

NEGOTIATING RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION DISCOURSE: A Study of Acehnese Hijab TikTokers

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Abstract: This study examines how these creators actively negotiate religious identity within the algorithmic and performative structure of TikTok. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through documentation of video content, captions, user comments, and online news, then analyzed thematically. The findings reveal that identity negotiation occurs through the strategic blending of Islamic markers such as hijab styles, Qur'anic phrases, modest aesthetics with local Acehnese cultural cues and popular TikTok formats including lipsync, short skits, and reflective storytelling. These dynamics highlight that religious identity online is co-constructed between creators and viewers. The study calls for strengthening digital religious literacy and encourages further research on gendered ethics and visual politics in contemporary Islamic expression.

Keywords: Acehnese Muslimah, Digital Communication, Hijab Representation, Religious Identity, TikTok Narratives

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Introduction

The development of social media has created understanding of religious identity construction in a new space for individuals to display self-digital context that is strongly tied to locality and identity openly and dynamically. In Indonesia, Islamic culture. The focus on Acehnese hijab TikTok is one of the platforms with the TikTokers provides a new contribution in bringing highest number of users, reaching more than together media studies, local culture, and critical 109 million active users by 2024 according to the We Are Social report.¹ In Aceh, in province that enforces Islamic law, the phenomenon of hijab-wearing TikTokers has emerged as a unique form of religious self-expression while still keeping up with the digital flow.² The content uploaded by Acehnese hijab TikTokers not only reflects Islamic values, but also represents Acehnese local culture through language choices, clothing styles, and religious quotes used. This phenomenon becomes increasingly important to study because it involves the dynamics between digital modernity and local-religious traditions. Identities that were previously bound to social norms are now renegotiated in the globalized and algorithmic virtual space of Viachaslau Filimonau.³ Thus, it is necessary to understand how hijab-wearing women content creators in Aceh construct religious narratives and build self-image in a highly competitive social media landscape.

Several previous studies have examined religious representation on social media, but their focus remains limited. A study by Rochmah highlighted how popular Islamic content on TikTok tends to be emotional yet theologically shallow.⁴ Meanwhile, Nabilah explored the phenomenon of digital da'wah through Instagram but did not investigate in depth the local dynamics such as those occurring in Aceh.⁵⁶ Research by Scavarelli emphasized the importance of religious symbols in shaping the identity of

young Muslim women, but did not focus on the negotiation process between local cultural values and digital algorithms.⁷ An evaluation of these earlier studies reveals a lack of attention to contextual dimensions, particularly how religious identity is constructed by TikTokers within social environments marked by strong religious and cultural pressures, as found in Aceh. Therefore, this study is essential in enriching the understanding of religious identity construction within a digital context that is deeply tied to locality and Islamic culture. Focusing on hijab-wearing TikTokers from Aceh offers a novel contribution that critically intersects media studies, local culture, and religious discourse.

The uniqueness of this research lies in its ability to combine three analytical fields that are rarely brought together in depth: social media algorithms, religious identity, and the locality of Aceh as a region with a strong Islamic character. First, this study does not merely view Acehnese hijabers as content producers, but positions them as actors who consciously negotiate religious identity within a space shaped by TikTok's algorithmic logic an approach that has not been widely used in studies of digital Muslim women. Second, this study emphasizes local contextuality, namely how Acehnese cultural symbols such as language, sharia clothing, and regional Islamic narratives are used to construct a religious image that differs from the representation of hijabers in other regions of Indonesia. Third, this study combines performativity analysis with audience response, so that it not only assesses how identity is displayed, but also how that identity is interpreted, praised, or criticized by the digital community.

This research has three main objectives examining the negotiation of religious identity by Acehnese hijab TikTokers. First, to explore the consistency of religious symbols and local culture in their self-representation, including the use of syar'i hijab, Acehnese language, and religious quotes that are part of their daily content.

Second, analyzing the digital communication strategies they use to align Islamic values with global trends on TikTok, such as the use of lipsync format, daily vlog, and Islamic storytelling. Third, identifying audience responses to these representations of religious identity, both in the form of appreciation and criticism, which are recorded through digital interactions such as comments, likes, and shares. These three objectives aim to uncover the hidden dynamics between religious authenticity and performativity in the digital world. This study also examines how Acehnese Muslim women utilize social media as a space for participation and representation. By examining these three aspects, the researcher seeks to understand the complexity of negotiating religious identity in everyday practices framed by digital technology.

Religion, as a system of values and practices, never exists in a vacuum, but always interacts with the surrounding social and cultural context. In the digital era, religion undergoes a significant transformation due to mediatization, which causes the meaning of religious symbols to become increasingly fluid and performative.⁸ Social media such as TikTok allows religious practices to appear in visual and entertainment forms, often blending proselytization, aesthetics and lifestyle.⁹ On the other hand, religious content on these platforms is also bound by the logic of algorithms, namely how a content can go viral and reach a wider audience. This makes religious performance on social media not only seen as a spiritual expression, but also as Horbans communication and personal branding strategy.¹⁰ Consequently, religion is no longer only practiced sacredly, but also performed, assessed and negotiated in Bos's digital public space.¹¹ This study rests on the understanding that religion in social media is not only a matter of proselytization, but also representation, identity, and value negotiation.

In this context, Islamic teachings provide relevant guidelines, as stated in Al-Qur'an surah An-Nahl verse 125:

“Invite people to the path of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and engage them in dialogue in the best and gentlest manner. Indeed, your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path, and He knows best who has been guided.”

This passage also emphasizes the importance of conveying religious messages in a wise and appealing manner, aligned with the strategies used by TikTokers to creatively package Islamic preaching (*da'wah*) in digital media. Thus, their activity is not merely personal, but also carries elements of contemporary *da'wah* that merit deeper exploration within the framework of religious communication in the digital age.

The researcher argues that the negotiation of religious identity by Acehnese hijab TikTokers is not a static or simplistic process, but rather an adaptive strategy in facing the complexities of social media and the cultural pressures of their local environment. In the Acehnese context where Sharia law and strong social control prevail hijab wearing TikTokers must perform various adjustments to remain socially accepted while still maintaining a digital presence. They do not merely represent religious identity; instead, they reconstruct it through creative and contextual visual narratives. Therefore, this study seeks to answer how such negotiation processes take place, who the involved actors and audiences are, and what impact this has on the interpretation of religiosity in digital spaces. The researcher adopts the position that religious identity in digital media is a social construction that is continuously evolving and deeply shaped by both local and global contexts. With this framework, the research aims to fill a gap in the literature and offer a new perspective in the study of digital communication grounded in religious and cultural values.

The Dynamics of Religious Identity in the Digital Sphere

In the digital age, religious identity is no longer practiced solely in private or institutional spaces but is openly negotiated on social media platforms. In the context of Aceh, which enforces Islamic law as a local legal framework, the presence of hijab-wearing TikTokers has sparked debates about the authenticity and authority of Islamic expression.¹² TikTok, as a visual entertainment platform driven by algorithms, allows individuals to perform religious identity in more flexible and performative ways. However, this performativity is often met with ambivalence, especially when religious practices blend with elements of pop culture.¹³ Some netizens view these expressions as a form of contemporary *da'wah*, while others perceive them as diluting rigid Islamic values. Consequently, the narrative of what is considered “Islamic” becomes a contested arena in the digital space, where religious authority is no longer singular.¹⁴ This negotiation process reflects how religious identity is being redefined through the interaction between local values, global technologies, and individual preferences.

The identity of Acehnese women as representations of piety becomes a focal point in the debates surrounding hijab TikTokers. When women appear wearing hijab while dancing, lip-syncing, or following TikTok trends, they are not only scrutinized as individuals but also as symbols of public morality.¹⁵ Within the patriarchal cultural context and the value system of Aceh's sharia, the female body is often used as a measure of ethical and religious integrity.¹⁶ Many online comments demand that women's religious expressions align with public standards of modesty and the image of the “ideal Muslim woman.” These demands reveal how gender-based social expectations and moral control remain dominant, even as digital spaces offer greater freedom of expression.¹⁷ In this regard, hijab-wearing TikTokers face a double burden from both community judgment and the algorithmic

pressures of social media to perform attractively.¹⁸ These debates demonstrate that the religious identity of women on social media is not merely a personal matter, but also political and ideological.

The hijab TikTokers phenomenon in Aceh highlights the fragmentation of religious authority in the digital public sphere. Previously, religious authority was dominated by formal institutions such as clerics and sharia agencies, but now voices from ordinary citizens also have the power to shape public perceptions.¹⁹ Hijab-wearing TikTokers, with thousands or even millions of followers, have become new authoritative figures in conveying their own versions of religious values. They offer narratives of Islam that are more inclusive, popular, and accessible to younger generations.²⁰ Nevertheless, these narratives are not universally accepted, as they are seen by some as spreading religious misinformation or undermining established sharia values.²¹ The debate between traditional authority and these emerging discourses reveals the shifting dynamics of religious legitimacy in the digital era.²² This transformation marks a change in how Muslims, particularly Aceh's youth, understand and practice religion through algorithmic logic and horizontal communication.

Social media platforms like TikTok serve as spaces for dialogue as well as resistance against dominant norms, including in expressions of religiosity.²³ For Acehnese hijab TikTokers, these platforms provide an opportunity to display religious identity that is more fluid, creative, and personal, without always conforming to traditional structural constraints.²⁴ However, such freedom also brings consequences in the form of digital surveillance by conservative online communities. Comments, criticism, and even harassment become mechanisms of social control that dictate how religious expression is deemed legitimate.²⁵ In this context, the debate is not merely about the morality of content,

but also about who holds the right to interpret religion in the digital age.²⁶ This study illustrates that negotiating religious identity in the digital realm is not a linear process, but a continuous tug-of-war between personal expression, communal norms, and the logic of media algorithms.

Method

The focus of this study is to examine the negotiation of religious identity within the discourse of digital communication as presented by Acehnese hijab wearing TikTokers. This issue is significant due to the proliferation of religious content constructed through visual symbols and delivery styles on social media platforms such as TikTok. Hijab TikTokers from Aceh have attracted public attention for presenting a fusion of Islamic values and local culture within globally popular content formats. This phenomenon reflects that identity is not static, but constantly negotiated through imagery, strategies, and digital interaction.²⁷ In the context of Aceh, where Islamic law and culture are deeply rooted, this study reflects on how Islamic values are represented within the logic of algorithms and digital public expectations. Therefore, this research not only aims to reveal the forms of symbolic representation but also to trace how religious identity is shaped and received in the social media space.

This study adopts a qualitative-descriptive approach with an exploratory orientation to gain an in-depth understanding of how religious identity is negotiated by Acehnese hijab TikTokers. The descriptive approach is chosen because it enables the researcher to explain and illustrate phenomena in detail based on real and actual data available in the digital space.²⁸ The qualitative orientation is essential as the research does not aim to measure influence quantitatively but focuses on meaning, symbolism, communication strategies, and audience responses. The data used are non-numeric,

consisting of TikTok video content, captions, comments, and narratives from online news related to the selected accounts. The qualitative framework allows the researcher to capture the dynamics of religious representation as a living and evolving social construction. Through this approach, the study explores the interplay between Islamic symbols, digital performativity, and public perception in a nuanced manner.

The data sources in this study consist of TikTok video content, captions, user comments, and online news articles that provide information and public responses related to Acehese hijabi TikTokers. The data were purposively selected, focusing only on accounts and content that consistently display religious symbols, local cultural representation, and provoke public discourse through comment interactions or news coverage. Accounts such as @cutzuhra_official, @safiraamaliala, @herlinkenza02, @kakaalfarisi90, and @agipalaydrus are the main objects of study, as they explicitly and consistently demonstrate patterns of religious digital communication. Data selection was based on public accessibility, relevance to the research focus, and the potential of content to be analyzed thematically.²⁹ News articles were selected based on media credibility, recency, and relevance to digital identity construction. This method ensures that the data used are representative of the phenomenon being studied.

In this context, data collection was conducted through systematic online citation and saving links to news articles related to the religious representation of Acehese hijab TikTokers.³⁰ The process involved identifying relevant accounts, exploring video and caption content, and recording responses or comments for each post. TikTok content was documented through screenshots and narrative recording, including audio, text, and symbolic visuals. In addition, national and local online news articles discussing viral phenomena or controversies surrounding hijab

TikTokers from Aceh were collected as triangulation sources. The researcher also created classification tables for each account and content type to facilitate the analysis process. This technique enabled the collection of contextual, comprehensive, and traceable data systematically.

This study used a thematic analysis process emphasizing patterns of symbolic representation, communication strategies, and audience responses. The analysis involved rereading and reviewing all collected content, then identifying recurring and significant themes. Themes such as Islamic symbolism, local culture, digital strategy, and audience discourse were examined to uncover the narrative structure and meanings embedded in each piece of content. After initial coding, the data were categorized in tables based on thematic focus and the TikTok accounts that exhibited them.³¹ The researcher then interpreted the findings using representation theory (Stuart Hall) and the theory of the mediatization of religion (Stig Hjarvard). This stage aimed to produce a deep, contextual, and critical understanding of how religious identity is constructed within social media discourse among Acehnese Muslim women.

Results and Discussion

Acehnese hijab TikTokers consistently use Islamic symbols, such as the syar'i hijab, and religious quotes in their content as a form of negotiation of religious identity.



<i>@cutzuhra_official</i> Shari'a-compliant hijab, modest style	<i>@safiraamaliaa</i> Headscarf, Shari'a-compliant clothing	<i>@herlinkenza02</i> Shari'a-compliant hijab, Kaaba background	<i>@kakaalfarisi90</i> Long hijab, Arabic language backsound	<i>@agipalaydrus</i> Niqab, Mecca background, Arabic backsound
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Figure 1. Religious Symbols Displayed by TikTok Accounts

Figure 1 demonstrates how Acehnese hijab TikTokers consistently present religious symbols in their content as a form of expressing both religious and cultural identity. Accounts such as @cutzuhra_official and @safiraamaliaa_ showcase the syar'i hijab and modest clothing as distinct markers of devout Acehnese Muslim women. Meanwhile, accounts like @herlinkenza02 and @agipalaydrus reinforce religious impressions by displaying backgrounds of the Kaaba and Mecca, as well as incorporating Arabic-language audio with strong Islamic nuances. These symbols are not merely aesthetic elements, but also reflect the affirmation of religious identity framed within Acehnese cultural context. Thus, symbolic representation in their content serves as a strategic effort to negotiate religious positioning in an open and diverse digital space.

From the Figure, three main trends can be identified in how Acehnese hijab TikTokers represent religious and cultural identity. First, the dominance of Islamic visual symbols such as the syar'i hijab and niqab serve as primary markers of religiosity, shown explicitly in almost every account. Second, the reinforcement of sanctity through visual and audio cues appears in the use of backgrounds like the Kaaba or Mecca and music or voices in Arabic, which are associated with sacredness. Third, consistent modest dress and polite expression demonstrate that identity is not constructed through a single symbol but through a combination of appearance, narrative, and content atmosphere. These three trends show that creators are not merely displaying personal piety but also constructing a communicative religious persona for the digital public.

The analysis of consistent religious and cultural symbols in the content of Acehnese hijab TikTokers can be explained using Stuart Hall's theory of representation. According to Stuart Hall, representation is not simply a reflection of reality but an active process of constructing meaning through language, symbols,

and media.³² In this context, TikTokers do not merely reflect religious identity as a personal belief but actively construct meanings of Islam that can be accepted, consumed, and evaluated by a broad digital audience. They carefully select religious symbols deemed effective in communicating piety in aesthetically appealing formats that are algorithm- and audience-friendly.³³ Therefore, the representation of religious identity on TikTok is not passive but a product of value negotiation, visual strategy, and religious performativity occurring within an open and competitive digital communication space.³⁴

Table 1. Digital Communication Strategies of Acehnese Hijab TikTokers: Aligning Islamic Values with Global Trends

<i>TikTok Account</i>	<i>Popular Content Format Used</i>	<i>Adaptation Strategy to Global Trends</i>
<i>@cutzuhra_official</i>	<i>Religious lipsync, daily vlog, hijab fashion</i>	<i>Packaging light da'wah in the form of daily trends</i>
<i>@safiraamaliala_</i>	<i>Hijab tutorials, da'wah duets, daily stories</i>	<i>Using storytelling format with an Islamic tone</i>
<i>@herlinkenza02</i>	<i>Islamic fashion, religious lipsync</i>	<i>Aligning hijab fashion image with sacred symbols</i>
<i>@kakaalfarisi90</i>	<i>Dhikr recitations, Arabic lipsync, daily vlog</i>	<i>Utilizing viral backsounds with Islamic nuance</i>
<i>@agipalaydrus</i>	<i>Short sermon backsounds, hijrah motivation videos</i>	<i>Emphasizing pious imagery through sacred visual elements</i>

Source: Online news uploaded via Tiktok.

Table 1 illustrates the various digital communication strategies used by Acehnese hijabi TikTokers to align Islamic values with global formats and social media trends. Accounts like @cutzuhra_official and @safiraamaliaa_ utilize popular content styles such as religious lipsyncs, hijab tutorials, and daily stories with a light and relatable approach. They blend da'wah narratives with everyday trends to make their content appealing while still Islamic in tone. Meanwhile, @herlinkenza02 aligns her hijab fashion style with sacred symbols such as the Kaaba background, constructing a religious yet fashionable image. Accounts like @kakaalfarisi90 and @agipalaydrus emphasize spiritual content through dhikr, Arabic audio, and short sermons accompanied by sacred visuals like Mecca backgrounds or Islamic symbols. These strategies reflect the creative efforts of these TikTokers to bridge religious messages with presentation styles shaped by digital platform algorithms and audience preferences.

From the data presented, three main tendencies emerge in the digital communication strategies of Acehnese hijabi TikTokers. First, the use of popular formats as *da'wah* media such as lipsyncs, daily vlogs, and tutorials proves effective in packaging religious messages in a contemporary style that resonates with younger audiences. Second, the integration of sacred symbols with visual trends such as Kaaba backdrops or Arabic audio generates a strong religious image that is also aesthetically aligned with social media dynamics. Third, the personal approach through motivational content and hijrah narratives provides emotional depth and authenticity, strengthening the connection between creators and their followers. These three tendencies indicate that religious communication strategies on TikTok go beyond message delivery, shaping narratives that align with algorithmic expectations and the visual preferences of the digital age.

This phenomenon can be analyzed through the Mediatization

of Religion theory developed by Stig Hjarvard. According to Hjarvard, religion in the digital era undergoes transformation under the influence of media logic not just as a means of spreading religious messages, but as a space for constructing meaning and identity.³⁵ In this context, Acehnese hijabi TikTokers are not merely disseminating Islamic values; they are constructing Islamic imagery tailored to the formats, aesthetics, and rhythms of digital media. Mediatization transforms religious symbols like the hijab, prayer, and sermons from mere acts of worship into communicative elements curated to build identity, reach audiences, and remain relevant within social media algorithmz.³⁶ Thus, the digital communication strategies of these TikTokers can be understood as active adaptations to the transformed role of religion in a public sphere that is increasingly digital and visual.³⁷

Table 2. Audience Responses to the Representation of Religious Identity by Acehnese Hijab TikTokers

<i>TikTok Account</i>	<i>Positive Audience Responses</i>	<i>Negative Responses / Criticism</i>	<i>Emerging Discourse Patterns</i>
<i>@cutzuhra_official</i>	<i>"MasyaAllah, beautiful & graceful," "Strong hijrah vibes"</i>	<i>Minor critique: "Too much lipsyncing"</i>	<i>Appreciation of hijrah aesthetics and content consistency</i>
<i>@safiraamaliaa_</i>	<i>"Very helpful, sis," "Soothing tutorials"</i>	<i>Some comments on delivery being too formal</i>	<i>Discourse on the educational value of content</i>
<i>@herlinkenza02</i>	<i>"Aesthetic & Islamic," "Hijab goals!"</i>	<i>Criticized for "image crafting" and "excessive styling"</i>	<i>Discussion on da'wah vs personal branding</i>

<i>@kakaalfarisi90</i>	<i>"Such serene content," "Feels peaceful"</i>	<i>Minimal criticism, seen as natural</i>	<i>Appreciation of calm and reflective Islamic content</i>
<i>@agipalaydrus</i>	<i>"Ustazah vibes," "Full of meaning"</i>	<i>Minor critique on Arabic dubbing voice</i>	<i>Focus on the authenticity of visual religious symbols</i>

Source: Online news uploaded via Tiktok

Table 3 portrays various audience responses to the religious content presented by Acehnese hijabi TikTokers. Accounts such as @cutzuhra_official and @safiraamaliaa_ received praise for their inspirational and calming content, with comments like "*Mâ syâ'a Allâh, beautiful and graceful*" and "*The tutorial is so soothing.*" Meanwhile, @herlinkenza02's content drew both appreciation and criticism her hijab fashion aesthetic was admired, but also sparked comments about image construction. Content from @kakaalfarisi90 and @agipalaydrus was met mostly with positive responses praising its spiritual resonance and meaning, though minor critiques appeared, such as concerns about overuse of Arabic dubbing. These response patterns show that audiences evaluate not only the verbal content but also consider intent, style of delivery, and the appropriateness of religious symbols within the digital context.

Three main tendencies appear in how audiences respond to these representations of religious identity. First, there is a dominance of praise for aesthetically appealing religious visuals particularly those featuring modern hijrah styles which suggests that attractively packaged religiosity tends to receive positive reception. Second, criticism emerges when there is a perceived

sense of excessive performance or overly formal communication, leading to impressions that the content lacks authenticity or is produced merely for image-building. Third, the discourse extends beyond religious content itself, touching on branding and spiritual intent as seen in responses to @herlinkenza02 and @agipalaydrus. This indicates that today's social media audiences are increasingly critical and reflective toward how religious symbols are constructed in digital spaces.

Audience responses to these representations of religious identity can be analyzed using the concept of mediatized authenticity, developed by Hjarvard and Lovheim.³⁸ In this theory, religious authenticity in the digital age is no longer solely about doctrinal adherence but also about how piety is convincingly communicated within media logic.³⁹ Digital audiences tend to assess religious sincerity based on the balance between appearance, communication style, and consistency of values.⁴⁰ Appreciation arises when religious representation feels sincere and emotionally resonant, while criticism arises when there is a perceived disconnect between message and performance.⁴¹ Thus, religious discourse on TikTok reflects not only reactions to Islamic values themselves but also demonstrates how religion is negotiated and evaluated within the complex visual and algorithmic landscape of digital culture.⁴²

Conclusion

This study found that Acehnese hijab TikTokers negotiate their religious identity through a combination of Islamic symbols, local cultural representation, and digital communication strategies aligned with social media trends. Symbols such as syar'i hijab, Kaaba backgrounds, Arabic soundtracks, and religious quotes are presented not merely as expressions of faith, but also as constructions of public identity, appearing in formats such as lipsync videos, storytelling, and daily vlogs. In this context,

religiosity is presented both visually and communicatively, influenced by algorithmic dynamics and digital audience expectations. Public responses vary, ranging from appreciation for Islamic aesthetics to criticism regarding the potential performativity of religious intentions. These findings address the core research question of how forms and strategies of religious identity negotiation are carried out within contemporary digital communication spaces.

Conceptually, this study contributes significantly to the understanding of the relationship between religion and social media, particularly in the context of Muslim women in digital spaces. The thematic analysis approach, combining Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Stig Hjarvard's theory of the mediatization of religion, allows for the exploration of how religion is not only practiced but also constructed visually and narratively through media. Furthermore, the data collection method, based on systematic online citation and creator account-based content observation, offers an alternative for qualitative research in digital media and identity studies. The subject of Acehnese hijab TikTokers also provides a new perspective in understanding the role of women in shaping an image of Islam that is contextual, communicative, and negotiable within the logic of the digital public sphere.

The main limitation of this study lies in the absence of direct interviews with content creators and audiences, which could have offered deeper insights into personal motivations, religious perceptions, and everyday practices behind the displayed digital constructions. Additionally, the focus on five popular accounts restricts the exploration of diverse representations of religious identity among marginal or minority groups. Therefore, future studies are recommended to employ digital ethnography or in-depth interviews to capture the subjective and psychosocial

dimensions of digital da'wah practices. Future research should also consider aspects such as gender, symbolic capital, and platform influence in comparative contexts to develop a more comprehensive and critical understanding of religious identity dynamics in the era of mediatized religion.

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