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# VIRAL MARKETING IN INDIA: ASPECTS, CASES AND PROSPECTS

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## ABSTRACT

Viral marketing is a marketing technique in which an organisation, whether business or non-business organisation, tries to persuade the internet users to forward its publicity material in emails usually in the form of video clips, text messages etc. to generate word of mouth. In the recent past, viral marketing technique has achieved increasing attention and acceptance all over the world including India. Zoozoo commercials by Vodafone, Kolaveri Di song by South Indian actor Dhanush, Gangnam style dance by PSY, and Ice Bucket Challenge with a twister Rice Bucket Challenge created a buzz in Indian society. If certain pre-conditions are followed, viral marketing technique can be successfully used by marketers of business organisations. Considering the increasing number of internet users and popularity of social media in India, viral marketing is certainly going to play a crucial role in the sphere of marketing in the years to come.

#### **KEYWORDS**

Ice Bucket Challenge, Kolaveri, Social Media, Viral Marketing, Zoozoo Commercials.

### INTRODUCTION

one are the days when marketers used to feel the political and geographical boundaries as the constraints and challenges while reaching the huge, diverse and dispersed target market. In the modern business world, internet has offered the solution to this problem to a considerable extent. Internet, the recent revolutionary transformation in communication technology, has offered wings to the mass promotion strategy of businessmen, as customers can pass on the information to thousand others in a very short span and with almost no cost. World has become smaller and tremendous marketing opportunities are now available to businessmen. Marketers all over the world accept and appreciate the fact that viral marketing is the new 'Mantra' to open the treasure cave of business success.

In the recent past, viral marketing has created a lot of buzz and excitement all over the world including India. The concept seems like 'an ultimate free lunch'rather a great feast for all the modern marketers who choose small number of netizens to plant their new idea about the product or activity of the organisation, get it viral and then watch while it spreads quickly and effortlessly to millions of people. Zoozoo commercials of Vodafone, Kolaveri Di- the promotional song sung by South Indian actor Dhanush, Gangnam style dance by Korean dancer PSY, election canvassing by Narendra Modi and Ice Bucket Challenge with a twister Rice Bucket Challenge are some of the recent examples of successful viral marketing strategies in India. The growth of social networking in India has significantly contributed to the effectiveness of viral marketing. Certainly, if planned and executed carefully, viral marketing can be a very useful marketing technique for all types of business and non-business organisations in India.

#### VIRAL MARKETING: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of viral marketing is based on the assumption that ideas spread like the viruses through word of mouth, enhanced by the network effects of the internet and mobile. The rationale behind the internet viral marketing is that the message can be received by exponential numbers of potential customers. If one person, for instance, sends a message to his ten friends; and each of these ten friends forward the message to ten new persons, the message could spread with a tremendous speed.

Viral marketing (also called as 'buzz marketing') is such a marketing technique in which company persuades internet users to forward the publicity material in emails usually in the form of video clips, images, text messages etc. to generate word of mouth. Sometimes people encourage others to visit a specific website on the internet. In old days, it was known as 'word-of-mouth marketing'. In internet viral marketing, this ancient form of buzz is taken and amplified with a global network of people connected digitally. 'Word-of-mouth' is now replaced by 'word-of-(computer) mouse'. Today viral marketing spreads the desired message in number of ways at a potentially very low cost. The chain goes on as people go on forwarding the message to others. Google's 'You Tube' is probably the best tool of internet viral marketing. If the video is interesting and funny arousing certain emotions and inducing definite action, it is possible that video could become popular rapidly. Links to video will immediately multiply as viewers share the video with others.

In the words of Kotler, Keller, Koshy and Jha (2009), viral marketing is a form of word of mouth or word of mouse, that encourages consumers to pass along company developed products and services or audio, video or written information to others online. A successful viral campaign has been characterised as 'that additive, self-propagating advertainment that lives on websites, blogs, cell phones, and message boards.

Viral marketing can be very effective and cheap way to attract the attention of general public towards your product and organization. It can be used by all types of business and non-business organizations. To achieve the success, video or the message for viral marketing must be of unique and creative nature. Of course, there is no guarantee that the viral marketing campaign would achieve the desired success. In addition, one must remember that although positive viral message can be spread with a speed, negative view points about the product or organization can also be spread rapidly.

#### **HYPOTHESIS**

The number of internet users and popularity of social media is increasing day by day in India. Awareness and application of viral marketing is also increasing among the business and non-business organizations. If certain pre-conditions are taken into account, viral marketing technique can be effectively used by Indian marketers in the years to come.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Considering the very nature of subject, secondary data has been collected which includes basically the websites informing about the cases of viral videos and commercials of the business and non-business organizations from various countries including India.

In addition, few books and periodicals containing information about viral marketing were also taken into account.

# **INTERNET & MOBILE USERS IN INDIA**

The use of internet and mobile is increasing with a tremendous speed in India. As published in The Economic Times (November 19, 2014), the latest research on 'Internet in India 2014', jointly conducted by IAMAI (Internet And Mobile Association of India) and IMRB International, in November 2014, finds that Internet usage in India has gone up by 32% from October 2013 to October 2014 . Following are the details.

As of October 2014, there were 278 million Claimed Internet Users and is expected to reach 302 million by December 2014. Claimed Internet Users in urban cities has grown by 29% from October 2013 to reach 177 million in October 2014. It is expected to reach 190 million by December 2014 and 216 million by June

2015. Compared to last year, Claimed Internet Users have increased by 39% in rural India to reach 101 million in October 2014. It is expected to reach 112 million by December 2014 and 138 million by June 2015.

The number of Active Internet users was 213 million as of October 2014, and is expected to reach 232 million by December 2014 and 269 million by June 2015. As of October 2014, there were 152 million Active Internet Users in Urban India, registering an increase of 31% from October 2013. Also there were 61 million Active Internet Users in Rural India as of October 2014, increasing by 33% from October 2013. It is estimated to reach 69 million by December 2014 and 81 million by June 2015.

The internet user base is estimated to grow to 354 million by June 2015. At present, India has the third largest internet user base in the world, but with the estimated growth, India will overtake US as the second largest internet user base in the world by the end of 2014. In November 2014, China was leading with more than 600 million internet users, while US had an estimated 279 million users.

In a report on the Indian internet market, titled 'Deep Drive', City Research states that 92% of India's internet users are mobile phone users (Malini, 2014). Share of mobile internet users in total internet user base was 69% in 2012. It is expected to rise up to 87% in 2016. Today, 90% of all media interactions are screen-based via smart phones, laptops, television and tablets. Mobile sites and apps are driving e-commerce.

### **ELEMENTS OF VIRAL MARKETING**

According to Marketing Guru Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein (2011), for the successful execution of viral marketing technique, right message must be given to the right messengers in the right environment. It means there are three essential elements or criteria of viral marketing such as the message, messengers, and environment.

- i) Message: For the successful viral marketing, basically the message to be communicated must possess the ability to attract the attention of readers or viewers. It must be memorable and interesting, having a power to develop curiosity among the viewers. It must be unique, based on somewhat 'out of the box idea'. If possible, it must induce some action on the part of viewers. A weak message cannot achieve the desired success in the sphere of viral marketing.
- ii) Messengers: To convert, the ordinary message into a viral one, three types of messengers are necessary, such as market mavens, social hubs and sales people. Market mavens are information specialists. These experts are usually among the first to get exposed to the message and who transmit it to their immediate social network. Social hubs are the people having large number of social contacts. They work as the link or connectors between people with different cultural background. Sales people are those persons who basically receive the message from market mavens. They amplify this message by making it more convincing and relevant. And then they communicate the same to social hubs for further distribution.
- iii) **Environment:** For the successful viral marketing, right type of environment including proper timing is necessary. If the timing of the campaign is appropriate, people may respond more enthusiastically.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF VIRAL MARKETING

Viral marketing is a marketing strategy that encourages individuals to pass on the marketing message to others. It creates an exponential increase in the exposure and influence of the message. The message is reached rapidly by many persons in a short span of time (Pillai& Bagavathi, 1987). From marketers' point of view, basically the promotion is absolutely free of cost. Secondly, it accelerates the process of customer decision making. It offers an authenticity to it because the source is normally independent of the company. In the words of Kaleem Mohammed Khan and Mohammed Naved Khan (2006), viral marketing is a marketing strategy in which marketers try to convince its customers to sell its products to others on behalf of company. Viral marketing is a powerful means of communication. It has the ability to override communication message sent by the company. Viral marketing can be used to approach prospects through the remarks and recommendations of familiar persons. Referrals can be very effective in closing the sale. Viral marketing can reduce advertising expenditures to the minimum, generate substantial revenue, and develop a strong customer base. According to consumers, the sources are convincing because the promotion method is – of the consumers, by the consumers and for the consumers.

### VIRAL MARKETING: GLOBAL SCENARIO

The emergence of viral marketing as a marketing technique has been associated with a popular notion that ideas can be spread like viruses. In the 1990s, the concept of viral marketing got attention and acceptance in several countries.

In 1996, **Hotmail** was the early business organization which was successful in using viral marketing technique by inserting a tagline – 'Get your free email at Hotmail', at the bottom of every email sent by its users. Hotmail was able to sign up to 12 million users in 18 months.

Burger King's 'The **Subservient Chicken'** marketing campaign of 2004 was a noteworthy example of viral marketing. 'The Subservient Chicken' was part of 2004 launch campaign for the tender crisp chicken. It was an interactive campaign. The website which resembled adult webcam site targeted mainly young men. In this campaign, when a command was typed into the website, a person dressed in chicken suit would follow the command. The website was tied with the product's commercial campaign –'Chicken- the way you want it', perfectly offering entertainment value to the viewers.

The Blendtec viral video series- 'Will it blend?' which was released in 2006 created a sensation among the viewers. In this ad campaign, attempt was made by Tom Dickson, founder of Blendtec Company, to blend various unusual items in order to display the power of the blender. This ad campaign won several awards including '2007 You Tube Award' for the Best Series of Advertisement. The 'Will it blend' page on You Tube currently shows over 200 million viewers have viewed this video.

The **2008 U S President Election** displayed successful implementation of viral marketing technique by Barak Obama who skillfully used the social media like Face Book and Twitter to connect with young generation. Barak Obama, along with his team members, created a new multi-channel communication strategy. As many as 1,600 videos were published on his You Tube page, Face Book, Twitter etc. He spent \$ 2, 40,000for the maintenance of his website and social networking profiles, where the donors (who paid in increments of \$200 or less) donated \$ 16.4 million (Honey, 2009). The campaign captured the public's imagination due to its unique style, and secured marvelous results with millions of people visiting the site. Videos of his speeches canvassing for election were viewed on You Tube and shared by millions of Americans.

On July 14, 2010, **Old Spice (**the brand famous for shaving cream, after shave lotion and many more products for men) launched online viral video campaign. In this three days campaign, TV commercial star of Old Spice Isaiah Mustafa replied the online communication and comments received from websites like Face Book, You Tube, and Twitter etc. In just 36 hours, campaign received more than 23 million views.

**Gangnam Style Dance** is a dance style popularized by PSY, the pop star of South Korea. The dance is based on the life style of Gangnam district of Seoul in South Korea. The dance video was released on 15<sup>th</sup> July, 2012, and it topped music chart of more than 30 countries. Millions of people watched and shared this dance video on you tube.

### ALS ICE BUCKET CHALLENGE: RECENT GLOBAL VIRAL SENSATION

'ALS Ice Bucket Challenge' is an activity of dumping a bucket of ice water on someone's head to promote awareness of the disease – amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and encourage donations to research over medicine for this rare disease. The challenge encourages nominated participants to record video of themselves in a continuous footage of pouring the bucket of ice water on themselves. Then the participant can nominate a minimum three other persons to participate in the challenge. The nominated person has to complete the challenge within 24 hours or donate a stipulated amount (usually \$100) to the ALS Association. Many participants, however, donated \$100 in addition to completion of challenge.

The origin of the idea of dumping ice water on one's head to raise money for charity is associated with Pete Frates, a base ball player from Boston College who was diagnosed with ALS in March 2012. He is now paralyzed, eats through the feeding tube and cannot talk. The viral challenge kicked off, when Pete Frates

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started posting about it on social media with his father's help (Brian,2014). In mid-2014, the ice bucket challenge went viral on social media, particularly in USA, with common persons, politicians, film stars, sports persons and several celebrities started posting their videos online. Although US President Barak Obama refused to accept the challenge, and paid the donation to ALS Association; the former US Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton completed the challenge along with payment of donation. Television anchor Matt Lauer, golfer Chris Kennedy, Governor of South Carolina Nikki Haley and several other celebrities completed the ice bucket challenge.

Ice Bucket Challenge movement increased awareness among media and common people about this rare disease ALS. According to the New York Times, people shared more than 1.2 million videos on face book between June 1 and August 13, 2014. People mentioned the 'Ice Bucket Challenge' phenomena 2.2 million times on twitter during this period. Within these days, 7, 39,000 new donors gave the money to ALS Association, and the total sum received by the Association was more than \$100 million.

Ice Bucket Challenge movement was a huge success because the campaign had a specific achievable goal with a noble cause of creating awareness and attaining donations for the cure of rare disease. The challenge was quite simple, as anyone could participate easily in the same. The timing of viral challenge was perfect. To accept the ice water challenge, summer (and not winter) was the perfect season in United States. Pete Frates, who initiated the movement, was himself the patient of ALS. And of course, the participation by politicians and celebrities led to the wide publicity to this movement.

### VIRAL MARKETING: INDIAN SCENARIO

## 1) ZOOZOO COMMERCIALS OF VODAFONE

In April 2009, during IPL(Indian Premier League)- Season II, the advertising campaign of Vodafone company hit the 'idiot box' to mesmerize the viewers with its stupid looking funny creatures- Zoozoo. These commercials mainly emphasized the various types of value added services offered by Vodafone. Almost thirty different services were highlighted in thirty different advertisements with the same characters- Zoozoo. Vodafone hit a jackpot with the Zoozoos ( Khandelwal, 20110).

Zoozoo became new sensation among the tele vision viewers. Zoozoo brand page was created on the face book. The face book page was initially uploaded with twenty Zoozoo TV commercials. The wallpapers, screen savers, sound clips and Zoozoo emotions with a facility of downloading the same were offered. Apart from the videos showing the making of Zoozoo ads, the face book was uploaded with latest TV commercials- as and when they were made- much before they were aired on TV channels. The strategy of immediate release of the commercials on social networking sites was mainly to generate a buzz that lives up to the brand's image of creative and influential marketing. Within three months, Zoozoo had more than 2, 87,000 fans. All the Zoozoo advertisements were uploaded on You Tube. Zoozoo fans created a new website – Zoozoo.co.ac. They opened one community on Orkut, and Zoozoo were also available on twitter. According to Vishwas Kumar Gupta (2009), the Zoozoo campaign is a perfect example of viral marketing.

The Zoozoo campaign created much curiosity about the characters-Zoozoos. When people understood that Zoozoos were not animated cartoons ( but human beings wearing special type of costumes), online search was made to know more about Zoozoos. The creators of Zoozoo, O & M advertising Agency posted the making of Zoozoo online. At the Effie Awards 2009, out of thirteen medals won by O & M, five were for Zoozoo. During subsequent IPL seasons also Zoozoo reappeared in the ad campaigns of Vodafone.

### 2) 'KOLAVERI DI'S AMAZING VIRAL POPULARITY

On 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2011, a viral bug called 'Kolaveri Di' hit the India's cyberspace, and Indian's social media as well as marketing world experienced amazing sensation. 'Why this Kolaveri Di' which means 'why this rage towards me, girl', is a song from Tamil film '3'. In this song, a young boy expresses his anger towards a girl who has deceived him. The song is based on South Indian folk music, having duration of 4.09 minutes. It is written, sung and acted by film star Dhanush. In November, 2011, Sony Music India uploaded this music video on You Tube which contains the song as well as making of this song. In this promotional video of movie, apart from Dhanush, film actress Shruti Hasan and Aishwarya Rajanikanth, musicians and arrangers are also seen.

Kolaveri video possesses several aspects which makes it a perfect product for viral marketing. Basically, although the song appears to be 'Tanglish', there are very few words are from Tamil language. The accent of Dhanush is, however, certainly Tamil. By adding sub-titles in English, it has made possible for non-Tamil viewers to understand and connect with the song. Since the lyrics contain very simple words from day to day life of modern world, it is easier for the audience to connect with the feelings expressed in the song. The music is original, catchy yet so simple that even children can hum this song without knowing the meaning of it. With the participation of three big film stars from South India, it was easier for this promotional video to attract the attention of viewers. However, Kolaveri video did not promote the movie '3' until the very last second. Sony ensured that video looks like an accidental or jam session, and not like a one more promotional or marketing gimmick. This made viewers to watch this video with interest and curiosity.

After Vodafone's Zoozoo, Kolaveri was the next biggest social viral phenomenon which hit India's cyberspace, print media and electronic media by storm. It created a deep impact on powers of social media and strategies of marketers. The novelty and curiosity quotient of the song along with few very brilliant marketing strategies led Kolaveri to a huge success. Kolaveri became the 'defacto' word against all sorts of anger, and captured the imagination of netizens from various parts of the world (Satyesh, 2011).

Within a month, more than 40 million people viewed Kolaveri and other related videos on You Tube. The Kolaveri video also achieved over 3.6 million face book shares. Kolaveri had several followers on Twitter also. Celebrities like Amitabh Bachchan, Shruti Hasan, Ranveer Shouri and so many others twitted to appreciate the video. You Tube gave this video a gold medal being the most popular video. More than 14,000 videos related to or inspired from Kolaveri were uploaded. As the popularity of Kolaveri increased, You Tube was flooded with regional versions of Kolaveri in the languages like Marathi, Telgu, Sindhi, Punjabi, Gujrathi, Bengali etc. A Kolaveri's Punjabi version was named 'Sharad Pawar Slap Song', since it was based on the incident of slapping Sharad Pawar, the then Union Minister for Agriculture, by a Punjabi youth to express anger against corrupt politicians. By the end of December 2011, this video recorded 9, 64,289 views on You Tube. Journalists, cartoonists and common people started using this phrase 'Why this Kolaveri' to express their anger towards, politicians, corruption and system. The Chennai and Delhi police used this tagline on the city hoardings to caution people for road safety and careful driving. Several on line shopping portals like eBay. in, xtees.com, zazzle.com etc. offered Kolaveri tea shirts for sale.

The success of Kolaveri was not limited to Indian cyberspace. It went viral in other parts of the world as well. You Tube videos of Japanese dancing on the tunes of Kolaveri became quite famous. Citizens from Egypt, Pakistan and Shri Lanka created their own versions of Kolaveri. Arabic and French version of Kolaveri also became quite popular in other countries. In Auckland, youths had a flash mob dance on the tune of Kolaveri.

#### 3) NARENDRA MODI'S ELECTION CAMPAIGN OF 2014

Similar to U S President Barak Obama's election canvassing of 2008, Narendra Modi in the Parliament Election of 2014 used the social media effectively to win the election. With the powerful use of You Tube, Face Book, Twitter etc., Narendra Modi and his team of information technology experts concentrated and wooed the techno-savvy young generation.

#### 4) ICE BUCKET CHALLENGE & RICE BUCKET CHALLENGE IN INDIA

Ice bucket challenge, the global phenomenon, also hit Indian society. Several film stars, sports person, celebrities and common people accepted and completed the challenge. Akshay Kumar, Abhishek Bachchan, Mandira Bedi, Neha Dhupia, Bipasha Basu and so many celebrities offered glamour and donations to the movement.

In India, ice bucket challenge also took a new twister in the form of 'Rice Bucket Challenge', which was a brain child of Hyderabad based Manjulatha Kalanidhi (Rediff News, 2014). It can be described as 'a desi version' of ice bucket challenge. Rice bucket challenge is quite simple. You just have to take a bucket of rice and donate it to a needy person. Then you have to post the picture of this donation on social media, and nominate other persons to carry forward the challenge. Since this movement was started in August 2014, within three months more than 70,000 kg rice has been donated by the organizations and individuals all over India. People from several cities like Hyderabad, Bangalore, New Delhi, Baroda, Deharadun etc. have accepted this challenge. The popularity of this concept is increasing in few other countries like Philippines and Dubai.

### **VIRAL MARKETING IN INDIA: PROBLEMS & LIMITATIONS**

Basically, even though awareness towards viral marketing is increasing in India, marketers have not been able to exploit the potential s of viral marketing to the fullest possible extent. Secondly, marketers are frequently unable to exploit the popularity of the videos/ commercials to increase the sales. This was noticed in case of Zoozoo commercials as there was not any substantial increase in the sale of Vodafone's value added services promoted in the campaign. Thirdly, viral campaigning is usually a short term fad or craze, as observed in respect of Kolaveri or Gangnam style dance. Indian people have now forgotten these campaigns. Fourthly, there is still a lot of scope for increase in the number of internet users and consequently application of viral marketing technique in rural India. Fifthly, Indian marketers should remember that there is no guarantee that a particular marketing campaign would successfully go viral. In addition, one must remember that although positive viral message can be spread with a speed, negative view points about the product or organization can also be spread rapidly.

### TEN COMMANDMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL VIRAL MARKETING IN INDIA

For the successful implementation, Indian marketers should remember the three essentials of viral marketing – right message, right messengers and right environment. In addition, following Ten Commandments of the viral marketing technique should be taken into account by the Indian marketers.

- 1. Have a specific and achievable goal. Basically before initiating the viral marketing movement, the business organisation or non-business organisation should have a clear cut and well defined goal which can be achieved easily. For instance, creating awareness and raising funds for ALS Association were the dual definite and achievable objectives of ice bucket challenge movement.
- 2. Keep it simple. The viral video or expected interaction from participants should be as simple as possible. Zoozoo commercials, Kolaveri's lyrics or the challenge of ice bucket, were all quite simple to attract the masses.
- 3. Use universal language. English is the universal language to receive wider response to the viral videos. If possible, video should use minimum words with an emphasis on visuals or non-verbal communication.
- 4. **Touch emotions or have clean humour.** To gain the desired response, viral video or commercial must contain a clean humour as observed in Vodafone's Zoozoo, or appeal to emotions, or display of noble cause as in case of ice bucket challenge.
- 5. Encourage participation. There should be possibility of viewing and sharing with others the videos or commercials, as it was noticed in case of Zoozoo, or Kolaveri, which were available on social media like You Tube, Face Book etc. In case of ice bucket challenge, number of participants increased as every person fulfilling the challenge nominated three more persons
- 6. Generate curiosity. Curiosity, not only about the promotion, but even in case of contents and language should be developed. People were anxious to know who the Zoozoos are, and what is the meaning of 'Kolaveri Di'.
- 7. Choose proper timing. Viral marketing campaign should be undertaken at the proper time. For instance, ice bucket challenge was successful in United States because it was started during summer, and not in winter season. Youths were feeling the vacation mood, and eager to undertake some funny activity. Zoozoo commercials were aired on TV during IPL cricket matches which had highest number of television viewers in India.
- 8. **Involve celebrities.** Participation of or endorsement by celebrities help to get the wider publicity to viral marketing campaign. When mega star Amitabh Bachchan appreciated the Kolaveri song, or when former US Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton accepted the ice bucket challenge, these movements got the real momentum.
- 9. Have it for a short duration. Craze or fad of viral sensation does not last for a longer period of time. Zoozoos, Kolaveri, Gangnam dance and ice bucket challenge- all these created a powerful impact in a short period of time, and then vanished. Hence, marketers should plan to capture maximum results in a short period of time.
- 10. Use the social media effectively. In this modern world, viral marketing can be successful if marketers use social media like You Tube, Face Book, and Twitter etc. tactfully.

### CONCLUSION

The importance of modern means of electronic communication and use of social media is increasing day by day. Very soon, India may acquire the status of second largest country in respect of internet users. Awareness and application of viral marketing is increasing all over the world including India. Vodafone's Zoozoo commercials, Kolaveri video, Narendra Modi's election canvassing and ice bucket challenge movement- all these have demonstrated the power of viral marketing technique in India. Both business organisations and non-business organisations can achieve their desired objectives if viral marketing strategies are planned and executed strategically. In this competitive business world, Indian marketers can and should apply viral marketing strategies in the years to come. Certainly, future belongs to viral marketing.

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