

Research Paper

Key Attributes of Malaysian Specialty Coffee Shops: An Exploratory Investigation

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Abstract: In the thriving specialty coffee industry in Malaysia, it is imperative for specialty coffee shop entrepreneurs to understand the important attributes that motivate consumers to patronise specialty coffee shops so as to have a competitive advantage and sustain their businesses. The existing published literature highlights the lack of research on this aspect, particularly in the context of emerging economies. This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative approaches in an exploratory sequential mixed method design to explore and identify the attributes used by Malaysian coffee consumers when selecting specialty coffee shops. The findings from the qualitative approach were used to develop the survey questionnaire. Based on purposive sampling, responses from 437 respondents were analysed using exploratory factor analysis. Nine factors were extracted using principal component analysis with promax rotation. The nine factors were labelled as: Tangibles, Coffee Quality, Service Quality by Staff, Brand Preference, Promotional Activities, Social Responsibility and Recreation, Food & Drinks Selection, Social Place and, Other Amenity. The nine factor solution explained 59.15% of the total variance. Consequently, these nine factors are perceived as key attributes of specialty coffee shops in Malaysia.

Keywords: Specialty coffee shops, attributes, services, exploratory factor analysis, consumption behaviour, Malaysia

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Introduction

Specialist or specialty coffee shops are the fastest growing restaurant category with global sales increasing by 9.1% from 2014 to 2015 and outlets in Asia Pacific are projected to reap the largest sales increase, totalling more than US\$3.7 billion dollars from 2016 to 2020 (Friend, 2016).

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In Malaysia, a traditionally tea-drinking nation, coffee drinking culture has become popular, particularly among the young and the professionals (Lee, 2014a, 2014b). Additionally, the rising purchasing power and sophisticated taste of consumers has led to a noticeable trend in the consumption of premium coffee (“How coffee culture ...”, 2015). According to Euromonitor International, urban and young consumers, specifically millennials, middle- and high-income professionals are more willing to patronise specialist coffee shops to enjoy freshly-brewed coffee (Friend, 2016). The booming coffee culture has subsequently led to the mushrooming of coffee outlets in Malaysian cities and towns in recent years (Lee, 2014a, 2014b). The coffee outlets comprise of branded coffee shop chains such as the internationally famous Starbucks and The Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf as well as numerous locally owned independent outlets. The specialty coffee outlets which attract younger affluent consumers are very different from the conventional coffee shops or *kopitiams* that serve unbranded, strong bitter and black coffee, frequented by the older generations (Ravagan, n.d.).

In Malaysia’s thriving specialty coffee industry, entrepreneurs and marketers require clear insights on the important attributes that attract and retain patronage for a competitive edge and sustainability. Customers today, particularly the young urbanites, are more discerning and have higher expectations. Hence, coffee outlets including specialty coffee shops need to find new ways of creating a competitive advantage. Additionally, as a multi-ethnic country, it is likely that Malaysian specialty coffee drinkers may be motivated by attributes that are different from consumers in other countries. By having a clearer understanding on how coffee lovers select outlets to patronise, entrepreneurs can formulate the relevant marketing strategies to attract and retain these customers. Further, existing literature reveals the dearth of research in this area despite the booming coffee culture in many emerging economies including Malaysia. The study therefore attempts to address this gap by identifying the important attributes that coffee consumers in Malaysia seek when selecting specialty coffee shops to patronise.

Literature Review

Coffee Consumption Trend in Malaysia

Specialty coffee refers to “gourmet coffee made from exceptional beans grown in ideal coffee-producing climates. They tend to feature distinctive flavours, shaped by the unique characteristics of the soil that produces them” (Merwe & Maree, 2016, p.502). Specialty coffee shops are outlets that sell premium and specialty coffee and other foods and beverages, with more than 55% of their sales coming from coffee or coffee-related products (Report Buyer, 2017).

Unlike twenty years ago, when coffee consumption was not popular in Malaysia (“How coffee culture.....,” 2015), coffee drinking, especially among the younger generation, is now a trendy lifestyle with coffee being consumed out of the home (Lee, 2014a). The booming coffee culture has been credited to Malaysians who returned after having studied or worked abroad (Poskod Malaysia, n.d), most likely in countries with developed coffee consumption cultures. Interestingly, according to Statista data, a survey on regular beverage consumption in Malaysia in 2016 found that 60.83% of Malaysians were regular coffee drinkers. While the local coffee consumption market is dominated by instant coffee, the trend towards consuming specialty coffee is growing due to the increasing affluence of consumers (“How coffee culture.....,” 2015).

Coffeehouse Selection Attributes

Attributes are defined as the descriptive features that typify a product or service (Chen & Hu, 2010). Discussions regarding attribute importance in understanding consumer behaviour with regard to making purchase and patronage decisions have dominated research in recent years (Chen & Hu, 2010). Within the foodservice segment, prior studies have investigated the important attributes that influence customers’ perceptions of service quality, satisfaction and revisit intention in restaurants or coffee outlets (Han & Ryu, 2009; Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2016; Ko & Chiu, 2008). According to Tan and Lo (2008), their empirical study was the first to identify the attributes considered important by customers when patronising specialty coffeehouses.

In their study on specialty coffeehouse consumers in Hong Kong, Tan and Lo (2008) identified a total of nine attributes or factors: staff attitude and service, coffee quality and selection, atmosphere and comfort, menu and expeditiousness, price and value, other food and drinks selection, marketing activities and entertainment, other amenities and, socially responsible reputation. Staff attitude and service referred to the attitude and ability of the staff in providing quality service. Coffee quality and selection was associated with coffee product features and the variety of coffee available. Atmosphere and comfort was related to the ambience and physical environment of the coffee shops. Menu and expeditiousness was associated with clear signage and appropriate menu, while price and value referred to the reasonable price for the food, coffee and service provided. Other food and drinks selection was related to the variety of the food and drinks served. Marketing activities and entertainment was mainly concerned with promotional events at the coffeehouses while other amenities concerned the availability of facilities for customers. Finally, socially responsible reputation pertained to corporate social responsibilities. In addition, the study determined four attributes considered most important by customers and these were

coffee quality and selection, followed by price and value, staff attitude and service and, atmosphere and comfort.

Due to the paucity of literature on attribute importance in the context of specialty coffeehouses, previous research undertaken on coffee outlets in general were also reviewed to obtain an insight into the various attributes used by consumers to patronise these outlets. The findings of these individual studies are presented next.

In a study among university student consumers at coffee chain stores in Taiwan, Ko and Chiu (2008) found that good service, friendly and relaxing ambience were the most important factors pertaining to customer satisfaction. Coffee chain stores provide a more affordable alternative to specialty coffee shops for university students who live on limited budgets (Ko & Chiu, 2008).

In another study, Chen and Hu (2010) identified five attributes used by customers when choosing to patronise chain and independent coffee outlets in Melbourne, Australia. These attributes or factors were coffee quality, service, food and beverage, atmosphere and extra benefits. Coffee quality was associated with coffee product features, in particular coffee freshness, smoothness, taste, temperature and aroma. Service was associated with the process of service delivery, particularly the service approach and staff aptitude in fulfilling customer needs. Food and beverage was associated with the food and beverage products that coffee outlets served. Atmosphere was related to the physical environment and ambience and extra benefits concerned the availability of materials to browse and loyalty programmes. With regard to the order of importance, customers perceived service as the most important attribute followed by coffee quality, atmosphere, food and beverage and extra benefit.

In the United States, Waxman (2006) explored the physical and social characteristics of coffee shops that encourage people to patronise and become attached to these places. His study revealed that coffeehouses serve as a 'third place' to regularly interact with other members of the community. Waxman (2006) also found that the most important physical design characteristics for customers were cleanliness, appealing aroma, adequate lighting, comfortable furniture and view of the outside. Regarding the social characteristics of the coffee shops, the attributes identified were: opportunity to linger; ownership and territoriality; trust, respect and anonymity; productivity and personal growth; social beings and familiar strangers; and support.

Unlike Waxman (2006), Tumanan and Lansangan (2012) did not specifically identify the attributes that attracted consumers to coffeehouses in the Philippines. Instead, they examined whether cultural, social, physical and environmental dimensions were associated with Filipinos' attachment to local coffeehouses. Their findings revealed that the physical and social dimensions were highly associated with Filipinos' attachment to coffee houses. However, the specific components or attributes of these dimensions were not explicitly explained in their paper. Their

study also highlighted that Filipinos regarded these outlets as a third place to be, with home being first and workplace as second. This implies that consumers view coffee not just as a product but also as an experience.

Lin (2012) investigated the characteristics or attributes that attracted customers to Starbucks coffee outlets in Taiwan. The study identified six main characteristic or factors: hope, dream and image (first factor), surrounding atmosphere (second factor), total quality (third factor), special social function (fourth factor), normal basic function (fifth factor) and, reputation and chatting (sixth factor). The main findings of the reviewed past studies are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of important attributes in coffeehouse selection

Author	Year	Country of study	Important Attributes
Chen and Hu	2010	Australia	Service, coffee quality, atmosphere, food and beverage and extra benefit
Ko and Chiu	2008	Taiwan	Good service, friendly and relaxing ambience
Lin	2012	Taiwan	Hope, dream and image, surrounding atmosphere, total quality, special social function, normal basic function, and reputation and chatting
Tan and Lo	2008	Hong Kong	Coffee quality and selection, price and value, staff attitude and service and, atmosphere and comfort.
Tumanan and Lansangan	2012	Philippines	Physical environment and social environment
Waxman	2006	United States	Physical design (cleanliness, appealing aroma, adequate lighting, comfortable furniture and view to the outside); social interaction (opportunity to linger; ownership and territoriality; trust, respect and anonymity; productivity and personal growth; social beings and familiar strangers; and support).

The information presented in Table 1 indicates that although the number and type of important attributes sought by consumers of coffee outlets varied across the different studies, there are some similar attributes which are considered important. These are coffee quality, physical environment, atmosphere or ambience

and customer service. Although this limited number of findings provide some pertinent information on the attributes that are important to coffee consumers in their selection of coffee outlets, they are not comprehensive as there may be other important attributes that may not have been researched yet, but would specifically attract and retain specialty coffee shop consumers. Hence, the research objective of this study focuses on identifying key attributes that customers seek when patronising specialty shops.

Method

Qualitative Phase—Online Blog

Qualitative research methodology is commonly used to explore why or how a phenomenon occurs, to develop a theory, or describe individuals' experiences while quantitative methodology addresses questions about the generalisability or magnitude of effect (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). This study adopted both qualitative and quantitative approaches in an exploratory sequential mixed method design (Berman, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2003) to explore and identify the attributes used by Malaysian coffee consumers to patronise specialty coffee houses. The qualitative phase involved developing an online blog with four open-ended questions to gather the required information. A total of eight individuals who regularly patronise specialty coffeehouses in Malaysia participated by answering the open-ended questions. The findings from the online blog were then coded using "magnitude coding" (Saldana, 2009) and analysed to identify additional attributes that may be unique to specialty coffee consumers in the Malaysian context. Two additional contextual attributes were identified and these were labelled "social place" and "brand preference".

With regard to the attribute "social place", some participants regarded specialty coffeehouse as a place to meet people and to relax during their leisure time, as seen in the following interview excerpts.

"...to meet customers, to relax, go with family, with friends..." (Respondent 3)

"...It could be just a casual gathering with buddies." (Respondent 7)

The attribute 'brand preference' referred to coffee consumers' preference for dining in specialty coffee shops they were familiar with which serves good quality coffee and prepares customised coffee, based on the excerpts below.

"...familiarity and the environment of the coffee house" (Respondent 1)

"...The quality of the coffee including the way the coffee was prepared and the type of beans used." (Respondent 7)

“To experience and enjoy good quality of beans and freshly brewed coffee.”
(Respondent 6)

“Specialty coffeehouse provide the ambiance and the quality product that we can always trust, where the mental satisfaction comes. ... moreover, (it) provides ‘customizable’ coffee (mix of different ingredients), that the youth generation like us always like.” (Respondent 4)

Both these contextual attributes (social place and brand preference) were then included in the survey instrument developed for the quantitative phase.

Quantitative Phase — Research Instrument

The literature review and exploratory data gathering exercise resulted in a total of twelve factors being included in the survey instrument. These were staff attitude & service, coffee quality & selection, atmosphere & comfort, menu & expeditiousness, price & value, other food & drinks selection, marketing activities & entertainment, other amenities, social responsible reputation, social place, brand preference, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The instrument’s six (6) variables were directly adapted from Tan and Lo (2008), five (5) composite variables were developed from the online blog as well as adapted from Tan and Lo (2008) and finally, two (2) variables were adapted from Pai and Tsai (2011). Two assistant professors who specialise in hospitality and tourism studies reviewed and validated the instrument and, based on their feedback, the format and clarity of the items in the survey instrument were improved. All the survey statements were measured using a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1–very unimportant to 5–very important. In addition to analysing reliability and data normality (skewness and kurtosis), exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using SPSS version 20 was used to identify the factors and their respective measurements.

Sampling and Data Collection

The sample of specialty coffeehouse consumers for this study were selected using purposive sampling. An online survey form was used as the primary method to collect data. It was possible to procure large samples of specific professional or interest groups when the survey was placed on their respective websites. At the same time, a total of 300 printed questionnaires were distributed in a few coffeehouses located at Sunway and 241 completed questionnaires were returned. The survey instrument carried a filter question, asking respondents whether they had been to any speciality coffee shop within the last six months. After filtering and removing response records with systematic missing values, a total of 437 responses were retained. The finalised response rate of 88.9% was subjected to non-bias using wave

analysis, and the descriptive statistics of the respondents' demographic profile was analysed as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic profile of respondents

Characteristics		Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	216	49.4
	Female	221	50.6
Country of origin	Malaysia	308	70.5
	Others	129	29.5
Ethnicity	Malay	53	12.1
	Chinese	255	58.4
	Indian	14	3.2
	Other	115	26.3
Age	20 years and less	146	33.4
	21-30 years	211	48.3
	31-40 years	76	17.4
	41-50 years	4	0.9
	51 years above	0	0
Marital status	Single	377	86.3
	Married	60	13.7
Education level	Primary	7	1.6
	Secondary	49	11.2
	Diploma	118	27.0
	Degree	229	52.4
	Master	32	7.3
	PhD	2	0.5
Consumed coffee in the last 6 months	Yes	437	100.0
	No	0	0

Results

Promax is an oblique rotation which allows factors to be correlated. This rotation can be calculated quickly and is useful for large datasets. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy was valued at 0.907, exceeding the recommended value of 0.5 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). Further, the Bartlett's Test of Sphericity showed statistical significance ($p=0.00, >.05$) and indicated that sufficient correlations exist among the variables to proceed (Hair et al., 2006). Factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 are considered significant. Table 3 shows factors whose eigenvalues were greater than 1. Factor loadings in the range

of $\pm.30$ to $\pm.40$ are sufficient to meet the minimal level for interpretation of structure (Hair et al., 2006), and this is further supported with Catell's (1966) scree test.

This study used a factor loading cut-off point of 0.40 for retaining items in the factor analysis. From the initial list of 54 items, a total of 9 items did not load significantly and were subsequently excluded. The remaining 45 items were factor analysed again, with the items loading onto nine factors. The nine factors were extracted using principal component analysis with promax rotation and were labelled as follows: Tangibles, Coffee Quality, Service Quality by Staff, Brand Preference, Promotional Activities, Social Responsibility and Recreation, Food & Drinks Selection, Social Place and, Other Amenities. The nine dimensions reflected respondents' perceptions of important attributes of specialty coffee houses in Malaysia.

The first factor Tangibles, involved 11 items with significant factor loadings ranging from 0.422 to 0.810. This factor was perceived to reflect friendly, helpful and courteous staff, reasonably priced coffee and food offered together with quality service, clean dining premises and toilets, easily readable menus, sufficient spacing between tables and a quiet atmosphere. These are the tangible elements associated with the specialty coffeehouses. Coffee Quality as the second factor, contained 9 items with factor loadings that ranged from 0.508 to 0.886. This factor reflected the perception that specialty coffeehouses offer coffee with high quality, freshly roasted beans, served with the right brewing skills, freshly brewed all the time, in accordance to preferred taste, aroma and at the right temperature, customised coffee and consistent quality. The third factor, Service Quality by Staff consisted of 6 items with factor loadings ranging from 0.516 to 0.729. This factor reflected the perception that staff of specialty coffeehouses play an important role in the delivery of quality customer service by performing the service right the first time, offering individualised attention, being knowledgeable about the products offered, providing prompt service as well as being attentive to customers' specific needs and orders. Brand Preference as the fourth factor had four items and their factor loadings ranged from 0.621 to 0.852. This factor demonstrated the perception that customers frequent coffeehouses they are familiar with and trust as well as for the ambience and quality of products served.

The fifth factor, Promotional Activities contained five items and the factor loadings ranged from 0.503 to 0.737. This factor portrayed the perception that coffeehouses engage in free trial of coffee and food items, availability of merchandise items and private rooms, sales promotion and selection of magazines. The sixth factor, Social Responsibility and Recreation used five items whose factor loadings ranged from 0.422 to 0.726. This factor conveyed the perception that specialty coffeehouses are environmentally friendly and socially responsible, are places to relax during leisure time and gather with friends and provide warm lighting. Food &

Drinks Selection as the seventh factor had two items, with each item having a factor loading of 0.710. This factor was perceived to reflect the variety of drinks (other than coffee) and food offered at specialty coffeehouses. The eighth factor, Social Place had only one item with a factor loading of 0.779 and reflected the perception that the coffeehouse is a place to socialise with prospective clients. Lastly, the ninth factor, Other Amenities also had only one item with a factor loading of 0.834 and portrayed the perception that a designated smoking area is provided for customers.

Table 3 shows the nine factors with all variables (items) showing strong loadings (more than 0.4) and all items loading substantially on only one factor. The nine factor solution explained 59.15% of the total variance, with Tangibles contributing 28.17%, Coffee Quality (6.85%), Service Quality by Staff (5.99%), Brand Preference (4.05%), Promotional Activities (3.41%), Social Responsibility & Recreation (2.98%), Food & Drinks Selection (2.71%), Social Place (2.55%) and, Other Amenities (2.4%). In summary, the results of this analysis support the use of positive effect items while the promax rotation solution explains the variance percentile by strongly loading the measurement items on their respective construct components.

Table 3 Exploratory factor analysis (EFA)

Factor and Variables	Factor Loadings	Eigenvalues	Variance (%)
<i>Factor 1 – Tangibles</i>		12.67	28.17
Friendly staff	.810		
Helpful staff	.793		
Reasonable price with quality service	.734		
Reasonable price with quality coffee	.694		
Reasonable price with portion size	.650		
Dining area that is thoroughly clean*	.608		
Restrooms that are thoroughly clean*	.598		
Easy-to-read menus	.537		
Adequate spacing between tables	.534		
Courteous staff	.463		
Quiet atmosphere	.422		
<i>Factor 2 – Coffee Quality</i>		3.08	6.85
Coffee with high quality of beans*	.886		

Table 3 (con't)

Coffee with freshly roasted beans*	.846		
Coffee with the right brewing skills*	.835		
Freshly brewed coffee all the time*	.747		
Coffee with preferred taste	.747		
Coffee with preferred aroma	.670		
Coffee with the right temperature	.657		
Customised coffee*	.613		
Coffee with consistent quality	.508		
<i>Factor 3 – Service Quality by Staff</i>		2.69	5.99
Staff perform service right the first time	.729		
Staff offer individual attention	.729		
Staff knowledgeable about taste products	.624		
Staff give prompt service	.566		
Staff attentive to specific needs	.560		
Staff attentive to orders	.516		
<i>Factor 4 – Brand Preference</i>		1.82	4.05
Frequently visit a particular coffeehouse familiar with*	.852		
Frequently visit a trusted particular coffeehouse*	.848		
Frequently visit a particular coffeehouse for its ambience*	.696		
Frequently visit a particular coffeehouse for the quality of products it serves*	.621		
<i>Factor 5 – Promotional Activities</i>		1.53	3.41
Free testing of coffee and food items	.737		
Availability of merchandise items	.709		
Availability of private rooms	.678		
Sales promotion	.560		
Selection of magazines	.503		

Table 3 (con't)

Factor 6 – Social Responsibility and Recreation		1.34	2.98
Environmentally friendly coffeehouse	.726		
Socially responsible coffeehouse	.691		
Place to relax during leisure time*	.563		
Casual gathering place with friends*	.552		
Warm lighting	.422		
Factor 7 – Food & Drinks Selection		1.22	2.71
Variety of drinks (other than coffee)	.710		
Variety of food	.710		
Factor 8 – Social Place		1.15	2.55
Place to meet potential clients*	.779		
Factor 9 – Other Amenities		1.08	2.4
Smoking area	.834		

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO-MSA): 0.907; Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity, significance at 0.00. *Attributes developed from exploratory study

Discussion and Conclusion

By identifying the key attributes customers seek when dining in speciality coffeehouses, the findings contribute to the existing literature and offer useful implications for specialty coffee shop entrepreneurs in Malaysia and other emerging economies.

The present study identified nine factors or attributes of specialty coffeehouses that are considered important by coffeehouse patrons. Overall, the findings are consistent with that of Tan and Lo (2008) who also identified a total of nine important attributes. However, only two of the nine factors in Tan and Lo (2008) have the same label as the factors in this study, specifically Food & Drinks Selection and, Other Amenities. Further, both these factors were not included as among the four most important factors identified by Tan and Lo (2008), as shown in Table 1.

Since Tangibles contributed the most to the total variance in this study, it is perceived as the most important feature of specialty coffeehouse. Although Tangibles was not explicitly labelled as a factor in Waxman’s study (2006), nevertheless the

cleanliness variable was recognised as an important characteristic in the factor, Physical Design. It should be noted that tangibility is acknowledged as an important dimension of service quality (Ali, Hussain, Konar, & Jeon, 2017) and specialty coffeehouse operators should definitely focus on the tangible elements in order to attract and retain customers. For example, an operational checklist that includes essential elements such as appropriate staff behaviour, clean premises, reasonable product pricing and legible menus, can be prepared and regularly monitored by the management to ensure customers' basic expectations are always fulfilled.

The study also proved, consistent with that of Tan and Lo (2008) and Chen and Hu (2010), that coffee quality is an important attribute. Undoubtedly, coffee is the core product served in specialty coffeehouses just like food is regarded as the main product in restaurants. Thus, it is imperative that coffeehouse operators consistently maintain a high standard of coffee-related products by sourcing for reasonably priced high-quality beans, recruiting and training baristas with the right technical and people skills, as well as providing customised coffee beverages based on customers' preferences. This would create the "wow" experience for customers and help to retain their loyalty and patronage.

It is well acknowledged that service quality is an essential criteria for the success of any service organisation. Indeed, as employees are a critical resource in service organisations, the quality of service delivered significantly affects overall service quality. As the third most importantly perceived factor/attribute of specialty coffeehouses, this results confirms the important role of service personnel (Chen & Hu, 2010; Ko & Chiu, 2008; Tan & Lo, 2008). To ensure their staff are motivated to provide excellent service and build long-term customer relationships, coffeehouse operators/management could institute appropriate reward and recognition schemes that reinforce positive service behaviour. In addition, regular trainings should be provided on grooming, customer service and job-related operational skills to ensure staff stay abreast with current trends and customer's ever-changing needs.

Apart from these important implications, the study has a few limitations that can suggest future directions for research. As the present study did not distinguish the different ethnicities or nationalities of the customers, future studies can focus on this aspect to identify if the attributes differ across ethnicity or nationality. Further, this study did not differentiate between international chain and independently-owned specialty coffeehouses. Hence, this aspect can be considered for future research to ascertain if there are differences between the attributes of independent and international chain outlets. Finally, the current study used mainly a quantitative research design. In future, an appropriate qualitative research approach (such as individual interviews or focus group discussions) can be employed to obtain more in-depth insights or additional attributes.

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