The Mobile Phone:

It Has Nothing to do with Identity in the Process of Cultural Practice

LE TÉLÉPHONE MOBILE:

RIEN À VOIR AVEC L'IDENTITÉ

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the relationship between technology and self-identity. It focuses on the representation of the mobile phone in everyday life and identity. In this paper, a literature review on du Gay et al (1997a) *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Song Walkman* will be introduced. This paper will be divided into four major sections. In the first section, it will be introducing the role of culture in everyday life. In addition to this, the relationship between commodities and popular culture will be analysed. Furthermore, there will be a discussion on the association between culture and technology. Secondly, there will be a focus on the investigation of identity, which includes the analysis of the body and the self. Thirdly, by emphasising the concept of consumption, on the one hand, the author will be interpreting the idea of whether identity is formed by what consumers consume. Lastly, the connection between technology and everyday life will be examined. In addition, three case studies based on the topics of 'mobile phone and identity' and 'public and private' will be provided throughout these four sections. A conclusion will be provided at the end of this paper.
Key words: Mobile Phone; Identity; Cultural Practice

Resumé: Ce document vise à analyser la relation entre la technologie et l'identité de soi. Il se concentre sur la représentation du téléphone mobile dans la vie quotidienne et l'identité. Dans cet article, une revue sur du Gay et al (1997a) Faire des études culturelles: L'histoire de la chanson Walkman sera introduite. Cet article sera divisé en quatre sections principales. Dans la première section, il présentera le rôle de la culture dans la vie quotidienne. En plus de cela, la relation entre les produits et la culture populaire sera analysée. Par ailleurs, il y aura une discussion sur l'association entre la culture et la technologie. Deuxièmement, l'accent sera mis sur l'enquête de l'identité, qui comprend l'analyse du corps et de soi. Troisièmement, en se concentrant sur la notion de consommation, d'une part, l'auteur introduira l'idée de savoir si l'identité est formée par ce que les consommateurs consomment. Enfin, le lien entre la technologie et de la vie quotidienne sera examiné. En outre, trois études de cas basées sur les thèmes du "téléphone mobile et l'identité" et "publics et privés" seront fournies tout au long de ces quatre sections. Une conclusion sera faite à la fin du présent article.
Mots-clés: Téléphone Mobile; Identité; Pratique Culturelle

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"Culture has traditionally been allotted a rather inferior role. In contrast to economic and political processes, for example, which were routinely assumed to alter material conditions in the 'real' world – how people thought and acted – in ways which could be clearly identified and described, and hence could provide 'hard' knowledge of the social world, cultural processes were deemed rather ephemeral and superficial. Because cultural processes dealt with seemingly less tangible things – signs, images, language, beliefs – they were often assumed, particularly by Marxist theories, to be 'superstructural', being both dependent upon and reflective of the primary status of the material base, and thus unlikely to provide social scientists with valid, 'real' knowledge" (du Gay et al., 1997a).

INTRODUCTION

The mobile phone has become one of the cultural commodities in today's world. The term 'culture' deals with several fields. In Bourdieu's opinion, 'culture is about the processes of identification and differentiation, with identities produced through practices of distinction: we distinguish ourselves by the taste distinctions we make – for example, between "cultivated" and "vulgar"' (cited in Mackay ed. 1997).

The usage of mobile phones can be considered as a sort of cultural practice. Today, the functions of mobile phones are not only for making and receiving calls, but also for providing other functions such as 'mailboxes, digital cameras, video recorders, personal radios, personal organizers, and even MP3 players' (cited in Bassett 2006). According to Bassett, 'It is sometimes assuming that the mobile becomes each of these objects rather than simulating them, or re-mediating them; that it takes on the most advanced characteristics of each media stream it subsumes, and also assumes the development trajectory, or even the nature, or ontology, of these media' (Bassett 2006).

How does the mobile phone relate to everyday life and the idea of identity? It can not be denied that the mobile phone plays an influential role in today's society. However, this idea may only be based on its convenience and immediacy of communication. It seems to Mackay that 'the mobile telephone, is concerned with the shifting meaning of a technology over time; the other refers to a symbolic significance which varies with locales' (Mackay eds 1997). On the other hand, Mackay continues that the mobile phone is, 'more than just a symbol, it's a very public symbol, carried prominently and hard to use discreetly. To be contactable anywhere, anytime may now seem straightforward, even meaningless' (Mackay eds 1997).

In the case of identity, Bennett defines identity as 'to do with the imagined sameness of a person or of a social group at all times and in all circumstances; about a person or a group being, and being able to continue to be, itself and not someone or something else' (2005). It would be arguable that identity can be represented though a commodity, 'choosing a mobile phone that you like', for instance, this choice somehow refers to a person's preference or interest. Giddens claims that 'on the level of the self, a fundamental component of day-to-day activity is simply that of choice' (1991).

A LITERATURE REVIEW

In the book, *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman*, du Gay (ed.) has divided this book into five processes, which are *Representation, Identity, Production, Consumption, and Regulation*. These five processes are the complete circuit of what they term 'the circuit of culture' (1997a). In this book, they use the Sony Walkman as a case study in order to show why cultural practices play such a crucial role in our lives. First of all, they define culture as 'the "what-everybody-knows" about the world – without consciously knowing where or when they first learned it. This kind of shared, taken-for-granted knowledge is an essential element in what we call "culture"' (du Gay et al., 1997). On the other hand, they point out that 'one way of knowing whether something has become "part of our cultural universe" is to see whether you can interpret or 'read' it – whether you understand what it means, what it is "saying" (du Gay et al., 1997). This is a way of examining a 'cultural universe'. In the case of Sony Walkman, they claim that:

> 'The Walkman is "cultural" because we have constituted it as a meaningful object. We can talk, think about and imagine it. It is also 'cultural' because it connects with a distinct set of *social practices* (like listening to music while traveling on the train or the underground, for example) which are specific to our culture or way of life. It is cultural because it is associated with certain *kinds of people* (young people, for example, or music-lovers); with certain places (the city, the open air, walking around a museum) – because it has been given or acquired a social identity. It is also cultural because it frequently appears in and is represented within our visual languages and media of communication' (1997).

Obviously, to become a product of 'part of our cultural universe', du Gay et al is/are concerned about three fundamental elements, which are social practices, kinds of people, and places. Moreover, frequently appearing and represented within

our visual languages and media of communication are another criteria for becoming 'cultural'. The criteria of becoming 'cultural' seem more or less strict.

By setting up the criteria of becoming 'cultural', du Gay et al emphasise the concept of 'meaning'. In their judgment, the importance of meaning is to 'help us to interpret the world, to classify it in meaningful ways, to 'make sense' of things and events, including those which we have never seen or experienced in real life but which occur in films and novels, dreams and fantasies, as well as objects in the real world' (1997a). This means to 'bridge the gap between the material world and the "world" in which language, thinking and communication take place – the "symbolic" world' (1997a). In terms of sharing, du Gay ed all state:,

> 'We are able to make sense of what the other person is doing by de-coding the meaning behind the action, by locating it within some interpretative framework which we and the person doing it share. It is shared meaning which makes the physical action "cultural". It is meaning that translates mere behaviour into a cultural – a signifying – practice' (1997a).

De Gay et al consider 'the production and consumption on a global scale of "cultural goods" which represent one of the most important economic activities' (1997a). Moreover, they point out that 'each of these new media technologies has a particular set of practices associated with it – a way of using them, a set of knowledge, or "know – how", what is sometimes called a *social technology*' (1997a).

In the relationship between consumption and identity, de Gay ed all point out that design is one of the fundamental elements of why a product can represent identity. In other words, the way that a product communicates with the consumer is through its design (1997a). They explain that 'the visual "look" and tactile "feel" of a product are crucial means of communicating with consumers, not simply about function or basic "use" but simultaneously about identity and meaning' (1997a). Furthermore, de Gay ed all stress that design plays another role as a 'global' language (1997a). For example, a national flag can be understood as a sort of design. It is not only an identity of nationality, but also functions as a visual communication.

In the case of the consumer, de Gay et al argue that consumer's desires and needs 'are created by producers, with the assistance of their "servants of power" and "hidden persuaders" - the advertisers – and then satisfied by those same producers' (1997a). It is arguable whether producers create consumers, or consumers create producers. However, the relationship between them is interactive. Basically, consumers' needs can be understood as what they need in general. On the other hand, the role of advertisers is to sell commodities to consumers, which are produced by producers. In the process of this circulation, producers can get more profit if they produce, or supply more products, which may not be necessities for consumers. These kinds of necessities would be considered as desires. Baudrillard disagrees with the idea of material culture merely having 'use' or 'exchange' value. He argues that based on these two values, material culture has 'identity' value as well (de Gay et al., 1997a).

CULTURE AND CULTURAL

'"Culture" can refer to either "high culture" or "popular culture"; the ways of thinking and feeling characteristic of everyone in a given group or society, or the capacities of individuals; the attitudes and habits of the many or of the few' (Inglis 2005). By defining the definition of culture, in addition, Inglis provides eight aspects of how culture works and its role:

1) Culture comprises the patterns of ideas, values and beliefs common to a particular group of people, their 'characteristic' ways of thinking and feeling.

2) The culture of one group differentiates it from other groups, each of which has its 'own' culture.

3) Culture contains meanings. Culture is meaningful.

4) The ideas, values, and beliefs of a group are profoundly implicated in motivating people to act in certain ways.

5) The ideas, values and beliefs of a group are embodied in symbols and artefacts.

6) Culture is learned.

7) Culture is arbitrary.

8) Culture and forms of social power are intimately bound up with each other (2005).

In the case of culture, Fiske claims that 'in a consumer society, all commodities have cultural as well as functional values. To model this we need to extend the idea of an economy to include a cultural economy where the circulation is not one of money, but of meanings and pleasures' (1989). The popularity of the Walkman played a role, which provided meaning and pleasures to its users 10 years ago. However, this situation has changed by the invention of the mobile phone

today. Throughout the last 10 years, consumers have been experiencing the variation of social technologies, from the Walkman, the Discman, MP3, to mobile phones.

Today, the development of mobile phone seems huge. It is a sort of technology, which appears as imperialism for other entertainment technologies. This is simply because of its multiple functions. Digital cameras, personal radios, MP3, for instance, are the representative functions among the total. With a mobile phone like this, is it necessary to have a digital camera? Will you bring a mini sized radio with you? Does MP3 still play an indispensable role in your life?

If the Walkman is what de Gay et al called cultural, then the existence of the mobile phone becomes cultural naturally. According to de Gay al's criteria of becoming cultural, firstly, the mobile phone provides its users with listening to music or receiving the most updated news by turning on the MP3 or radio function, when they are on the way to work, for instance. Secondly, in the case of certain *kinds of people*, it could be of benefit to those people, who have a certain specific preference. It depends on the specific case. Finally, certain *places* can refer to any place.

In the relationship between culture and technology, as Mackay puts it: 'culture gives rise to technologies and they, in turn, embody key elements of that culture … Technology is seen as being shaped by culture, rather than culture shaped by technology' (Mackay eds 1997). Obviously, both ideas are reasonable. Humans contribute to every cultural practice and activity. In contrast, according to Inglis, 'cultural forces do not just control the human body, they also shape it' (2005). In the case of technology, it is discovered by humans. On the one hand, it serves humans. There is no a clear-cut way to say whether technology is shaped by culture or culture is shaped by humans. Generally, culture and technology seem to influence each other.

CASE STUDIES

Example One

Cornelius Segun OJO is a 36-year-old Nigeria, male. He is a DPhil student at the University of Sussex, in the United Kingdom. He has been using a mobile phone since four years ago. A mobile phone is one of the essential commodities of life. He stresses that he cannot live without a mobile phone as it makes communication easier. Even through we have a landline at home, it is not reliable, as we are not staying home for 24 hours. Mobile phones provide an immediately conversion. In Cornelius' opinion, there is not much connection between mobile phones and personal identity.

> 'A person who holds a mobile phone with multiple functions (such as a digital camera, mp3 function, etc.) does not means that this is a high-tech person. On the other hand, a person who uses a mobile phone that made in Japan does not means he or her is from Japan' (Cornelius Segun OJO, Interviewee 1).

When he was asked whether there is no privacy when people use their mobile phone in a public place, Cornelius divides his answer into two parts. First of all, he is concerned about what kind of conversation you are making. If there is something confidential, he will not continue the conversation in a public place. Alternatively, he will answer the call by choosing a quiet place. Otherwise, he will reply back to the caller later when he comes back home.

Example Two

Haruyo Kusumi is a 28-year-old Japanese female. She is doing her master degree at the University of Sussex as well. She carries a mobile phone for her own use. However, a mobile phone is not important for her at all.

> 'If it is possible, I wish I didn't have one' (Haruyo Kusumi, Interviewee 2).

The function of a mobile phone is contactable for others but not for herself. According to Haruyo, almost all her friends have a mobile phone; it seems difficult for her if she does not have one. As people always ask her for a contact number, it will only cause inconvenience for others but not for herself.

It seems to Haruyo that living in a different country causes a different situation by using mobile phone. In Japan, she puts her emphasis on the appearance of a mobile phone. She agrees with that the idea of technology somehow representing personal identity. However, there is nothing more important than the price of a mobile phone since she began studying in the UK. In her opinion, living in the UK is only a short period of time in her life. Even she does not pay attention to how she dresses up. According to Haruyo, she is only a foreigner or stranger here and she has never ever cared about whether she is fashionable or not in the UK. This situation is totally different from when she was in Japan.

In the idea of public and privacy, Haruyo has a clear guideline between these two elements. She does not like listening to people's conversation on phone. On the other hand, she dislikes her conversation being paid attention to when she uses a mobile in a public place.

Example Three

Akiko Kato is another Japanese person who studies at the University of Sussex. She is doing her master's degree in Social Development. In the same way as Haruyo, Akiko does not agree that a mobile phone is necessary. Akiko strongly believes that we can live without mobile phones. Our ancestors did not have mobile phones, and yet they still could live with their own lifestyle. However, she provides two points of view regarding the usage of mobile phones. In the case of work, the mobile phone is important as it is convenient. In the case of private use, she is concerned about the existence of mobile phones making people lazy. This idea is related to personal appointments, for instance, when people are late or cannot reach their destinations on time, they will simply give you a call or a text message to inform you that they will be late. It creates huge difficulties in having a meeting with people who behave like that.

In the opinion of Akiko, technology such as a mobile phone is a representation of personal identity. She puts the appearance of the mobile phone in first place. As for her, no matter where she is, a mobile phone is a sort of accessory.

> 'Of course a mobile phone can be considered as a representation of identity. For example, a person who chooses a mobile phone with multiple functions means that this person is concerned about the functions of technology. In other words, it means he or she is a high-tech person' (Akiko Kato, Interviewee 3).

It seems to Akiko that whether there is privacy or not will depends on how you handle the situation. Like Cornelius' opinion, if there is something confidential, you are free to choose a quiet place to talk, or to stop the conversation.

IDENTITY, THE BODY, AND THE SELF

Castells defines identity as 'people's source of meaning and experience' (1997). He quotes Calboun's definition of identity by saying: 'we know of no people without names, no languages or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made … Self-knowledge – always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery – is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others' (cited in Castells, 1997).

The change of society makes it more and more difficult to distinguish people's nationality. How to identify a person's nationality has become certain people's interest. By encountering a stranger or a group of tourists on the street, is there any characteristic that can be identified as to where they come from, or which kind of group they belong to?

By analysing the term identity, it is necessary to examin the role of *body* in everyday life is necessary. Shilling defines the body as 'an entity which is in the process of becoming; a project which should be worked at and accomplishes as part of an individual's self identity' (cited in Nettleton and Waston 1998). However, as Csordas argues that 'the body is the "existential ground of culture and self, a methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world"' (cited in Nettleton and Waston 1998), then the body in everyday life is passive. As Giddens points out: eEach of the small decisions a person makes every day – what to wear, what to eat, how to conduct himself at work, whom to meet with later in the evening – contributes to such routines. All such choices (as well as larger and more consequential ones) are decisions not only about how to act but who to be' (1991).

Everyone has a body, which apparently belongs to a particular person. However, its owner no longer controls the body once it participates in social activity of everyday life. It is too general to say that certain social technologies, such as mobile phone is considered as the identity of a person in their everyday life and culture. In order to adapt to the new environment, a person's attitude or act may be changed according to where he or she is. In Inglis' opinion, 'within a complex society, there will be different sets of cultural norms as to how the body is to act, which vary according to social context' (2005).

In the case of mobile phone use, for example, to speak loudly in a public place in China is normal, however, if this situation happens in Singapore, for instance, what will happen may be that everybody looks at you in a strange way. As Inglis points out, 'very few people want to be different from everyone else if that leads to their being viewed by others in ways that are embarrassing or humiliating' (2005). Moreover, it seems to Budgeon that 'modern culture embodies a particular tension: just as rationalization processes have created a milieu where everyone is expected to act in predictable and socially defined ways, at the same time modernity has unleaded, as no society ever has done to quite the same extent before, the cult of the individual' (Inglis 2005).

In the association between the body and the self, Giddens points out that 'the self is of course embodied and so the regularised control of the body is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained' (Nettleton and Watson ed 1998). In addition, Giddens argues, 'the body used to be one aspect of nature, governed in a fundamental way by processes only, marginally subject to human intervention. The body was a 'given', the often inconvenient and inadequate seat of the self. With the increasing invasion of body by abstract systems all this becomes altered. The body,

like the self, becomes a site of interaction; appropriation and reappropriation, linking reflexively organized processes and systematically ordered expert knowledge (cited in Nettleton and Watson ed 1998).'

CONSUMPTION AND IDENTITY

According to de Gay et al, consumption is one of the five processes of the circuit of culture (1997a). It is undeniable that consumption plays an indispensable role in the process of culture and cultural practice. It seems to Mackay that consumption is 'an active process and often celebrated as pleasure … In postmodern accounts, cultural consumption is seen as being the very material out of which we construct our identities: we become what we consume' (Mackay eds 1997). The Mobile phone, with its dramatic development and peerless functions, is not a myth but a consequence of social development. The mobile phone, is based on its fundamental functions as a phone, but more importantly, it offers pleasure to its users. Bassett questions 'how are particular industrial logics instantiated in particular kinds of technologically articulated cultural practice, which tend to valourize particular kinds aesthetics and particular modes of use and consumption?' (2006) By focusing on the mobile phone, her answer to this question is that 'a key element of convergence is the re-making of one form of media by another' (2006).

In the relationship between identity and consumption, Baudrillard does not agree entirely with Mackay's idea that 'we become what we consume'. As for Baudrillard, he maintains that identity should not be merely constructed by the product that consumer consumers. He argues that, 'we become what we buy: signs and signifying practices are what is consumed – even if we do not consume the product. Signs have no fixed referent: any object can, in principle, take on any meaning. Rather than representing some signifier, the sign is all that is left. We are left with society as pastiche, a play on signs with no reference beyond the commodity' (Mackay eds 1997).

General speaking, identity can be constructed by various aspects. Especially under a multi-layer consumption regulation. In Singapore, M1 is one of the largest mobile phone companies. It offers different promotions each month. The conditions and regulations of these promotions are to sign up a contract with M1, for instance a monthly contract,, which is a common way of paying bills. As for customers, one of the most attractive advantages is to get a new mobile phone. Even though the choices of mobile phones are limited, most of them are updated models, which are expensive if they are sold without a contract. So customers literally benefit from the promotion as they do not have to pay for a new phone. However, the mobile phone they get may not be the one they love or ardently wanted. As Miller stresses 'it gives an illusion of consumer choice, but only to those who have the money to buy, and that its orientation to profit can be as much at the expense of consumers as to their benefit' (Mackay eds 1997). If the mobile phone is considered as a product, which constructs identity, in M1's case, the identities of some customers may not be formed accurately. Moreover, Miller criticises consumers that play a passive role in the process of consumption. He says, 'consumption, then, is more than just purchasing, it is better understood as a struggle which begins with the problem that in the modern world we increasingly live with institutions and objects that we do not see ourselves as having created' (Mackay eds 1997).

On the other hand, in Ohmae's opinion, 'you were "born not to belong but to buy"' (cited in du Gay eds 1997b). It seems to Ohmae that the situation of consumers is not only passive, but also helpless. If customers' choices are merely based on the few limited models of the mobile phone, if identity is formed by the product that consumers consume, then in other words, identity will be districted by Nokia 6280; Motorola V; etc.

Mackay's opinion on the relationship between consumption and identity is a contradiction. First of all, he agrees that the terms consumption and identity are of relevance. Secondly, he claims that 'our identity is made up by our consumption of goods – and their consumption and display constitute our expression of taste' (Mackay eds 1997). However, Mackay denies the idea that identity is reflected by the product that consumers consume directly. As he argues 'identity is less malleable and cannot be so easily changed simply by purchasing goods; and, although goods have a communicational or symbolic value, they also have a materiality' (Mackay eds 1997).

The term taste is used to 'describe a particular physical sense [which] is an everyday occurrence' (Bennett et al 2005). Generalyl speaking, taste is one element that reflects a person's preference. It is not formed innately, but by a person's experience, educational background, and various aspects. According to Williams' suggestion, 'taste cannot now be separated from the idea of the consumer' (cited in Bennett et al 2005).

TECHNOLOGY AND EVERYDAY LIFE

In Durkheim and Alvin Gouldner's opinion, everyday life is 'involving things that happen on a day-to-day basis and that are not especially marketed out and defined as somehow "out of the ordinary" (Inglis 2005). On the other hand, Nettleton and Watson define everyday life as 'about the production and reproduction of bodies' (1998).

Everyday life is a sort of human experience, which is to confirm something has happened and certain problems have been solved. According to Williams, Featherstone, and Burrows 'wider societal developments may precipitate interest in

the body, and indeed impact upon how bodies are experienced, is the advent of new technologies' (Nettleton and Watson 1998).

Just like other texts, Mackay considers technologies as encoded and decoded. In the case of encoded ones, it refers to their design, styling, and marketing. On the other hand, in the case of decoded ones, it is based on what they mean to their consumers (Mackay eds 1997). The relationship between technology and everyday life is inseparable. Technology plays a crucial role in everyday life, even every minute. Technologies, such as mobile phones, may not be compulsory but it would be better to have one. In the second case study, Haruyo Kusumi stresses that 'if possible, I wish I didn't have one'. It seems to her that the existence of a mobile phone is superfluous. In Haruyo Kusumi's case, she has to have one in order to be contactable by her friends and family. In other words, she is forced to have a mobile phone. de Certeau criticizes 'everyday life [which] invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others' (1988). As he states, 'the investigation of everyday practices was first delimited negatively by the necessity of not locating cultural difference in groups associated with the "counter-culture" –groups that were already singled out, often privileged, and already partly absorbed into folklore –and that were no more than symptoms or indexes' (1988).

On the other hand, in Giddens' point of view, modern technology offers security to its users (Inglis 2005). He points out that 'to use more modern technology, the individual needs a certain sense of psychological security, to the effect that the world around him or her is relatively predictable and understandable and is not just totally chaotic' (Inglis 2005). Inglis' idea could be true for certain people, if the mobile phone is an indispensable technology of everyday life. In the first case study, Cornelius Segun OJO claims that he can go out without watch and wallet, but he feels empty and helpless if he does not bring his mobile phone with him. If the purpose of using a mobile phone is to seek for psychological security, in order to ensure that the world is predictable and understandable, this thought is too emotional and illogical. Even through Miller argues that technology is 'an artefact which is designed or used to achieve some human purpose' (Mackay eds 1997). These sorts of purposes can be relied on the functional purposes.

CONCLUSION

The role of the mobile phone depends on each case. People from different backgrounds, countries, and cultures may have conflicting understanding of the existence of mobile phones. No matter which role the mobile phone is playing, it cannot be considered as a representation of identity. However, there is no denying that the mobile phone is a social technology, which has its own meaning. As de Gay et al put it, 'we can use the concept to think about it, or use the word (or image or drawing or sculpture or whatever) as a sign or symbol which we can communicate about to other people in a variety of different contexts, even though we may never have owned or operated one. It belongs to our culture because we have constructed for it a little world of meaning; and thin bringing of the object *into* meaning is what constitutes it as a cultural *artefact* (1997a).' Under the multi-layer social conditions, it could be too simply by saying that identity becomes what consumers consume.

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