Use and Adoption of Website and Social Media Marketing: Insights from Homestay Business Owners

*Faiz Izwan Anuar, Wang Qian Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia *faizwanuar@uitm.edu.my, wangqian@std22.cn Corresponding Author: Faiz Izwan Anuar

Abstract: This qualitative inquiry delves into the transformative impact of digital technology adoption, specifically websites and social media, on the operational and promotional strategies of homestay business owners in Negeri Sembilan within the burgeoning technology-driven tourism sector. It critically examines the integration of these digital tools into marketing and communication frameworks, evaluates their role in enhancing business visibility and shaping public perceptions, and offers comprehensive insights into the associated benefits and challenges. Initial results indicate that the adoption of websites has significantly redefined marketing paradigms by broadening customer outreach and intensifying engagement, while social media has been instrumental in increasing visibility and improving interactive communications with prospective clients. However, this digital transition also poses challenges, including the need for continuous content development and bridging the digital skills gap.

Keywords: Website Adoption, Social Media Marketing, Homestay Tourism, Business Owners, Heritage

1. Introduction and Background

Tourism in rural areas is inextricably linked to community-based tourism (CBT), a model that hinges on active community involvement to flourish. To catalyze industry growth, it is critical to integrate local community initiatives, such as homestay programs, that tap into the indigenous potential of these areas. Recognizing this potential since 1995, the government has championed homestays as a key sustainable economic driver, necessitating a synergistic effort from interconnected stakeholders to ensure its enduring success (Mapjabil & Che Ismail, 2012; Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2022; Kumar, 2024).

This investigation, therefore, scrutinizes the deployment of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) within one of Malaysia's eminent CBT offerings – the homestay program. Officially designated as the Malaysian Homestay Experience Program and inaugurated by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts, and Culture (MOTAC) in 1995, this initiative aligns with the broader CBT framework. The program's raison d'être is to galvanize rural community engagement in tourism ventures and to curb the rural-to-urban migration trend (Fresnoza, 2021). Moreover, Nor and Burridge (2020) highlight the program's strategic focus on promoting the distinctive cultural and heritage tapestry of Malaysia to a global audience.

Homestays are esteemed for their long-term viability as rural tourism offerings, fostering a sense of community integration and cultural immersion among tourists. Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition, homestays are commonly depicted as accommodation where tourists are lodged within resident homes, enabling authentic encounters and interactions with the host community, thus providing guests with a genuine sense of inclusion, familial engagement, and cultural exposure at an economical rate (Kuhzady et al., 2020; Kulshreshtha & Kulshrestha, 2019). In essence, as defined by Ngo & Pham (2023), a homestay experience involves a guest residing with a local family, facilitating an intimate understanding of the locale's way of life.

Problem Statement

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) harbors the capacity to substantially broaden opportunities for local communities by enhancing tourism resources, catalyzing new business ventures, fostering product innovation, augmenting tourist inflow and foreign income, and contributing to overarching economic development (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; Cavalheiro et al., 2020; Gong et al., 2023). Despite this, the nuanced dimensions of homestay branding, the nexus between homestays and entrepreneurship, ICT proficiency among homestay proprietors, and training in sustainable operational practices are markedly underexplored in the prevailing academic discourse, particularly within the Asia Pacific context (Janjua et al., 2021).

This scholarly deficit necessitates a methodical empirical examination of community informatics utilization

among homestay operators. The study advocates for an evolved paradigm grounded in community informatics theory, which postulates the Internet's role as not merely an informational nexus but also a critical instrument for transformation. This research endeavors to dissect various facets: the technologies employed by homestay proprietors, their motives for technology adoption, the consequent impact on their enterprise, the hurdles encountered in technology utilization, and the influence of technology on consumer bookings. Moreover, it investigates who stewards their web presence and social media, identifies the pivotal features or tools within their digital arsenal, and delineates how they gauge technological efficacy in business enhancement.

Such an inquisition is pivotal, as there is an observed scarcity of scholarly inquiry focusing explicitly on community informatics application by operators within the Malaysian Homestay Tourism Programme (HTP). A profound comprehension of the tribulations homestay operators face in adopting and leveraging community informatics via ICT could yield multifaceted benefits. The study's outcomes aspire to extend beyond academic enrichment by amplifying the extant literature; they are posited to impart tangible advantages to homestay operators and governmental frameworks alike. Thus, this study's purview encompasses both theoretical expansion and practical application, each of which merits exploration and discussion. Consequently, this research articulates the following queries: What are the perceptions of business owners regarding website adoption and social media usage within the Negeri Sembilan homestay sector? Additionally, what are the observed ramifications of such digital integration on the homestay businesses therein?

2. Literature Review

Homestay Tourism

The concept of a rural homestay is distinguished as an alternative form of accommodation, offering tourists the unique opportunity to reside within host communities during their visits to rural locales. Scholarly attention has been directed towards the effects and perceptions of both guests and homestay operators, encompassing aspects such as service quality, destination activities, cultural exchange, culinary experiences, and infrastructural elements.

Utami et al. (2023) propose that variables like leadership acumen, community support, and entrepreneurial skillsets are crucial in the development of community-based tourism in rural settings, necessitating robust backing from both local stakeholders and government entities to drive the success of rural homestay tourism. This community engagement is fundamental to the tourism dynamic, as posited by Simarmata & Wijaya, (2024), hence a significant focus is placed on enhancing homestay services to bolster rural tourism.

From a Malaysian perspective, the Homestay Program (HP), initiated in 2014, is designed to propagate the concept of homestays across the nation expansively. Managed by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC), this program aspires to immerse visitors in the day-to-day culture and lifestyle of local communities. It is tailored for diverse traveller demographics, encompassing families, students, and corporate groups, offering a more personalized travel experience compared to other countries (Malaysia Homestay Experience, 2014). Moreover, Ramli et al. (2015) examined the sustainability criteria of Malaysia's rural homestay program, finding that operators should concentrate on developing capabilities, and leadership qualities, and harnessing community resources to achieve and maintain sustainability.

Social Media Marketing of Homestay

The utility of social media in contemporary organizational marketing is pivotal for profitability enhancement. Defined as a multifaceted Internet communication tool, social media facilitates market interaction, and information dissemination, and harnesses collective intelligence through crowdsourcing (Sivarajah et al., 2020). Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube are prime examples of social media's capacity for relationship-building and marketing outreach.

In the context of high-end brands and services, social media's pervasiveness has revolutionized the marketing paradigm from traditional methodologies to a digitalized marketing approach (Ndirangu, 2023). The tourism industry is no exception, with social platforms enabling content sharing among users, thus enhancing brand visibility and information exchange (Moche, 2023). As elucidated by Sfetcu (2024), the instantaneity of text, image, audio, and video transmission via social networks, photo-sharing sites, online communities,

microblogging tools, and video-sharing services epitomizes social media's versatility. However, a deficit in awareness, information, and proficiency can mitigate expected business outcomes, highlighting the necessity for incentive programs that bolster social media skills for promotion and sales (Dimitrova, 2024).

Perception and Attitude of Using Social Media

Homestay operators' social media use is influenced by both internal and external factors. Notably, positive engagement with social media can foster business growth, while misuse could potentially lead to business decline. Evans et al. (2021) identified key factors such as perceived usefulness, ease of use, trust, and overall attitude towards social media, which influence homestay operators' intentions to integrate these platforms into their business strategies in Malaysia.

The inaugural determinant in the adoption of social media by homestay operators is trust: there exists a consensus among them that the platforms are secure and safeguarded for use. This foundational trust is imperative for operators who must feel confident in the digital environment in which they promote their services. The second determinant is usability; operators commonly perceive social media as user-friendly and effortless to navigate. This ease of use is crucial, as it reduces the barrier to entry for homestay proprietors engaging with digital marketing tools. However, it is underscored that adequate training and support are essential to empower them to proficiently manage their social media accounts and capitalize on the platforms' full potential.

The third determinant is the perceived utility of social media in enhancing business operations. Homestay operators contend that leveraging social media significantly improves various facets of their job performance, from marketing to customer interaction. This perceived utility underscores the multifaceted role of social media as a tool not only for promotion but also as an integral component of operational efficiency in the homestay sector.

Website Adoption

Websites serve as quintessential marketing tools, delivering comprehensive branding, product descriptions, and customer-centric information. In the era of the Internet of Things (IoT), technological engagement in media has become vital for promoting rural homestay tourism. Local community involvement is instrumental in elevating their homestay offerings as desirable tourism destinations (Pradhan, 2021).

Razamin Ramli et al. (2019) introduced a novel web system termed the Collaborative-Based Web Recommender System (CBWRS), amalgamating community-based tourism with the tourism supply chain system. This collaborative venture aims to amalgamate individual homestay websites, thereby amplifying their service visibility on an international scale. The research by Razamin Ramli et al. (2019) asserts that such an integrated website is pivotal within the Community-Based Tourism Supply Chain (CBTSC), offering rural homestay operators and users a strategic tool that influences user engagement and decision-making processes.

3. Methodology

This inquiry utilized a qualitative research methodology, anchoring its approach on semi-structured interviews with homestay owners from Negeri Sembilan engaged with the *'Jom Poei Homestay Negeri Sembilan'* Program. This program, under the auspices of MOTAC, informed the random selection of ten participants for the study. The interview framework was partitioned into four critical segments: (1) respondents' narratives, (2) website utilization, (3) social media engagement, (4) the consequential effects of digital tool adoption, and (5) the challenges identified by homestay owners in applying marketing and communication technologies.

These interview sessions were conducted through Google Meet and phone calls throughout May 2023. Questions were curated for clarity and ease of comprehension, with NVIVO software employed to ensure precision in data analysis.

Research Design and Data Collection

The qualitative nature of the study is oriented towards eliciting a profound comprehension of the contextual realities through narrative sharing, as opposed to a quantitative cause-and-effect analysis (Mirhosseini, 2020;

Ruffa & Evangelista, 2021). Data were collected through interviews, using a multi-source approach to corroborate findings. Traditional document analysis supplemented the verbal data. Each participant engaged in one interview session, lasting about one hour, with a combination of structured and open-ended questions, all intended to illuminate the research questions through comparative analysis of the respondents' experiences.

Interviews

As suggested by Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021), interviewing serves as a pivotal method for validating observational data. Patton (1990) delineates six question types contributing to comprehensive research understanding: experiences/behaviors, opinions/values, feelings, knowledge, sensory responses, and demographic backgrounds. These diverse questioning strategies are employed to facilitate participants' detailed perceptions regarding the adoption and impact of websites and social media on their businesses.

The study's cohort comprised ten homestay business proprietors from Negeri Sembilan, representing a mixture of community and private homestays. Snowball sampling was utilized, including an equitable gender distribution. There were five male and five female homestay owners participated in the study. Respondent demographics included owners from various local homestays, with the interviews being facilitated through Google Meet and direct phone calls. Four respondents from Lonek homestay. Two are homestay owners from Sungai Buluh homestay including respondents from Pachitan, Lenggeng Riverside, Klawang, and D'Pelandok Best homestay.

Research Procedures

Initial participant selection was guided by snowball sampling due to the anonymity of potential respondents. The interview process, conducted both online and via phone, involved both structured and unstructured dialogue. All conversations were recorded to maintain data integrity, with each respondent contributing a single session of insights.

Data analysis, an integral component of qualitative research, began with verifying the accuracy of interview transcripts against original audio recordings. Coding was undertaken extensively, with the constant comparative method (Naeem et al., 2023) employed to systematically evaluate the data. Analysis revolved around the research questions, focusing on respondents' experiences and opinions related to digital tool adoption. The research team meticulously assessed the interviews and supporting data to discern patterns and discrepancies, ultimately synthesizing the findings to present a nuanced understanding of the digital implementation's positive and negative impacts on business operations.

4. Research Findings

This investigation sought to discern homestay business owners' perceptions of the impact resulting from the adoption of websites and social media for their enterprises. The study reveals that technology adoption is largely influenced by operators' experiential narratives and examines both the facilitative and inhibitory effects of digital tools on business operations.

The synthesized data culminated in the identification of five predominant perceptions among homestay owners regarding the adoption of digital platforms: Information Service, Connectivity, Target Market, Accessibility, and the Management of Over-Expectations and Negative Feedback. It was observed that these perceptions manifested both positively and negatively in the business context.

Two distinct impact categories emerged regarding technological integration into business practices. The positive influences include enhanced customer service, digital tools serving as potent influencers, and the promotion of professional business image. Conversely, the negative ramifications entail a deficit in expertise, an increased temporal investment in content management, and unsystematic information dissemination.

Homestay Business Owners' Perception of Technology Use

Information Service: The provision of information services emerged as a highly acknowledged benefit by the majority of respondents. The pivotal role of this service lies in its capacity to efficiently disseminate business-related information to the public, aiding in achieving market penetration goals. Despite a variation in the valuation of digital tools, with a preference for websites over social media by some respondents, the consensus affirms the necessity of an online presence. The data indicates that websites are deemed indispensable for business operations, engendering customer trust and acting as an authoritative source of information about homestay offerings.

"I see the use of websites as a must for businesses to provide information about their products or services"

"The use of a website to deliver information because the functions are easy to access".

"I agree to have a website managed by the government to convince guests that my homestay is registered and active. Other than that the website can be used to give information about my homestay".

Three out of ten respondents use social media for their homestay business. According to them, the use of social media like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok will give more benefits and are much easier to manage compared to complicated websites or platforms.

"I prefer social media to create awareness among social media users about my homestays".

"I realize that social media has become an important and useful platform for information search and virality".

"Social media is the great influence tool for business use" "am using social media to advertise and promote my homestay. Social media has proved great digital marketing to build social networks, accessible, and quick information transfer".

"I can see the difference when I am using social media to promote my homestay continuously and it reaches more audience engagement and fast information delivery".

"I agree to have a website managed by the government to convince guests that my homestay is registered and active. Other than that, the website can be used to give information about my homestay".

Accessibility: Respondents unanimously acknowledged the value of digital tools' accessibility. This characteristic permits information retrieval at any time and place, catering to the modern reliance on smartphones and apps for information. Digital accessibility thus empowers business owners to consistently update information, engage in promotional activities, and cultivate customer interactions, consequently expanding their business reach. Most of the respondents acknowledge that the accessibility of digital tools ensures they frequently update information, conduct advertising, improve interaction and achieve target market. This allows them to expand their business.

"From the information obtained on the website, I am confident it can attract customer interest to stay in my homestay".

"I saw today that digital devices are commonly used by people of all ages; this creates opportunities for me to approach the target market and to get involved in digital tools for my business promotion and advertising".

"Social media is accessible and functional to use. The system meets people's requirements from time to time and is easy to access on all devices. There are many attractive functions on social media. This is a factor that attracts people to use the apps".

Connectivity: Connectivity was acknowledged as a beneficial attribute of digital tool adoption, enabling accessibility across various devices and fostering the creation of social communities. The omnipresence of connectivity not only simplifies information procurement for customers but also facilitates the formation of global relationships through interactive engagements.

"The connectivity function can maintain the use of it among the organization, business and personal. I saw today that use is widely used from all ages".

"It was a quick communication, information, and advertising function. Social media allows me to respond fast to any inquiry or comment".

"In marketing, social media can reach out to a bigger audience which gives high potential to achieve market

target. In communication strategy, the useful of social media for me to interact and reply to the audience fast".

Homestay Tourism Target Market: The strategic deployment of technology in business is predominantly aimed at capturing the homestay target market. Operators posited that the use of websites and social media significantly elevates service awareness, acting as a catalyst for business enhancement through creative and interactive content dissemination.

"Social media success creates awareness about homestay and attracts guests to stay".

"Using social media will help to create awareness about my service (homestay). That causes the sharing of content from us to followers and from followers to others. This gives a high chance to attract potential guests".

"To create awareness among media social users about my homestays. Social media is seen as a great influence tool for business use". The special function tools in social media give opportunities for respondents to create creative and attractive content and posting."

Managing Expectation: The study uncovered the double-edged sword of using technology to shape customer expectations. While digital content effectively captures audience interest, it can also spawn over expectations, posing challenges for business owners in managing customer perceptions.

"Using social media will help to promote and advertise my homestay. This gives a high chance to attract potential quests. But sometimes the use of it also causes over-expectation among customers about the homestay".

"This is a bit of a challenge for us to make them understand. However, I always try to achieve customer expectations".

Controlling Negative Feedback: An unanticipated challenge that emerged was the management of negative feedback across digital platforms, which can markedly affect business reputation and customer decision-making. Most respondents said that controlling negative comments is hard and causes bad impacts on the business.

"The serious negative impact is to control the negative comment".

"The possibility to influence other people is higher. However, it is hard to avoid negative comments".

"This is a bit of a challenge for us to make them understand. However, I always try to achieve customer expectations".

Impacts of Technology Use on Homestay Business

Influential Digital Tools: Digital tools, notably social media, have been recognized as influential factors in business promotion and visibility, providing rapid and cost-effective avenues for customer engagement. All respondents agreed the use of social media can gain more advantages in time and save cost.

"A huge social network can be created in social media. The delivery and sharing of information, promotion and advertising are efficient for the business. The zero cost to open a social media account saves a lot of business financials to focus on other parts".

"Social media is known as the domain influence tool nowadays. it can influence people with content upload. The business became visible and from that the business received more booking orders, especially on public holidays". "The customer engagement in social media also became a factor homestay social media can influence the audience".

"Yes. I need to be active in social media by creating and uploading content and adding more friends to increase my social media engagement. High engagement will help me brand my homestay".

Enhancing Customer Service: The study indicates that technology serves as a conduit for improved customer service, providing barrier-free communication channels for pre-, during, and post-stay interactions. While using social media, the audience can put their inquiry in a comment session or personal direct message (DM).

"Direct online communication allows two-way communication that can save time and cost and manage a discussion on the spot".

"The interaction allows me to manage social customer service and build good relationships with potential customers".

Professionalism: The utilization of technology is also indicative of a business's professionalism, with websites and social media serving as proxies for showcasing business experience and credibility.

"Because the use of websites is still relevant for future business. It shows the business professionality and experience to convince guests".

"Yes, it is very important because active homestay social media can show the audience that the homestay is active, and experienced and can convince quests about the business".

"Homestay operators who have been running this business for a long time agree that the use of websites and social media can maintain their business in this field".

Challenges in Technology Adoption

Expertise Deficit: A significant barrier identified was the lack of expertise in technology utilization, resulting in suboptimal management and performance of digital platforms.

"Next is a lack of knowledge about the social media function. As we know every year they change or upgrade functions to better use experience for social media apps. It is very challenging to keep track of the change due to the age factor".

"The lack of information will give a bad interpretation about homestay even though the homestay has made a lot of improvement".

Time Investment for Content Management: Respondents articulated the heightened time investment required for content creation and management, particularly for visually compelling materials like videos.

"It takes a long time for me to create video content because it needs proper editing".

"The other factor is that because of their permanent work, they need more time to upload content".

"The problem I face is the consistency in creating and uploading new content due to my other permanent work. The higher time spent for creating content will affect the social engagement for the homestay business owners who use social media in particular compared to website".

Systematic Discrepancies: Instances of unsystematic information handling were noted, particularly when homestay operations were managed by third-party or government platforms (Agoda, Trivago, Booking.com, etc), leading to booking overlaps and miscommunications.

"Development of a website needs someone who has knowledge and experience to handle it. That is because the lack of knowledge is unable to align the system properly".

"The website use has contributed to the homestay guest increase, because of that the website should be managed well".

"The nonuniform system website development may hurt booking such as inaccurate information and the system shut down".

"The government-managed websites are good. But there is a lack of information on the website such as the homestay room has been added now and has not been updated. Another is the overlapping booking order because miscommunication with homestay owners sometimes happens".

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to conduct an empirical investigation into the utilization of community informatics by homestay operators and to propose a strategic approach grounded in community informatics theory. This approach reconceptualizes the Internet as a multifunctional tool, extending beyond mere information dissemination to a pivotal instrument for business growth.

Through interviews with homestay owners, the study aimed to extract and analyze the resultant data for substantive findings. It emerged from the study that websites remain a critical and enduring asset for

businesses looking to the future. This perspective was embodied by one of the respondents, who underscored the intrinsic value of websites in nurturing customer relationships and facilitating business expansion. Websites serve as a digital narrative space, allowing homestay owners to showcase their accommodations and affirm their presence in the market. Moreover, websites deliver multidimensional benefits not only to the owners but also to prospective guests by providing a plethora of informative and interactive sections. The availability and detail of such information influence guests' decisions, potentially leading them to opt for the homestay experience, thereby bolstering business growth and online visibility.

Furthermore, the research revealed the economic feasibility of website adoption for homestay owners. There is an emerging trend among some operators to independently create websites or to participate in collective development efforts, often supported by governmental training and workshops. These cost-effective strategies allow owners to harness the benefits of online presence without substantial financial outlay. The research quotes a respondent, reflecting on the utility of free website versions that offer both convenience and functionality without incurring costs, highlighting the financial prudence of such platforms.

In the realm of professionalism, the study delves into the critical importance of professional input in website businesses and its correlation with meeting guest expectations. Professionalism, as reflected through well-crafted websites, establishes a trusting rapport with potential guests and communicates a commitment to quality service provision. A respondent suggested that a professional website is not just a business tool but a symbol of business acumen, indicative of the homestay's dedication to delivering an exceptional guest experience.

Simultaneously, the discussion touches upon the challenges homestay operators may face in managing online bookings and content, particularly when reliant on third-party or governmental platforms. The potential for booking overlaps and the dynamic nature of content necessitate vigilant management and timely updates to maintain accuracy and prevent miscommunication. Importantly, the findings underscore the complex yet rewarding nature of digital integration within the homestay industry. Websites and social media emerge as dual pillars supporting the structure of modern homestay marketing and guest engagement strategies. Simultaneously, the study acknowledges the intricate challenges that accompany digital adoption, emphasizing the need for expertise, time, and systematic approaches to leverage technology effectively within the tourism domain

5. Managerial Implications, Recommendations and Conclusion

The integral role of website development and social media in the realm of homestay businesses has been unequivocally affirmed. Websites, as the linchpin for information dissemination and reservation facilitation, coupled with the dynamic and interactive capabilities of social media platforms, constitute essential facets of modern homestay business operations. These digital tools enable homestay entities to fortify their online presence, enhance guest engagement, amplify booking opportunities, and secure a competitive edge in the hospitable industry. The adoption of digital strategies and keeping pace with technological evolution emerge as pivotal elements for sustained growth and prosperity in the homestay sector.

Technology, beyond its capability to vividly showcase products and services economically, plays a pivotal role in capital accumulation, advancing the quality of scientific research institutions, and boosting international competitiveness, as articulated by Çalışkan (2015). Moreover, technology acts as a catalyst for cultural development within communities. This investigation was steered to discern the perceptions of homestay business owners in Negeri Sembilan on the impact wielded by website integration and social media utilization. It offers an in-depth exposition of the business owners' perspectives on digital adoption and delineates the dualistic impact—beneficial and adverse—on their ventures.

Data gleaned from ten diverse homestay operators, acquired through meticulous snowball sampling and analyzed via interviews conducted via Google Meet and phone, unveiled that while digital adoption amplifies customer service and projects professionalism, it also brings challenges such as skill deficiencies, time investment, and unsystematic information management.

This research underscores the necessity for a multifaceted data collection approach in qualitative studies, potentially informing policy development for the Malaysian government, particularly the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (MOTAC), and Tourism Malaysia. The insights may catalyze enhancements in the tourism sector's performance, with a focus on Negeri Sembilan's homestay tourism, and by extension, the broader Malaysian context.

The study successfully met its objectives, elucidating the significance of social media in targeting and engaging desired demographics, notably Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. The potent connectivity fostered by social media is an indispensable asset for marketing, branding, and promotion in the homestay industry, enabling businesses to cultivate meaningful relationships with potential guests and effectively navigate the competitive market landscape.

Anticipating that this study will contribute pragmatic marketing insights to homestay operators, the expectation is that such strategies will enhance tourist arrivals, both domestic and international. Moreover, the implications of this study should be acknowledged by governmental and tourism entities, as they bear the potential to elevate tourists' experiences within Malaysia. Future inquiries may delve into evaluating the effectiveness and satisfaction levels of tourists concerning digital platforms, examining whether enhancements made by homestay operators based on these findings will streamline reservation processes and attract a larger influx of guests to homestays

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