Motivation and perception of Hong Kong university students about social media news

Motivación y percepción de los universitarios de Hong Kong sobre noticias en las redes sociales

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ABSTRACT

With the prevalence of social media in a digital age, accessing news on social media has become a daily routine of university students' lives. However, little research has been done to examine their social media news use in detail, especially in Asian countries. To fill this gap, we aimed to examine what motivated university students to seek news on social media, to what extent they perceived they were in control of the influences of news, and whether news motives were related to their levels of news media literacy across three domains: (a) authors and audiences; (b) messages and meaning, and (c) representation and reality. One hundred and forty-seven university students from a university in Hong Kong participated. Among the four news motives, socializing was the most powerful predictor for news use on social media. Most students believed they were in control of news influences and demonstrated a high level of news media literacy, and those who believed themselves to be in control of news influences showed a higher level of news media literacy. In this sense, high news-literate students were more likely to seek news for socializing as compared to their low news-literate counterparts. Insights on educating students to use social media in a positive and smart way were discussed.

RESUMEN

Con la prevalencia de las redes sociales en la era digital, acceder a las noticias en redes sociales se ha convertido en una rutina cotidiana en la vida de los estudiantes universitarios. Sin embargo, se ha realizado mínima investigación sobre el uso de noticias en redes sociales, especialmente en los países de Asia. Para colmar esta laguna, pretendemos examinar qué motivó a los estudiantes universitarios a buscar noticias en redes sociales, en qué medida percibían que controlaban las influencias de noticias, y si las motivaciones de noticias se relacionaban con su nivel de alfabetismo de la prensa en tres dominios: a) autores y audiencias; b) mensajes y significados, y c) representación y realidad. Participaron 147 estudiantes de una universidad de Hong Kong. Entre las cuatro motivaciones, la socialización fue el indicador más poderoso. La mayoría de los estudiantes creían que podían controlar la influencia de noticias, demostrando un alto alfabetismo de la prensa. Los estudiantes con alto nivel de alfabetización de los medios de comunicación son más propensos a buscar noticias para socializar, en comparación con las contrapartes con bajo nivel de alfabetización. Se debatieron perspectivas sobre cómo educar a los estudiantes para emplear de una forma positiva e inteligente las redes sociales.

KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Social networking sites, news, digital consumption, media use, media literacy, university.
Redes sociales, noticias, consumo digital, uso de medios, alfabetización mediática, universidad.

1. Introduction

Social media, such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Twitter, constitute a form of online platform that enables interactions and communications across the geographical boundaries worldwide. With the dramatic rise of social media, seeking, sharing, and discussing news via these interactive platforms has become an inevitable part of university students' everyday lives (Casero-Ripollés, 2012; Martinez-Costa et al., 2019). According to a digital news report covering 37 Western and Asian countries (including the US, the UK, Japan, and Korea, etc.), around half (53%) of young people aged 18-24 use social media for news on a weekly basis (Newman et al., 2018). In Hong Kong, three out of five adults report getting news from social media, which has surpassed the proportion who do so via traditional print media (Newman et al., 2019).

With the growing popularity of social media as news sources, it has become a focus of attention among teachers, educators, and scholars to have a clear understanding of how and why university students seek news on social media, how much control they perceive over the influences of news, and how well they know about the news. The current research aimed to address these questions by measuring university students' motives underlying social media news use, perceived news media control, and levels of news media literacy. We captured students' news motives using a scale adapted from prior research and assessed their perceived control over news influences and news media literacy using existing measurements. The potential associations among news motives, perceived news media control, and news media literacy were also examined.

We believe that a clearer understanding of news activities and news motives would help to identify learners' actual levels and needs in news media literacy education. As suggested by prior research, teaching news media literacy can increase individuals' news consumption, social responsibility, and democratic participation (Hobbs, 2010). Before we can move forward to education in practice, we need empirical data to identify students' current news knowledge and skills. In this sense, the current study fills this gap by providing direct evidence on Hong Kong students' needs and characteristics.

1.1. Social media news use

Social media has dramatically changed the way university students consume news and the role they play in the news industry. On the bright side, it brings benefits to news users with its unique features. Unlike traditional news channels where users only receive news passively, social media enables users' active participation in news production and dissemination. Users can post a status, upload event photos and live videos that deliver timely and useful information using functions such as comments, likes, shares, or tags on social media (Choi, 2016; Choi & Lee, 2015). Also, social media produces and delivers news instantaneously, at a speed that leaves traditional sources or other online channels far behind (Choi & Lee, 2015). Furthermore, social media provides open and interactive forums where students can share viewpoints and have discussions freely. Thus, a more transparent, trustworthy, and democratic society would come into being with citizens engaging more in news and caring more about society (Ellison et al., 2007).

While social media provides a range of benefits, it poses several risks. First, social media filters or prioritizes news based upon users' personal preferences (such as previous news reading and sharing, friends' preferences, recency, and popularity). This might lead to selective exposure to media content and cause extreme viewpoints (Thurman & Schifferes, 2012). Second, social media makes news stories susceptible to reinterpretation, distortion, mutation, and redistribution, with users summarizing news stories or adding commentaries while sharing news (Soep, 2012). Also, without strict controls and well-established fact-checking systems, social media can be a fertile ground for sowing misinformation (which is unintentionally false) and disinformation (which is intentionally false) (Shao et al., 2017). Fake news might distort students' view of the world and undermine the public trust in society if students cannot deal with them correctly (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Pennycook et al., 2018). Even worse, if students are not able to use social media properly, they could rely on these platforms as a way to escape from reality (Gao et al., 2017; Kırcaburun & Griffiths, 2019). Considering both benefits and pitfalls of social media news use, it has become crucial to provide students with efficient news media literacy education. If

students are better prepared to avoid the risks and maximize the benefits, their learning of news could be enhanced through these interactive platforms. Before this step can be taken, educators and practitioners need to have an accurate understanding of students' news motives, actual competence, and knowledge.

1.2. Conception of news motives

To better profile students' social media news use, one of the first questions we need to figure out is why students choose to seek news on social media. Many studies grounded on the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory have been conducted to investigate news motives. The main argument of U&G theory is that individuals select media that can best gratify their specific social and psychological needs (Katz et al., 1974). Based on this, four motives for social media news use have been identified by prior studies: information seeking (i.e., to acquire useful information about community, social events, and current affairs), socializing (i.e., to get topics for social conversations), entertainment (i.e., to escape the boredom of daily routines or release emotions), and status seeking (i.e., to get recognized by peers) (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Dunne et al., 2010; Park et al., 2009).

Social media revives the research of U&G theory with its capabilities to fulfill users' diverse needs (Rubin, 2009; Ruggiero, 2000). As noted earlier, it makes news more personalized and interactive and provides communicative platforms where users can discuss social issues freely. These defining features cater to users' personal needs for certain categories of information and satisfy their gratifications related to socializing. Considering an increasing amount of news activities on social media, it is valuable to recap news motives through the lens of U&G theory (Dunne et al., 2010). To address this, the first research question of the current study was:

• RQ1: What are the news motives underlying news seeking on social media?

1.3. Conception of news media literacy

Given the uneven quality of news on social media, university students need a wider range of skills and knowledge to stay reasonable in this complex news environment. News media literacy is a skill that can help develop an understanding of how and why people engage with news, how individuals make sense of the news, and how they are influenced by their own news habits (Maksl et al., 2015).

The theory of news media literacy was derived from Potter's cognitive model of media literacy (2004). In his model, four components were proposed: knowledge structures, personal locus, competencies and skills, and information processing. Of these four components, knowledge structures highlight a generic awareness of media industry, content, effects, self, and the real world, and personal locus involves the personal needs and motives that drive different modes of information processing.

According to Potter's model (2004), knowledge structures and personal locus interact with each other, with better knowledge enriching a person's motives for news, and motives driving the person to know more about media influences. Additionally, media literacy involves a set of critical thinking skills for analyzing, evaluating, and judging media messages. Although Potter's model is more concerned with an overall understanding of media literacy, it has been widely applied to the sub-field of news media literacy (Mihailidis, 2011).

In terms of news media literacy specifically, news knowledge involves a clear understanding of what news is, under which conditions news is produced, and the influences news can have on people. The knowledge about news content, industries, and effects, combined with a great sense of control and consciousness regarding the effects of news, would result in higher levels of news media literacy. In other words, news media literacy requires an interplay between knowledge about news and the personal locus over the influences of news.

In the current study, we examined the extent to which students perceive themselves as being in control of news influences and how much they know about the news by using Media Locus of Control Scale (Maksl et al., 2015; Maksl et al., 2017) and News Media Literacy Scale (Ashley et al., 2013). We skipped some components proposed in Potter's model (2004; 2010), such as the competencies and skills, because of the practical difficulties related to survey administration. Maksl et al. (2015) have found that highly media-literate teenagers can perceive more control over their relationship with media, indicating that the

more teens know about news, the higher their perceived control over news influences. Thus, we aimed to examine the following questions:

- RQ2: What are the levels of university students' perceived news media control and news media literacy?
- RQ3: Are there any relations between perceived news media control and news media literacy?

Apart from a sense of being in control of news influences and news knowledge, news motives also help to create news-literate students. Basically, news motives can determine a person's attitude and behavior, giving rise to the way a person understands and processes news messages (Diddi & LaRose, 2006; Eveland, 2002; 2004; Lin, 2002; Rubin & Perse, 1987; Ruggiero, 2000). Maksl et al. (2015) have suggested that diverse motives would link to individual differences in learning from the news, thus leading to different levels of news media literacy. Stronger news motives would enhance a person's knowledge about current events and the process of influences, and in return, the acquired knowledge and perceived influences would strengthen the motives for news (Potter, 2004). To further understand such a potential relation between news motives and news media literacy, we examined:

- RQ4: Aredifferent types of news motives related to different levels of news media literacy?

1.4. The present study

The present study aimed to examine university students' news motives, perceived news media control, and news media literacy. We investigated 147 undergraduates' news habits on social media (i.e., how often they get news from social media, which platform they use most frequently for news), and assessed their news motives underlying social media news use. Students' perceived news media control and news media literacy across three domains (i.e., authors and audiences, messages and meaning, and representation and reality) were measured using Media Locus of Control Scale (Maksl et al., 2015; Maksl et al., 2017) and News Media Literacy Scale (Ashley et al., 2013). A median split was conducted to separate and compare participants with high and low news media literacy. We expected that students who were more knowledgeable about news would perceive higher control over news influences, and highly news-literate students were more likely to be driven by internal motives for social media news use (e.g., information seeking). Insights on how to educate students to better navigate information on social media were discussed.

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

The study's participants were 150 Hong Kong university students recruited through posters and bulletin board announcements on campus during the month of February 2018. A total of 147 participants were included in the final analysis, with data from three students eliminated due to their age being over the range of the target population (i.e., young students). The final sample's age ranged from 18 to 25 years (M=20.71, SD=1.58), with 76.19% being female. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. However, the fact that the sample was drawn from only one university in Hong Kong might present a limitation of the study. We would further address this in the discussion.

2.2. Measures and procedures

Participants were asked to complete a 30-min survey offline in a laboratory. Informed consent was obtained before the commencement, and each participant was provided with a coffee coupon valued HKD 50 as a token of appreciation.

2.2.1. Social media news habits

Participants' social media news habits were measured in terms of daily news access. They were first asked to indicate their time spent on news activities on social media via a question, (i.e., what is the amount of time you spent on news reading, sharing, commenting, or discussion on social media on an average day?), and their preferences for various social media platforms (i.e., which of the following social media do you use most frequently to read/watch news and share/discuss news?; see Table 2 for the options). To

ensure every participant comprehends the concept of social media, a brief description of its definition was provided before related questions were asked (i.e., social media comprise web-based applications where users can create and share information and have free interactions, such as Facebook, YouTube, WeChat, etc.).

2.2.2. Social media news motives

Participants' news motives were measured using a well-established assessment adapted from prior research (Lee et al., 2011; Lee & Ma, 2012; Park et al., 2009). Four types of social media news motives were included: information seeking, socializing, entertainment, and status seeking. Information seeking measured the extent to which participants valued the useful, relevant, and timely information provided by social media. Socializing tapped on how much news activities on social media helped to develop and maintain social relationships. Entertainment measured the degree to which participants sought news on social media for leisure and entertainment purposes, and status seeking assessed the purpose of attaining status among peers. Each motive was assessed by three items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. Sample items and the number of items were presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample items of news motives, perceived news media control, and news media literacy		
Variables	**Sample Items**	**No. of Items**
News motives[1]		
Information seeking	It helps me to store useful information	3
Socializing	To keep in touch with people	3
Entertainment	It helps me pass time	3
Status seeking	It helps me feel important	3
Perceived news media control[2]	If I pay attention to different sources of news, I can avoid being misinformed	4
News media literacy[3]		
Authors and audiences (AA)	News companies choose stories based on what will attract the biggest audience	3
Messages and meaning (MM)	People pay more attention to news that fit with their beliefs than news that don't	5
Representation and reality (RR)	A news story that has good pictures is more likely to show up in the news	4

Note 1. News Motives were measured by scales adapted from prior research (Lee et al., 2010; Lee & Ma, 2012; Park et al., 2009).
2. Perceived News Media Control was measured using the Media Locus of Control Scale (Maksl et al., 2015; Maksl et al., 2017).
3. News Media Literacy was measured using the News Literacy Scale (Ashely et al., 2013).

2.2.3. Perceived news media control and news media literacy

Participants' sense of being in control of news media influences and knowledge about news were measured using existing scales. For perceived news media control, a 6-item self-reported Media Locus of Control Scale (Maksl et al., 2015; Maksl et al., 2017) was administered to assess the perceived confidence and sense of responsibility in seeking truthful and credible news information. Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree. For news media literacy, a 12-item self-reported News Media Literacy Scale (Ashely et al., 2013) was administered to assess students' knowledge about news media across three domains: authors and audiences (an understanding of how news might be constructed differently to reach specific target audience), messages and meaning (an ability to comprehend the way that value judgments affect the interpretation of news), and representation and reality (an understanding of how the editorial process of news might affect the presentation of news). Identical to the Media Locus of Control Scale, a 5-point Likert scale was presented (Table 1), and a higher score indicated a higher level of news media literacy.

3. Results

3.1. Social media news habits

Around half of the participants (47.62%) spent 30 minutes to 2 hours per day engaging with news on social media, followed by 38.78% spending less than 30 minutes and 11.56% for over 2 hours. Only

2.04% reported that they never used social media for news activities. In terms of the most frequently-used social media platforms, Facebook came up as the dominant site (66.14%), with Weibo (5.51%) and Yahoo (5.51%) following far behind. The profiles of students' social media news habits are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Social media news habits of Hong Kong university students	
Variables	**%**
Time spent on social media news use	
Less than 30 minutes	38.78
30 minutes – 2 hours	47.62
Over 2 hours	11.56
No such habit	2.04
Most frequently-used social media platforms[1]	
Facebook	66.14
Weibo	5.51
Youtube	3.94
Wechat	3.94
Instagram	3.94
Whatsapp	2.36
Google+	2.36
Twitter	0.79

Note 1. Social media platforms were listed in the order from most- to least-used. Options not listed: 'others' (9.45%) and 'never use social media for news' (1.57%).

3.2. Social media news motives

Table 3 presented the descriptive results and reliability of news motives on social media. Acceptable reliability of each motive type was obtained (all $\alpha s \geq 0.72$, see Table 3). Information seeking was the primary motive driving participants' news activities, with socializing ranking the second followed by entertainment and status seeking.

3.3. Perceived news media control and news media literacy

Table 3 also presented the descriptive statistics and reliability of participants' perceived news media control and news media literacy. Acceptable reliability was obtained for the News Media Literacy Scale ($\alpha=.70$), but unacceptable reliabilities were obtained for the Media Locus of Control Scale and the subscales of News Media Literacy (all $\alpha s \leq .54$). Participants' ratings in Media Locus of Control Scale demonstrated a moderate to high sense of perceived control over news influences, and results of the News Media Literacy Scale revealed a high level of news media knowledge, even in each dimension of authors and audiences, messages and meanings, representation and reality.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations (SDs) and reliability coefficient of news motives, perceived news media control, and news media literacy			
	Mean	**SD**	**Cronbach alpha**
News motives			
Information seeking	3.77	.69	.72
Socializing	3.66	.70	.75
Entertainment	2.96	.91	.82
Status seeking	2.44	.85	.92
Perceived news media control	3.66	.56	.46
News media literacy	4.41	.31	.70
Authors and audiences (AA)	4.43	.43	.52
Messages and meaning (MM)	4.32	.40	.54
Representation and reality (RR)	4.51	.40	.52

3.4. Correlations among news motives, perceived news media control, and news media literacy

Table 4 shows the correlations among daily news access on social media (i.e., the amount of time spent on news activities on social media), news motives, perceived news media control, and news media literacy. Results suggest that daily news access on social media is positively correlated with the motive of

socializing (r=.21, <.05). Four types of news motives were not correlated with perceived news media control and news media literacy, except the relation between status seeking and perceived news media control and that between socializing and news media literacy. Besides, perceived news media control was positively and significantly related to news media literacy.

Table 4. Correlations among daily news access on social media, news motives, news media knowledge, and news media literacy							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Daily news access on social media	-						
News motives							
2. Information seeking	.04	-					
3. Socializing	.21*	.11	-				
4. Entertainment	.03	.13	.24**	-			
5. Status seeking	.14	.15	.32**	.32**	-		
6. Perceived news media control	.03	.12	.24	-.06	.17*	-	
7. News media literacy	.05	.08	.30**	-.09	.08	.31**	-

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01.

3.5. Prediction of news motives and news media literacy on social media news use

A regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive effects of news motives and news media literacy on daily news access on social media (Table 5). We entered four types of news motives (i.e., information seeking, socializing, status seeking, and entertainment), news media literacy and perceived news media control into the model using a forward method, so that only the variable(s) producing the best prediction could be entered into the model. Only the motive of socializing was successfully entered into the model, which significantly predicted the daily news access on social media (β=1.06, t=3.27, p=.03). The motive of socializing also explained a significant proportion of variance in daily news access on social media (R^2=.03, F=4.93, p=.03).

Table 5. Means and standard deviations (SDs) of news motives by levels of news media literacy				
	Mean (SD)			
	Information seeking	Socializing	Entertainment	Status seeking
Low news media literacy	3.68 (.65)	3.48 (.70)	3.06 (.87)	2.38 (.77)
High news media literacy	3.82 (.71)	3.83 (.66)	2.88 (.95)	2.49 (.93)

3.6. Comparisons between high and low news-literate participants

High and low news-literate participants were separated by a median split, and a two-way mixed ANOVA was conducted to examine the relations between news motives and news media literacy. Normality checks showed that the residuals did not fit the normal distribution (Mauchly's Test of Sphericity: p=0.32). The results of ANOVA showed that there were significant effects for news motives (F=122.88, p<.001, η_p=.44) and news motives×news media literacy interaction (F=3.57, p<.05, η_p=.03), but not for news media literacy (F=1.48, p=0.23, η_p=.01). Simple effect t-tests to follow up the interaction revealed significant differences in socializing between low and high news-literate participants, t(143)=2.98, <.01, with high news-literate participants being more likely to seek news for socializing (Table 5).

4. Discussion and conclusion

The current study provided empirical data on how Hong Kong university students consumed news on social media, what motivated their news use on social media, and how those news motives were linked to their levels of news media literacy. Most Hong Kong students consumed news via social media on a daily basis with Facebook ranked the most popular platform. Three major findings were obtained: (1) most students were motivated by information seeking and socializing for social media news use, and socializing was the strongest motive in predicting the amount of news use on social media; (2) those who believed themselves to be in control of news media influences showed higher levels of news media literacy; and

(3) students with high news media literacy were more likely to seek news for socializing as compared to their lower news-literate counterparts.

The majority of our participants were motivated by information seeking and socializing for their social media news use. These are powerful and enduring motives that could enhance students' acquisition of useful knowledge and social communication. Similar findings have been obtained in prior studies. For instance, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) and Luo (2002) found that information seeking was a key driver for Web use, and Howard and Corkindale (2008) demonstrated that socializing was positively associated with online news consumption. It was good to see that university students sought news mostly for relevant and timely information, as such intrinsically driven behavior would result in better learning, creativity, competence and positive coping (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Also, the socializing motive helped to fulfill students' needs to fit in, extend and deepen social relationships, which constituted an important developmental task for young people during their early adulthood (Scale, 2010). We also found that news motives varied between highly news-literate and low news-literate students, with those possessing higher news media literacy being more likely to be driven by the socializing motive. This indicates that highly news-literate individuals care more about interacting with others which brings them a sense of belonging (Rubin, 1986). They share news from social media to develop and maintain their social relationships, and feel connected to the community through news sharing and discussions. On the one hand, the increased news activities boost the accumulation of news knowledge that forms the basis of news media literacy. On the other hand, higher news literacy brings confidence in sharing views and news, thus leading to closer connections to their friends and family.

The link between news motives and news media literacy was also found in previous research. The study of Maksl et al. (2017) suggested that teens with better news media literacy displayed greater intrinsic motivation as compared to less news-literate counterparts (e.g., I follow the news because I like to). This can be explained by the argument that suggests that diverse news motives influence the way young people perceive and process news (Ryan & Deci, 2000), thus leading to differential learning from the news (Choi, 2016; Eveland, 2002; David, 2009; Maksl et al., 2015; Malik et al., 2013). Theoretically, a full awareness of how news are produced and disseminated would help to increase the understanding of news influences and enhance personal self-efficacy in controlling news influences. When people recognize their abilities to do so, their motivations for news engagement might increase (Potter, 2004). Taken together, the current findings have practical implications for future news literacy education. By identifying university students' knowledge and competence in news, our data specifies what educators and practitioners should focus on in their future education to best fulfill students' needs. For instance, as suggested by our findings, news use on social media has become an unavoidable part of students' everyday lives, so it is necessary to teach about social media and its potential influences before exposing students to a complex news environment on social media. Also, news habits, news motives, and news media literacy might differ among students from different socio-cultural environments (Fleming & Kajimoto, 2016; Hornik & Kajimoto, 2014; Silverblatt et al., 2014). Therefore, educators should incorporate local learners' characteristics into the existing education models but not directly copying what Western programs have developed. We believe that a better understanding of students' news habits, news motives, and other psychological components (e.g., perceived control over news influences and levels of news media literacy) would help empower and improve the teaching and learning of news. Social media would serve as an efficient learning tool for news literacy education if students are well equipped to use them in a smart way.

One limitation of this study was the efficacy of the self-report scales and a lack of direct assessment on critical thinking in news. As illustrated in our results, the reliability of some scales was unacceptable for a standardized instrument, and there is a lack of objective assessment on students' critical thinking skills in interpreting and evaluating real-life news messages. Future research can seek to address these questions by improving the relevant measurements. For instance, a combination of self-report scales and objective skill tests would help to get a more comprehensive picture of how much university students know about news (Ku et al., 2019). Another limitation is the sampling methods and limited sample size. We put out open recruitment for students to participate in our study, and those who decided to come were more likely to be naturally active and expressive, which led to a possibility of a biased sample. The scale of

sampling is small and restricted in one university in Hong Kong, and there were more female than male participants. Methodologically, we did not consider students' majors and other background information that might be associated with news habits or news media literacy. Overall, these limitations might cause a limited generalization of our findings. To solve these, we suggest implementing a larger-scale study to look at university students' news activities across countries. In this sense, the current findings can serve as a starting point and basis for future research.

The current study examined 147 university students' news motives, perceived news media control, and levels of news media literacy. We found that the motive of socializing was the most powerful predictor for social media news use, and most students showed a strong sense of being in control over news influences and a high level of knowledge about news. Highly news-literate users were more likely to display a socializing motive when compared to those who were less news-literate. Considering the limited scope and size of our sample, we call for a study at a larger scale, across different cultures, to further understand students' actual knowledge, competence, and needs in news. The relevant research would provide first-hand information about learners' diverse needs and assist educators and teachers to foster responsible news users in an interactive and information-saturated age.

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