

## A Study on Consumer Behaviour: Transition from Traditional Shopping to Online Shopping During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate Malaysian and Indian consumers' preferred ways of shopping, the reasons behind their choices, and problems of transactions they faced during the pandemic. Data were primarily collected through a survey distributed to 200 respondents. The study concluded that it is unlikely for online shopping to replace traditional shopping as many consumers remain value physical examination of the products prior to purchase. However, many have opted for online shopping for its various advantages. Regardless of which method of shopping, respondents face similar problems in their transactions. The findings of this study may serve as a guideline for businesses to integrate into online shopping platforms for potential future development.

**Keywords:** Consumer Behaviour, COVID-19 Pandemic, Online Shopping, Preference, Traditional Shopping

**JEL Classification Codes:** M10, L20, D23

### INTRODUCTION

Traditional shopping is where consumers have the opportunity to observe, feel, and peruse goods sold. It requires consumers' physical presence to examine the products physically. If they are satisfied with their condition and price, they will make payment and bring them home. This is especially critical when purchasing daily necessities such as groceries and medicines. Consumers frequent the same stores over the years as they are satisfied with the quality of the products and services; this is customer loyalty (Isswani & Chaturvedi, 2019). The practice of traditional shopping has been ongoing for years. It is one of the most common ways society are used to purchase products and

services for the past centuries before the internet and e-commerce came into the picture.

In the digital era of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, human necessities, such as food and electronic gadgets, can be easily found and purchased online. Digitization has benefitted consumers by better quality products and providing personalized demand options. This illustrates that online shopping has replaced traditional shopping (Warrier et al., 2021). Online shopping, which is considered one of the most convenient, viable, and preferred by people in metros and urban areas, is progressively extending to the non-metro and rural areas. To attract customers, retailers try their best to make their online store environment more entertaining and attractive (Anwar, Waqas, Zain & Kee, 2020). Consumer purchasing habits have also shifted from traditional purchases to digital mediums as mobile technology advancement has resulted in simpler access to marketplaces across the world with the help of greater access to high-speed internet. Modern communication devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops have not only connected people virtually but also led to an era of rendering a host of services to the masses with accuracy (Sharma, 2017).

Over the last century, the world has been frequently touched by pandemics, such as the Spanish flu (1918-1919), the Asian flu (1957-1958), the Hong Kong flu (1968), SARS (2002-2003), and the Swine Flu (2009-2010) as history reveals. The current pneumonia outbreak, which began in early December 2019 near Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, is being blamed on a novel coronavirus (CoV) known as 'COVID-19' by the World Health Organization (WHO). COVID-19 brings significant impacts on nearly every civilization on the planet. The COVID-19 virus spread over the globe at the beginning of 2020 and went out of control in just a few weeks. The virus had caused a pandemic resulting in a threat to the economy and health systems all over the world (Koch, Frommeyer & Schewe, 2020).

According to Koch et al. (2020), most countries had restricted social life and some even imposed partial or complete lockdown upon their citizens to control the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus within the country, and the restrictions on movement range from banning of large gatherings, a temporary closure of schools and offices to even a temporary shutdown of the economy, where workers of non-essential sectors of the economy cannot go to work. Some employees might be able to work from home, while some are close to unemployed as their work cannot be done in the comfort of their homes. Most retail stores and services had to stop their operations during the lockdown. Simultaneously, consumers faced increasing levels of economic uncertainty as a result of increased unemployment. Due to the temporary closure of certain businesses, online shopping has become the only means for many consumers to satisfy their consumption needs safely.

This research aims to investigate consumers' preferred ways to purchase goods and services amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and the determining factors of their choices. In addition, this research examines the issues of consumer transaction experience.



In this era where the number of matters turning digital is increasing, research relating to traditional and online shopping had been conducted by other researchers and academic practitioners. This research focuses mainly on the consumers' preferred ways to purchase goods and services and the factors leading to their choices, as well as the problems they faced in their transactions. Also, it provides consumers' suggestions for businesses to have better shopping experiences.

Before civilization even started, society had been involved in some sort of process of obtaining items they want or need. This process is referred to as traditional shopping, or offline shopping, in which consumers are required to be physically present at storefronts and have human-to-human interaction with a salesperson for the purchase consideration of products or services (Barvin, 2014). It is the oldest way to purchase products or services, in which consumers will visit the stores, shops, or vendors directly (Suthamathi & Jeeva, 2020). Through traditional shopping, consumers get to hold the product in their hands, allowing them to check on its condition and enquire the salesperson right on the spot and face any problem with the item in the stores (Bhalerao & Gujar, 2019). In another research by Sivanesan, Monisha, Babisha, and Abisha (2017), physical possession of the product is one of the main reasons consumers choose traditional shopping. This leads to the conclusion that physical touch and product experience are of immeasurable importance to consumers when it comes to shopping. Besides, traditional shopping guarantees instant delivery as consumers are able to bring the products home right after the purchase. As for services, consumers could enjoy and experience the service instantly. Besides, walking around in malls and shopping traditionally is also a form of leisure, enjoyment, and entertainment to some people (Liu et al. in Bhalerao & Gujar, 2019).

However, traditional shopping has its disadvantages hindering further progress. According to Suthamathi and Jeeva (2020), traditional shopping typically offers a limited range of products and services to its consumers besides being time-consuming. Due to limited spaces in the warehouses and stores, it would be challenging for vendors to stock up on each item on the customer wish list. Hence, consumers may have to visit another store to seek for the item they want, resulting in more time being spent on a single item.

With digitalization on the rise, online shopping is quickly gaining popularity among society members for good reasons. According to Silpa, Rajasree, and Balasubramanian (2016), online shopping is "one of the fastest-growing phenomenons" and is defined as "a form of electronic commerce which allows consumers to buy products and services over the internet". The earlier is true, especially during the pandemic when citizen movements were restricted so they had to find another way to purchase what they needed. Hence, the convenience of purchasing goods online is often one of the main reasons consumers choose to shop online (Setiawan et al., 2020; Kailash, 2020; Tham, Dastane, Johari, & Ismail, 2019). Besides, easy access to product information (Wang et al. in Kailash, 2020; Kushwah & Singh, 2019) and reviews from other customers (Keeney in Kailash, 2020) also encourage consumers to purchase online. This is because more information gives consumers more product

assurance. A wider range of products and services offered at attractive or discounted prices (Agyapong, 2018) is another factor consumers shop online as it provides them with greater benefits (Lim & Dubinsky, 2004). To sum up, consumers choose to shop online for the convenience, easy access to information, wider range of products and services, and lower prices.

On the other hand, consumer's belief that purchasing products online is riskier avoids them from purchasing online (Bhalerao & Gujar, 2019). The most critical factor demotivating consumers in online shopping is the deprivation of product tangibility. In online shopping, consumers are unable to get ahold of the product in their hands or to check and examine the product which may result in their lack of confidence in ensuring the item is of good shape. On top of that, certain online sellers use pictures that differ from the real look of the item sold (Silpa et al., 2016). Tricked customers hardly will trust online sellers for being authentic.

We argue that consumer shopping behavior patterns may change during the pandemic. Hence, it is important that businesses, both offline and online study the changes of such behaviors and the reasons behind them to remain competitive in the market in the long run (Koch et al., 2020). Regardless of the medium of shopping, businesses' ultimate aim would be to offer goods and services to consumers that would satisfy their wants and needs. When that is achieved, only then the business can move forward easily and expand its market.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research moves forward with a qualitative and quantitative approach. A survey was conducted to collect primary data from 200 respondents of Malaysian and Indian nationalities through random sampling. Through the survey, the authors managed to capture the respondents' preference between traditional and online shopping, the respondents' perceptions, and the way forward for the businesses during and even after the pandemic. The frequency and percentages of the data from the survey were then calculated and displayed in tables before analysis. Besides, secondary data were obtained from literatures and other sources online to support the data inferences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaires were prepared using Google Form and randomly distributed to 200 respondents in Malaysia and India. The main purpose of this survey is to understand people's perceptions of traditional shopping and online shopping. The questionnaires were separated into five sections: respondent's demographics, traditional shopping, online shopping, comparison between the two shopping methods, and suggestions to improve the shopping method. The sections of traditional shopping, online shopping, and comparison of both will be our key discussion.



**Table 1.** Summary of Respondent's Demographics (N=200)

	Frequency	(%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	84	42
Female	116	58
<b>Nationality</b>		
Malaysian	143	71.5
Indian	56	28
Others	1	0.5
<b>Age</b>		
Under 18 years old	3	1.5
18-24 years old	134	67
25-34 years old	27	13.5
35-44 years old	21	10.5
45-54 years old	10	5
55-64 years old	5	2.5
65 years old and above	0	0
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single/Not married	158	79
Married	42	21
Widowed	0	0
Divorced	0	0
Separated	0	0
<b>Employment Status</b>		
Employed	76	38
Unemployed (looking for a job)	8	4
Retired	2	1
Student	114	57
Disabled	0	0
<b>Malaysian Citizen: Household Income Per Month</b>		
T20-RM10,960 and above	15	9.3
M40-Between RM4,850-RM10,959	58	36
B40-Lower than RM4,850	88	54.7
Not a Malaysian citizen	39	-
<b>Indian Citizen: Household Income Per Month</b>		
High-INR800,000 or above	10	22.2
Upper Middle-INR500,000-800,000	8	17.8
Lower Middle-INR200,000-500,000	10	22.2
Low-INR200,000 or less	17	37.8



Not an Indian citizen	155	-
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Table 1 shows the demographics of 200 respondents including their gender, nationality, age, marital status, employment status, household income per month for Malaysian citizens, and household income per month for Indian citizens. Table 1 indicates that most of the respondents are female (58%). Besides, we have more Malaysian respondents (71.5%) than Indian respondents (28%). Out of 200 respondents, 67% are aged between 18 to 24 years old, 79% are single or not married and 57% are students. Most of the Malaysian respondents (54.7%) have their monthly household income lower than RM4,850 while most of the Indian respondents (37.8%) have their monthly household income below INR200,000.

**Table 2.** Traditional Shopping

	Frequency	(%)
<b>Do you leave your home to purchase goods or services from physical stores during the COVID-19 pandemic?</b>		
Yes	173	86.5
No	27	13.5
<b>How often do you go out to physical stores to purchase goods and services during the COVID-19 pandemic?</b>		
Not even once	0	0
Once a month	54	31.2
Once a week	86	49.7
Several times a week	25	14.5
Once everyday	8	4.6
<b>What kind of product(s) do you purchase through traditional shopping?</b>		
Convenience goods	161	63.6
Shopping goods	54	21.3
Specialty goods	14	5.5
Unsought goods	22	8.8
Others	2	0.8
<b>What are the disadvantages for you when purchasing products or services at physical stores?</b>		
Lack of stock in stores	60	22.8
Takes up a lot of time to go out	100	38
Need to visit a few stores to get all the items you want	100	38
Others	3	1.2
<b>Which problems do you face during your purchase of goods and services during the COVID-19 pandemic?</b>		
Too lazy to leave the house	114	53.3



No transport to go out	48	22.4
Poor customer service	36	16.8
Exposure to the virus	9	4.2
Ignorance of the SOP	5	2.3
Increased price of goods/services	2	1.0

Table 2 shows the respondent's perceptions of traditional shopping. From the survey, 173 respondents (86.5%) had left their homes to purchase goods and services at physical stores during the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of these 173 respondents, almost half of them (49.7%) went out to purchase goods and services once a week. Most of the respondents (63.6%) purchased convenience goods such as groceries, toiletries, and stationery through physical stores. From the respondent's point of view, taking up a lot of time to go out and needing to visit a few stores to get all the items they want (38%) are the common disadvantages of traditional shopping. The biggest problem that respondents faced when purchasing goods and services during the COVID-19 pandemic is being too lazy to leave their homes (53.3%), while other minor problems are exposure to the virus (4.2%), ignorance of SOP by certain people (2.3%) and increased price of goods and services (1.0%).

Nowadays, more people shift to online shopping, especially young generations, due to its attractive factors and some other leading factors of traditional shopping. Traditional shopping involves high traveling and searching costs (Jigyasha & Japneet, 2017). Due to COVID-19 outbreak, some problems add up to the disadvantages of traditional shopping, such as people's laziness to leave their homes due to the strict SOP, no transportation to go out as the public transportations had been reduced, and poor customer services at the physical stores. Some respondents avoid purchasing at physical stores since a lot of people do not follow the SOP and social distance. People who did not comply with the SOP tend to use the traditional shopping method and this situation has diminished other people's desires to use it to avoid exposure to the virus (Moon, Choe & Song, 2021).

**Table 3.** Online Shopping

	Frequency	(%)
<b>Do you buy goods and services online during the COVID-19 pandemic?</b>		
Yes	162	81
No	38	19
<b>How often do you buy goods and services online during the COVID-19 pandemic?</b>		
Not even once	0	0
Once a month	112	69.1
Once a week	34	21
Several times a week	15	9.3

Once everyday	1	0.6
<b>What kind of product do you buy through online shopping?</b>		
Convenience goods	63	25.6
Shopping goods	124	50.4
Specialty goods	30	12.2
Unsought goods	26	10.6
Others	3	1.2
<b>Which online shopping platforms have you used to purchase goods and services?</b>		
Shopee	124	40
Lazada	86	27.7
Taobao	17	5.5
Amazon	34	11
Flipkart	16	5.2
Others	33	10.6
<b>Which online shopping platform do you think is the best to use?</b>		
Shopee	85	52.5
Lazada	33	20.4
Taobao	9	5.6
Amazon	31	19
Others	4	2.5
<b>According to the question above, why did you choose that platform?</b>		
Items are cheaper compared to other platforms	109	22
The authenticity of items are guaranteed	62	12.5
Faster delivery service	88	17.7
Many discounts' codes or vouchers are available	76	15.3
Better customer service	54	10.9
Easier to find the items wanted	104	21
Others	3	0.6
<b>What are the disadvantages for you when purchasing a product or service online?</b>		
Lack of stock in stores	34	14.2
Delivery time is long	86	36
Risk of meeting fraud sellers	115	48.2
Others	4	1.6
<b>Which problems do you face when purchasing goods and services online?</b>		
Items are damaged when delivered	79	28.6
Poor customer service	38	13.8
Wrong products and services purchased	66	23.9





Unable to purchase if do not have an e-wallet or bank cards	45	16.3
Difficulty in navigating the online platform	38	13.8
Others	10	3.6

Table 3 shows the respondent's perceptions towards online shopping methods. From the survey, 162 respondents (81%) have purchased online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the respondents (69.1%) buy the goods and services online once a month. Most respondents prefer buying shopping goods online (50.4%). Shopee has become the most used online shopping platform (40%). A total of 85 respondents (52.5%) rated Shopee as the best online shopping platform to use. The second common online shopping platform is Lazada (27.7%) and is rated as the best use platform at 20.4%. This result is consistent with the research by Tinambunan (2019) on a comparative analysis of Shopee and Lazada, in which Shopee has a higher average score than Lazada. According to our respondents, Shopee is the best platform to use because the items are cheaper if compared to other platforms (22%) and it is easier to find the items they want (21%). However, there are some disadvantages when purchasing through an online shopping platform as it increases the risk of meeting fraud sellers (48.2%). The problem that may be faced by the respondents when purchasing goods and services online is items are damaged products during the delivery (28.6%).

During the pandemic, most people feel insecure when going out to a crowded place. Thus, e-commerce is an excellent alternative to shop as it saves time and reduces social contact. However, some disadvantages hinder them from using online shopping platforms. Some courier companies impose expensive shipping fees causing the price of goods to become higher. Besides, lack of control over the selection of perishable goods, such as fruits, makes online shopping not suitable for purchasing this kind of goods (Pitts et al., 2020). Although online shopping is getting more attention worldwide, it still has some restrictions compared to traditional shopping. When purchasing goods online, customers are not able to touch and feel the products. Lack of product information and physical inspection will also result in the deviation of customer expectations and the actual product. Fraud and security are other concerns when purchasing online. Therefore, online business owners are suggested to provide cash on delivery service to ensure customer privacy protection and be rest assured when purchasing goods at online platforms (Rahman, Islam, Esha, Sultana, & Chakravorty, 2018).

**Table 4.** Comparison between Traditional Shopping and Online Shopping

	Frequency	(%)
<b>Do you prefer purchasing goods and services at physical stores or on online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic?</b>		
Traditional shopping	54	27
Online shopping	34	17



Both	112	56
<b>If you choose "Traditional Shopping", why do you say so?</b>		
I can confirm the quality of the product	51	52.6
I can have a better shopping experience in shopping malls and other stores	26	26.8
More services are available to be purchased	11	11.3
I am unsure about how to purchase items online	9	9.3
Others	0	0
<b>If you choose "Online Shopping", why do you say so?</b>		
I can buy everything I need from one platform	28	23.7
I do not need to leave the house	28	23.7
I can purchase items that are not available in my region	22	18.6
There are a lot of vouchers to be used	16	13.6
Flexible time to shop	23	19.5
Others	1	0.9
<b>If you choose "Both", why do you say so?</b>		
A wider selection of items	72	41.9
I can compare the prices from physical stores and online platforms, then purchase at a lower price	96	55.8
Others	4	2.3

Table 4 shows the comparisons between traditional shopping and online shopping. More than half of the respondents prefer using both shopping methods (56%) to purchase goods and services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, 27% of them prefer using traditional shopping methods and the remaining 17% prefer using online shopping methods. They prefer traditional shopping because they were able to confirm the quality of the product (52.6%) and felt better shopping experiences (26.8%). Some respondents preferred online shopping because they could buy everything on the same platform, and there was no need to leave their house (23.7% respectively). The respondents selecting both shopping methods believe that they can compare the prices from physical stores and online platforms to make a purchase at a lower price (55.8%) and for a wider item selection (41.9%).

The results imply that the traditional shopping method remains popular among Malaysian and Indian citizens even during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, strict SOP and movement control orders had reduced the frequency of outdoor activities. Often, the respondents went out to purchase convenience goods such as dry food, groceries, and household products. Traditional shopping methods are more suitable for convenience goods due to their instant use. Besides, the results show that the respondents also purchase shopping goods, specialty goods, and goods unavailable at physical stores. These kinds of goods need proper planning, considerations, and

comparison. Therefore, the respondents are more likely to collect digital information and purchase the goods at a physical store for direct product confirmation. Previous study suggests that customers have a special need to see, touch, and feel the quality of the products directly (Sayyida, Hartini, Gunawan, & Husin, 2021). Purchasing goods at physical stores gives customers a better shopping experience than at online stores as it provides them with tangibility and trialability of the products. On the contrary, online stores would only provide pictures and specifications that might not be sufficient for making a buying decision (Sarkar & Sabyasachi, 2017).

Online shopping provides customers with exposure to a variety of products by gathering many vendors on a single platform. Shoppers can visit web stores comfortably at their house and make comparisons among different sellers. Besides, online stores are available all day and customers can shop freely at their own preferred time. Hence, it is safer and highly convenient for them to shop online (Sunitha & Gnanadhas, 2014). On the other hand, online shopping allows shopping abroad without a need for traveling abroad. The customers can shop at any time and feel free to evaluate the product they want (Saprikis, Chouliara, & Vlachopoulou, 2010). One example of a good online shopping platform is Shopee. Table 3 indicates that Shopee has been rated as the best online platform for its fast delivery, product diversity, and abundant discount vouchers (Erpurini, 2021).

In the survey, we collected respondents' suggestions on how to improve the shopping method from the perspective of a business owner. Some of them suggest traditional shopping to provide excellent customer services, advertising and promotion, SOP, product diversification, enough stock and proper product arrangement, digitalization, card or e-wallet payments, and good product quality with sufficient information to improve customer satisfaction. The respondents suggest the business owner do more advertising, promotion, and provide discount vouchers for online shopping. Others emphasize enough stock, fast delivery, product quality improvement, good customer services, free shipping, complete product information, product diversification, and proper packaging for delivery.

In this competitive era, many firms offer similar products, their customer service thus can differentiate one firm from another. According to the survey, the respondents believe that frequently collecting customers' reviews of current customer service improvement can increase customers' satisfaction and maintain their loyalty. From a marketing perspective, a business owner needs to manage profitable customer relationships because customer satisfaction and brand trusts are the main drivers of customer loyalty and firm profitability (Gul, 2014). The research of Vithya (2017) also indicates that there is a positive relationship between customer satisfaction, trust, and loyalty. In addition, advertisement and promotion such as social media advertisement, special discounts during festivals, free samples, and gifts are also important strategies. This corroborates Assaf, Josiassen, Mattila, and Cvelbar (2015) suggesting that advertising spending has a positive impact on sales performance.

Online business owners should keep improving their business to maintain its competitive advantages and outstanding in the market. A study on Amazon.com contended that the key factors of Amazon's success are its quality products, proper product presentation, good shopping experience, seller credibility, timely delivery, post-sales services, and reasonable pricing (Warrier et al., 2021). This is consistent with our respondent suggestions, which are providing good customer services, product quality improvement, sufficient product information, fast delivery, and free shipping. Widianti and Sabar (2019) also contended that price perception, product, and service quality have positive effects on customer satisfaction. When customers are satisfied with the purchases, there will be a chance of a second glance at the product and services catered by the owner.

The data conclude that despite the increase of online shopping platform use during the COVID-19 pandemic, most people are more willing to use both traditional shopping and online shopping simultaneously. By using both, the customers can enjoy more benefits instead of forcing themselves to choose one of them. At present, online shopping cannot replace traditional shopping. However, business owners should prepare themselves and reexamine their business model to face new challenges that may arise in the future. There is a likelihood that the trend of online shopping will increase and accelerate in the coming years.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our data analysis leads to a conclusion that more than half of the respondents prefer using both traditional and online shopping methods during the COVID-19 pandemic since it allows them to collect all information about the product online and compare the price with that in the physical stores. According to the survey, most problems that online shopping users faced are the risk of meeting fraud sellers, untimely delivery, lack of stock, damaged items, purchase of wrong products, e-wallet or bank cards unavailability, difficulty in navigating the online platform, and poor customer service. As for traditional shopping buyers, the biggest disadvantage is most are found lazy to leave the house despite their need to purchase products and services.

More people accept both traditional and online shopping methods compared to those who chose either one. After over a year of being in the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens of Malaysia and India starts to shop more online while maintaining the practice of buying products and services face to face. However, in the comparison of respondents who chose only either one method to shop, respondents who prefer to shop traditionally occupies a higher percentage than those who prefer shopping online as many of them believe that they can confirm the product's quality only when they can touch, see, and try the products. This concludes that traditional shopping is hard to be replaced by online shopping in the short future.

Having a new technology like online shopping is a great breakthrough for this era today, it may however take a longer time for some people, such as elders, to get used to it. Concurrently, online scamming is rising with the growing popularity of online shopping

to the extent that it has gathered attention from the media. The respondents are worried about fraud and hence, decreased their trust in online sellers. On the other hand, younger people prefer both shopping methods. This shows that most of them are accepting the new technology to keep themselves updated and make purchasing goods easier.

Nobody knows what the future holds for us, but if people want to change, Malaysia and India may step further into the modern technology era in no time. This is especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, as there is a huge number of people who have started to use online shopping when going outside could be more dangerous and more prone to getting infected by the virus. This finding is in line with Hashem (2020) underlining the same conclusion that the pandemic had changed consumer behavior to more depending on online shopping. Hence, to protect society from increasing the possibility of being infected by the COVID-19 virus, people need to know how to protect themselves first by staying at home. As the technology is expected to be widened in the future, customers may try to shop for any product or service online.

As this paper is written during the COVID-19 pandemic, it creates a limitation in which the members cannot have close contact with others. That makes the distribution of the survey form to more people a challenge, and it could only be distributed online to people within the same circle. In addition, the group could not get a larger sample size to further solidify the findings of this study.

In conclusion, there is a chance that traditional shopping is converted into online shopping during the COVID-19 pandemic, this transition however hardly will affect the whole population of citizens of Malaysia and India. This phenomenon is expected to remain even after the pandemic is over as everyone has their own opinion on both shopping methods.

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