put mark on their cattle to differentiate them from competitors (Keller 2009). American Marketing Association defines brand as "A name, term, symbol or design, or a combination of them, which is intended to signify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors." Brand creates awareness, reputation and niche for the product in market place (Keller 2009). Brand has the ability to bring back certain attributes and features associated

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with the product to the mind of the customers. Brands, thus act as the differentiator from the local products as well as from competitor's product (Aaker 1996). Thus brand can be described as a bouquet of values that enables a promise about the unique and differentiated experience (De Chernatony 2001). Brand is a promise of the bundle of attributes; these attributes can be real or imaginary, rational or emotional, tangible or intangible (Ambler and Styles 1992). The brand encompasses both tangible product related values as well as intangible characteristics (added value) (Aaker 1996).

Brands are seen as symbols with personalities that users relate to the product and services being offered beyond the offered functional utility (Alt and Griggs 1988; Arnold 1992; Goodyear 1993). Brand is a symbol which in itself encompasses variety of ideas and attributes (Gardner and Levy 1955). The stronger and clearer message these symbols carry, more trust is developed in consumers (Dawar and Parker 1992). The impact of branding process increases significantly if the information carried by these signals and symbols is more accurate and closer to the actual attributes and features of the product (Leischnig et al. 2012).

The identification of the true quality of the product and services being offered is too cumbersome a process for the customers and also involves huge amount of purchase risk (Jacoby et al. 1971). The purchase risk can be of numerous type i.e. financial risk, time risk, social risk, physical risk etc. (Swait and Ardem 2003). Due to lack of readily available information and high risk involved in actually purchasing the product, the customers rely on signals provided by brands to gauge the quality of product and service being offered (Rao and Monroe 1988). The purchase risk involved at the time of choosing a school for their child is very high. Thus, parents seek these signals to gauge the quality of the school, as an outsider with limited availability of information judging the actual school quality is very difficult (Jacoby et al. 1971; Scheneider and Buckley 2002). The signals that schools send out through branding process can be tangible as well as intangible. Tangible signals include infrastructure, academic results of the school, transport etc. Intangible signals can be teacher quality, imagery of the school, word of mouth etc.

School education has this peculiar distinction of providing both tangible as well as intangible services. In the end school is offering a service, 'education' as service differentiates from product, such that the ownership does not change hands (Lovelock and Wirtz 2011). But the antecedents of the school brand are both, the tangible product (infrastructure) as well as the intangible service (education). The efficacy of the service offered by the school i.e. education can only be gauged after the completion of schooling (post-consumption) (Chen 2008). Brand is not a stand-alone attribute, it is the sum total of various aspects like attributes, features, experience, communication, positioning etc. (Jobber and O'Reilly 2011; King 1991). Similarly school brand is a sum total of infrastructure, academic performance, systems & processes, teacher and staff quality, culture etc.

Traditionally parents have wanted their children to get educated, have a stable income and build a career. In order to provide all this to their children they tend to push their child to the best (branded) preparatory and secondary school, followed by education from a reputed university (Napompech 2011). Brand in itself is not a standalone attribute; it is an amalgamation of features, communication, positioning, experience etc. (Jobber 2011; King 1991). Similarly the school brand is a function of infrastructure, teacher quality, marketing, academic results etc.

Problem Definition

A good school brand not only attracts quality students but also attracts and helps in retaining quality teachers. The schools in developed countries are largely state-run and branding primarily

becomes a function of results of the school, as other variables like infrastructure, curriculum, extracurricular activities etc. are pretty standardized. On the contrary in Indian context the quality schools i.e. top ranked schools (Education World, Outlook surveys) are primarily the private schools; school administrators in the government run schools does not have much say in revamping the infrastructure, faculty and student selection etc. The private schools want to attract best talent which is a function of the school brand, however, the literature on the antecedents of school branding in context of developing countries in general and India in particular is very scant. This paper attempts to identify the factors contributing to the school brand and to explore the linkages among those factors.

Research Methodology

Focus Group Discussions were conducted to identify the factors that contribute to the overall brand of the school. The factors identified were designed in the form of a structured questionnaire to seek responses from the experts on the impact of one factor on other and vice-versa. Total of 11 responses were received on the questionnaire and the data collected through the questionnaire was used to identify the inter-linkages among the factors.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to identify the factors that drive the school brand. These discussions were conducted with school principals and administrators i.e. stakeholders who are the decision makers in the brand building activities from the school end. Four FGDs were conducted comprising of 10 participants each at 4 different locations i.e. Delhi, Muzaffarnagar, Kolkata and Coimbatore. Each FGD lasted for 45-60 mins. The discussions were moderated by an expert from the education sector and the techniques used were direct open questioning by the moderator at the beginning of the discussion followed by self-administered questioning between the participants, with occasional moderating from the moderator to direct the group towards the set goals of the FGD.

The key questions that were open for the group to discuss were:

1. Is branding important for k-12 schools
2. What are the elements of school ecosystem that contribute/impact the school brand

1. Is branding important for k-12 schools

Majority of the participants were of the opinion that branding is important for k-12 schools. They opined that the branding is/should be one of the focus areas of the school. A school should focus on the activities that create a positive brand image in the minds of the customers (parents) and society. Depending on the vision and mission of the school, a school can focus on the brand image that they want to create for themselves.

“School brand is the name that school earns over a period of time”

“Parents do look at brand image of the school before sending their child to a particular school”

“A good school brand helps in attracting good students as well as good teachers”

“School brand is created over a period of time by doing right things right”

Few participants were of the opinion that branding is not something that a school can control or should focus upon, it happens on its own as a school focuses on academics, extracurricular, build infrastructure; branding happens on its own. However, others opined and argued that knowingly or unknowingly these activities do develop a certain brand image of the school, and if right things are done in the right manner than schools can create the desired brand image for themselves.

2. What are the elements of school ecosystem that contribute/impact the school brand

Participants in all the groups had long discussions on the elements of school branding, there were numerous aspects that came up from the discussions. Majority opined that the schools' performance in the board results and number of selections in the competitive examinations were the key elements, whereas there were substantive number of participants who opined that the extra-curricular and co-curricular activities along with the international tie-ups is important for the overall branding of the school as now days parents also focus on the holistic development of the child and see these aspects as antecedents to an all-round development. The major elements that emerged out of discussions were following:

- **Academic Performance:** this element included both board examination results as well as the performance of the students in various competitive examinations like IITJEE, Medical entrance and law entrance examinations.

"Academic performance of children is an indicator of the quality of education imparted by the school. It also reflects the quality of leadership and teachers in the school"

"Academic performance is a key driver of schools' brand image, other aspects can be an add on, but academic performance remains at the core of the school brand"

- **Physical Infrastructure:** this element comprised of the infrastructure available at the school i.e. how big is the overall school, what type of school building is there, what are the various labs that are available in the school and their corresponding infrastructure, playground size and various sports facilities etc.

"Having good physical infrastructure in place is a prerequisite for the quality education nowadays"

"Physical infrastructure is the first interface of the school with the parents and society, and hence plays a vital role in the overall brand development of the school"

- **Extra and Co-curricular activities:** what are the extra-curricular and co-curricular activities that the child is subjected to in the school, what is the infrastructure available to undertake those activities

"Extra and co-curricular activities aids the overall learning of the child and improves all round performance in academics as well as in other activities"

"Extra and co-curricular activities have emerged as key factors in the holistic development of the child. There are schools who wants to be seen as the ones focusing majorly on the extra-curricular activities. A set of parents are also seeking schools that focus on other aspects of learning than the academics, with a belief that it will prepare them for a challenges in life"

- **Information Technology (IT) Infrastructure:** this element included the information technology infrastructure such as smart classes, online presence, mobile/internet connectivity with the parents, how much real time data can be shared with the parents and how to keep them in loop with continuous information sharing to complete the feedback system.

"With almost every parent having access to internet at home or through phone they want information about child's progress on the go"

"Parents come to school and say that they want their ward's marks and other details on phone, through internet or message, as other 'good' schools are doing so"

- **Teacher and Staff Quality:** the groups opined that the quality of teachers and the support staff is one of the key elements in developing a strong school brand. It is the quality of the teachers that impacts the performance of the students, and in turn the teacher quality is impacted by their own skillsets along with the support they get from the school.
“Quality of education in a school cannot exceed quality of teachers and the support staff”
“Quality teachers develop quality students and hence the brand of the school”
“Brand of a school is hugely impacted by the teacher quality and leadership (head of the school)”
- **Marketing and Promotion:** this element focused on the promotional activities that the school does to brand itself. Various activities were mentioned by the participants that comprise this element i.e. notice boards, hoardings, cultural/academic events etc.
“Apart from academics and the holistic development, marketing and promotion activities help in creating a strong school brand”
“Doing right things right is not enough, the good work done by the school needs to be spread to all stakeholders (parents, children, society and media) to create a positive brand image of the school”

Interpretive Structural Modelling (ISM) is a process of formulating mental models into well-defined visible models encompassing multiple viewpoints and bringing subjectivity to the model (Warfield 1974; Sage 1977). ISM is based on hierarchy and establishes relationship between multiple elements (Warfield 1976). ISM is a strong modelling tool, however the interpretation of links established between components is comparatively weak. Interpretation in ISM is restricted to relationship between elements and direction of relationships in paired comparisons. Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM) incorporates interpretation of links in ISM (Sushil, 2012), thus making the structured model interpretative and open to interpretative logic at each relation (Sushil, 2005). TISM makes a model more transparent by interpreting every logical relation; instead of leaving it open for multiple interpretations. TISM interprets both nodes as well as links in the structural developed model.

TISM Development

Step 1: Identifying the key elements

Identifying the elements impacting the overall school brand. The elements of school branding model has been identified using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

Step 2: Define contextual relationship between elements

Defining contextual relationship is an integral part of TISM to structure the model relating various elements. The contextual relationship explores relations between identified factors i.e. “Factor X will influence/enhance factor Y”. For example, “Extra-curricular activities will influence/enhance Academic performance”.

Step 3: Interpreting Relationships

This step gives TISM an edge over ISM as this seeks interpretation of the relationships. The key issue explored here is “In what ways factor X will influence/enhance factor Y”

Step 4: Interpretive logic of pair-wise comparison

Interpretive knowledge base is created by conducting a pair-wise comparison of the elements,

thus establishing the relationship between the elements. The response to each comparison can be either Yes (Y) or No (N). Directional relationships are established among elements in this step. If the response to the relationship is Yes (Y), it is further explored.

Step 5: Reachability matrix and transitivity check

The reachability matrix is prepared by putting 1 for 'Yes' and 0 for 'No' from the pair-wise comparison in previous step. Further the matrix is checked for transitivity (if X-Y and Y-Z, then X-Z). For each transitive link established the reachability matrix is updated with 1 (Yes), and the interpretation column is updated with 'transitive'. If some meaningful relation can be established then it is written along with transitive entry.

Table 1: Reachability Matrix

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7
C1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
C2	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
C3	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
C4	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
C5	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
C6	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
C7	0	0	1	0	0	0	1

Table 2: Post-iterative matrix

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7
C1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
C2	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
C3	0	0	1	0	0	1	1
C4	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
C5	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
C6	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
C7	0	0	1	0	0	1	1

Step 6: Level partition on Reachability Matrix

Level partition in TISM is carried out in the similar manner as in ISM. This step helps in identification of placement of elements level-wise (Warfield 1974; Saxena et al. 2006). The

elements in the top level of the reachability matrix will consist of the element itself and other items that lie within the same level.

Step 7: Developing Diagraph

All elements are arranged graphically as per the relationship in the reachability matrix. The information from the interpretive knowledge base is examined to revise the transitive relationships between the elements. Only those transitive relationships are retained whose interpretation emerge out to be crucial in the overall model.

Step 8: Interaction Matrix

Diagraph is converted into an interaction matrix using 1's to indicate direct and significant transitive links. Further interpretations are drawn from the interpretive knowledge base to develop an interaction matrix.

Table 3: Partitioning Matrix (Iteration 1)

	Reachability	Antecedent	Intersection	Level
C1	1, 2, 4	1, 2, 5, 6		
C2	1, 2, 4	1, 2		
C3	3, 6, 7	3, 7		
C4	4	1, 2, 4, 6	4	I
C5	1, 5, 6	5, 6		
C6	1, 4, 5, 6	3, 5, 6		
C7	1, 3, 6, 7	3, 7		

Table 4: Partitioning Matrix (Iteration 2)

	Reachability	Antecedent	Intersection	Level
C1	1, 2	1, 2, 5, 6	1, 2	II
C2	1, 2	1, 2	1, 2	II
C3	3, 6, 7	3, 7		
C5	1, 5, 6	5, 6		
C6	1, 5, 6	3, 5, 6		
C7	1, 3, 6, 7	3, 7		

Table 5: Partitioning Matrix (Iteration 3)

	Reachability	Antecedent	Intersection	Level
C3	3, 6, 7	3, 7		
C5	5, 6	5, 6	5, 6	III
C6	5, 6	3, 5, 6	5, 6	III
C7	3, 6, 7	3, 7		

Table 6: Partitioning Matrix (Iteration 4)

	Reachability	Antecedent	Intersection	Level
C3	3, 7	3, 7	3, 7	IV
C7	3, 7	3, 7	7	IV

Table 7: Interaction Matrix

	Teacher and Staff Quality	Physical Infrastructure	Extra and Co-curricular Activities	Overall Brand of School	Academic Performance	Marketing and Promotion	IT Infrastructure
Teacher and Staff Quality	X	1	0	1	0	0	0
Physical Infrastructure	1	X	0	1	0	0	0
Extra and Co-curricular Activities	0	0	X	0	0	1	1
Overall Brand of School	0	0	0	X	0	0	0
Academic Performance	1*	0	0	0	X	1	0
Marketing and Promotion	1*	0	0	1*	1	X	0
IT Infrastructure	0	0	1	0	0	1*	X

 Direct Link
 Significant Transitive Link

Step 9: Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM)

The connective information derived from the diagram and interpretive information from the interpretive knowledge base is utilized to come up with Total Interpretive Structural Modelling (TISM). Interpretations are shown as the directive links between the nodes which are formed by the proposed elements in a hierarchical structure as identified by the model.

Table 8: Interaction Matrix (Interpretive Matrix)

	Academic Performance	Teacher and Staff Quality	Physical Infrastructure	Overall Brand of School	Marketing and Promotion	Extra and Co-curricular Activities	IT Infrastructure
Academic Performance	X	Academically strong school attracts better teachers	0	Board Results and IITJEE Medical Selections	0	0	0
Teacher and Staff Quality	Better teachers lead to better results	X	0	Teaching Pedagogy	0		0
Physical Infrastructure	1	0	X	1	Tangible Infrastructure enhances Marketing efforts	Infrastructure boosts EC activities	Smart Classes and ERP
Overall Brand of School	0	0	0	X	0	0	0
Marketing and Promotion	Marketing and promotion pushes schools to put impetus on Academic results	0	0	1	X	Marketing efforts pushes schools to introduce more Extra and Co-curricular activities	0
Extra and Co-curricular Activities	Holistic development and positive impact on Academics	0	0	Parents consider schools focusing on holistic development as better brands	Extra and Co-curricular activities enhances the marketing pitch	X	0
IT Infrastructure	1	0	Directly Relevant	1		1	X



Direct Link
Significant Transitive Link

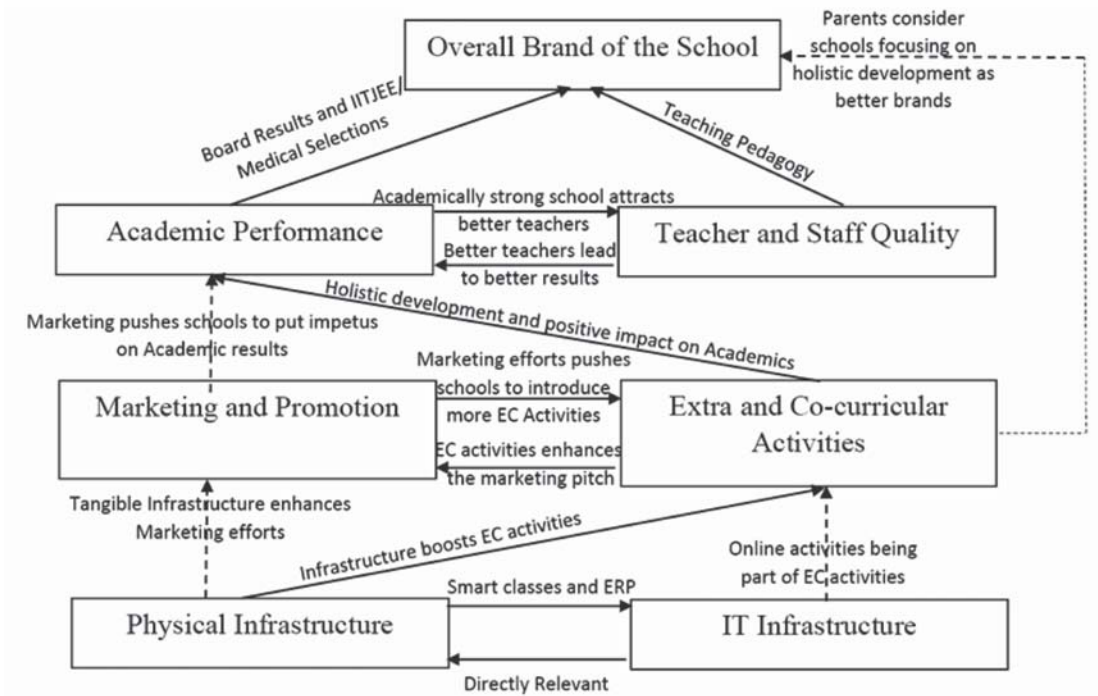


Figure 1: TISM Model for School Brand Development

Findings and Conclusions

This paper explores various factors that contribute towards the branding of k-12 schools in India. Focus group discussions among the experts i.e. school principals and owners with more than 10 years of experience in the leadership role, were conducted. Six factors emerged from the focus group discussions, whose impact on the overall brand of the school has been identified in this paper. Further the linkages among these factors were identified using Total Interpretive Structural Modelling. Academics was found to be directly impacting the overall brand of the school, indicating that the board exam results and the number of selections in the IITJEE and Medical competitive examinations impacts the school brand favourably. Also Infrastructure (both physical and IT) was identified as pre-requisites for developing a school brand. The tangibility of the school brand arises from the quality of the infrastructure. Also the Information Technology related infrastructure i.e. Smart Class rooms and ERP systems were found to be impacting the brand image of the school positively. Extra and co-curricular activities were found to have a significant transitive impact on the academic performance of the school, indicating that contrary to the general belief, extra and co-curricular activities positively impacts the academic performance too. Marketing and promotion efforts by the school were identified to be significantly linked to both Physical Infrastructure and Extra & Co-curricular activities. Teacher and staff quality evidently has direct impact on the overall brand of the school as well as significant direct impact on the Academic performance of the school.

Schools can use the proposed model to brand themselves as the preferred brand among the parents, with focusing on the broad factors and understanding their inter-linkages. Findings like impact of extra and co-curricular activities on the academic performance of the school along with the impact of teacher and staff quality can be used to improve academic performance of the school and hence develop and enhance overall brand of the school.

Appendix I: Interpretive logic-knowledge base questionnaire

S. No.	Element Nos.	Element Statement	Y/N	Brief Explanation
1	C1-C2	Academic Performance will influence or improve Teacher and Staff Quality		
2	C2-C1	Teacher and Staff Quality will influence or improve Academic Performance		
3	C1-C3	Academic Performance will influence or improve Physical Infrastructure		
4	C3-C1	Physical Infrastructure will influence or improve Academic Performance		
5	C1-C4	Academic Performance will influence or improve Overall Brand of the School		
6	C4-C1	Overall Brand of the School will influence or improve Academic Performance		
7	C1-C5	Academic Performance will influence or improve Marketing and Promotion		
8	C5-C1	Marketing and Promotion will influence or improve Academic Performance		
9	C1-C6	Academic Performance will influence or improve Extra and Co-curricular Activities		
10	C6-C1	Extra and Co-curricular Activities will influence or improve Academic Performance		
11	C1-C7	Academic Performance will influence or improve IT Infrastructure		
12	C7-C1	IT Infrastructure will influence or improve Academic Performance		
13	C2-C3	Teacher and Staff Quality will influence or improve Physical Infrastructure		
14	C3-C2	Physical Infrastructure will influence or improve Teacher and Staff Quality		
15	C2-C4	Teacher and Staff Quality will influence or improve Overall Brand of the School		
16	C4-C2	Overall Brand of the School will influence or improve Teacher and Staff Quality		
17	C2-C5	Teacher and Staff Quality will influence or improve Marketing and Promotion		
18	C5-C2	Marketing and Promotion will influence or improve Teacher and Staff Quality		
19	C2-C6	Teacher and Staff Quality will influence or improve Extra and Co-curricular Activities		
20	C6-C2	Extra and Co-curricular Activities will influence or improve Teacher and Staff Quality		
21	C2-C7	Teacher and Staff Quality will influence or improve IT Infrastructure		
22	C7-C2	IT Infrastructure will influence or improve Teacher and Staff Quality		
23	C3-C4	Physical Infrastructure will influence or improve Overall Brand of the School		
24	C4-C3	Overall Brand of the School will influence or improve Physical Infrastructure		
25	C3-C5	Physical Infrastructure will influence or improve Marketing and Promotion		
26	C5-C3	Marketing and Promotion will influence or improve Physical Infrastructure		

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27	C3-C6	Physical Infrastructure will influence or improve Extra and Co-curricular Activities		
28	C6-C3	Extra and Co-curricular Activities will influence or improve Physical Infrastructure		
29	C3-C7	Physical Infrastructure will influence or improve IT Infrastructure		
30	C7-C3	IT Infrastructure will influence or improve Physical Infrastructure		
31	C4-C5	Overall Brand of the School will influence or improve Marketing and Promotion		
32	C5-C4	Marketing and Promotion will influence or improve Overall Brand of the School		
33	C4-C6	Overall Brand of the School will influence or improve Extra and Co-curricular Activities		
34	C6-C4	Extra and Co-curricular Activities will influence or improve Overall Brand of the School		
35	C4-C7	Overall Brand of the School will influence or improve IT Infrastructure		
36	C7-C4	IT Infrastructure will influence or improve Overall Brand of the School		
37	C5-C6	Marketing and Promotion will influence or improve Extra and Co-curricular Activities		
38	C6-C5	Extra and Co-curricular Activities will influence or improve Marketing and Promotion		
39	C5-C7	Marketing and Promotion will influence or improve IT Infrastructure		
40	C7-C5	IT Infrastructure will influence or improve Marketing and Promotion		
41	C6-C7	Extra and Co-curricular Activities will influence or improve IT Infrastructure		
42	C7-C6	IT Infrastructure will influence or improve Extra and Co-curricular Activities		

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