

## Visual Semiotics of Instagram Advertising Posters: A Grammar of Visual Design Analysis of Indonesian Soda Brands

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### Abstract

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Despite the growing use of Instagram advertising, comparative visual semiotic studies examining how competing soda brands construct brand identity remain limited. This study analyzes how visual elements in soda drink advertising posters shape meaning and brand image through four aspects of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Grammar of Visual Design: composition, modality, represented participants, and interactive participants. A descriptive qualitative approach was applied to eight official Instagram posters from the four most popular soda brands in Indonesia (Coca-Cola, Fanta, Sprite, and BIG Cola) based on the 2025 Top Brand Award. While all four brands share high visual modality and product-centric composition, they differentiate through distinct coding orientations: Coca-Cola and Sprite employ naturalistic realism to convey authenticity and purity, Fanta adopts a sensory orientation with stylized visuals to express youthful energy, and BIG Cola blends naturalistic detail with sensory boldness. All brands predominantly use the offer image, positioning the audience as observers. Critically, BIG Cola uniquely deploys a demand image through the direct gaze of football stars, creating a parasocial connection absent in the market leaders. This study demonstrates how brands in the same product category construct distinctive multimodal identities on Instagram, and how a challenger brand uses the demand image to disrupt convention. The findings provide practical insights for marketers in designing visual brand identities and contribute to multimodal advertising research in digital communication.

#### Kata Kunci:

*Identitas Merek, Iklan Digital, Instagram, Minuman Bersoda, Semiotika Visual*

#### Abstrak

Meskipun penggunaan iklan Instagram terus berkembang, studi semiotika visual komparatif yang mengkaji bagaimana merek-merek minuman bersoda yang bersaing membangun identitas merek masih sangat terbatas. Studi ini menganalisis bagaimana elemen visual

dalam poster iklan minuman bersoda membentuk makna dan citra merek melalui empat aspek Tata Bahasa Desain Visual Kress dan van Leeuwen (2006): komposisi, modalitas, partisipan yang direpresentasikan, dan partisipan interaktif. Pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif diterapkan pada delapan poster Instagram resmi dari empat merek minuman bersoda paling populer di Indonesia (Coca-Cola, Fanta, Sprite, dan BIG Cola) berdasarkan Top Brand Award 2025. Meskipun keempat merek berbagi modalitas visual tinggi dan komposisi yang berpusat pada produk, mereka membedakan diri melalui orientasi pengkodean yang berbeda: Coca-Cola dan Sprite menggunakan realisme naturalistik untuk menyampaikan keaslian dan kemurnian, Fanta mengadopsi orientasi sensoris dengan visual bergaya untuk mengekspresikan energi anak muda, dan BIG Cola memadukan detail naturalistik dengan ketegasan sensoris. Semua merek predominantly menggunakan *offer image*, memposisikan audiens sebagai pengamat. Yang paling krusial, BIG Cola secara unik menerapkan *demand image* melalui tatapan langsung bintang sepak bola, menciptakan koneksi parasosial yang tidak ditemukan pada merek-merek pemimpin pasar. Studi ini menunjukkan bagaimana merek dalam kategori produk yang sama membangun identitas multimodal yang khas di Instagram, dan bagaimana merek penantang menggunakan *demand image* untuk mendobrak konvensi. Temuan ini memberikan wawasan praktis bagi para pemasar dalam merancang identitas merek visual dan berkontribusi pada penelitian periklanan multimodal dalam komunikasi digital.

## INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age, visual communication has become one of the dominant forms of communication. The delivery of information no longer relies on a single medium. Instead, people now use multimodal communication more often in their everyday lives (Deng, 2023). As explained by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, 2nd ed.), multimodality refers to the use of various semiotic modes such as text, images, colors, typography, sound, and movement to create meaning. This has also become an important part of product promotion through various media, especially the use of digital advertising posters on social media, which are now increasingly creative with attractive designs and the use of colors, text, and images.

The visual can effectively influence the audience's psychology towards the brand (Feng & Zhao, 2024). This phenomenon is evident in the advertising practices of soda drinks, where the powerful visual design is a major factor in creating consumer appeal (Ahmed, Sarker, & Ahmed, 2023).

In Indonesia, soda drinks continue to grow in popularity, especially amid globalization, which has expanded public access to international products (Sartika, Atmarita, Duki, Bardosono, Wibowo, & Lukito, 2022). According to data from the 2025 Top Brand Award, Coca-Cola holds the top spot as the most popular soda drink brand with a Top Brand Index (TBI) of 36.90%, followed by Fanta (27.60%), Sprite (18.10%), and BIG Cola (4.50%). These four brands dominate the soda drink market in Indonesia. These four brands were selected because they collectively represent the full spectrum of market positioning in the Indonesian soda category: Coca-Cola as the dominant global leader, Fanta and Sprite as mid-range international brands, and BIG Cola as the sole local challenger. Together, they account for over 87% of the Top Brand Index, making this dataset both representative and strategically significant for cross-brand visual comparison. Their popularity is inseparable from their visual communication strategies, particularly through poster advertisements and digital media used to build brand image and strengthen brand perception (Lignum et al., 2024). Coca-Cola utilizes digital media, particularly the Instagram platform, as a means to convey promotional messages and build relationships with its audience through engaging visual content (Indah & Kristiana, 2021).

Advertising posters for soda drinks rely heavily on the strength of visual design (Vincent & Kolade, 2019). Visual design is essential because without attractive visuals, advertisements lose their ability to attract consumers (Wen et al., 2022). Many soda advertisements use images tailored to the product, whether in the form of refreshing drink bottles, brightly colored backgrounds, or additional graphic elements. Short, persuasive text reinforces the visual message and can influence readers to buy the product (Surbakti et al., 2025). The combination of images, text, and overall visual design is crafted to build strong appeal and promote the product (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

Semiotics provides the theoretical foundation for analyzing such visual strategies. De Saussure (1916) defined every sign as composed of a signifier, the physical form, and a signified, the concept it carries. Peirce (1931) classified signs into icons, indices, and symbols, while Barthes (1964) introduced denotation and connotation to account for cultural layers of meaning. Chandler (2017) reinforced semiotics as a broad framework applicable to any sign system, including visual ones. Within this discipline, visual semiotics examines meaning produced through images, colors, spatial arrangement, and typography, while social semiotics, as outlined by Machin (2014), situates sign-making within social and cultural contexts. These branches converge in the study of multimodal communication, which is particularly relevant to advertising posters that combine image, color, typography, and text to create layered persuasive messages.

The theoretical framework applied is the Grammar of Visual Design by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), which draws on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics to propose that images, like language, operate according to a structured visual grammar. Four analytical aspects guide this study: (1) Modality refers to the degree of realism based on coding orientation, whether naturalistic (resemblance to reality) or sensory (affective impact through color and stylization); (2) Composition relates to the spatial arrangement of elements in terms of information value (top/ideal, bottom/real; left/given, right/new), salience, and framing; (3) Represented Participants focus on who or what is depicted, and whether through narrative (action vectors) or conceptual (symbolic) structures; and (4) Interactive Participants examine the relationship through gaze (demand vs. offer image), shot distance, and perspective.

Visual design in advertising extends beyond aesthetics: color contrast, typographic hierarchy, and spatial arrangement operate as semiotic strategies that shape brand perception and emotional response (Wen et al., 2022; Vincent & Kolade, 2019). Prior studies in Indonesia have explored these strategies through various lenses. Da Silva (2017) found that color, expression, and natural backgrounds projected freshness for a tea brand, though the single-brand, single-medium scope limits transferability. Enemuo and Chukwu (2023) demonstrated that

gaze direction and viewing distance build emotional closeness in household product advertising, though modality and composition received less attention. Febhimaesuri and Pratama (2021) showed how iconic and symbolic signs construct a freshness identity for a drink brand, though the Peircean framework did not address compositional or interactive dimensions. Together, these studies reveal the need for a comprehensive, cross-brand application of all four dimensions of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework in the digital social media context, which this study provides.

Using the Grammar of Visual Design by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this study examines four main aspects: modality, composition, represented participants, and interactive participants. This approach provides a comprehensive analysis of visual branding on social media, which previous studies have not fully explored. To investigate these visual strategies, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What meaning is constructed through modality and composition of digital advertising posters selected for soda brands?
2. How do represented participants and interactive participants contribute to the formation of brand identity and shape the visual interaction between posters and audiences?

Theoretically, this study advances the application of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework to the digital social media context by offering a systematic cross-brand comparison that previous single-brand and single-medium studies have not provided. It particularly highlights the underexplored distinction between naturalistic and sensory coding orientations as a differentiating variable in brand identity construction. Practically, the findings offer actionable reference for marketing practitioners designing visual brand identities on Instagram and other social media platforms, demonstrating how subtle but consistent semiotic choices in modality, composition, and interactive positioning can shape distinct audience relationships and brand perception.

## **METHOD**

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with visual semiotics analysis. This approach is particularly suited to the research questions because visual semiotic analysis requires the researcher to interpret the layered meanings of images in their natural communicative context rather than quantify surface-level features. A descriptive qualitative design enables in-depth, holistic examination of each poster's visual elements and allows systematic cross-brand comparison of how meaning is constructed through modality, composition, and participant representation. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena in their natural context and interpret the meaning individuals give to those phenomena. Data was collected from official Instagram advertising posters from Coca-Cola, Fanta, Sprite, and BIG Cola Indonesia, reflecting the current shift from outdoor to digital advertising. Purposive sampling was applied: a total of eight posters were selected, two from each brand, as this number was determined to be analytically sufficient given the study's focus on four brands. Selecting two posters per brand (one featuring human figures and one without) enables controlled comparison of visual approaches while maintaining the depth required by a qualitative descriptive design. Increasing the number of posters per brand would risk sacrificing analytical depth for breadth, which is inconsistent with the interpretive purpose of this study. The posters were selected based on the following criteria applied consistently across all brands: (a) taken from the official verified Instagram account in Indonesia; (b) uploaded within the 2025 timeframe; (c) one poster featuring human figures and one that does not, to allow visual approach comparison; (d) includes clear product visuals or key brand elements; (e) sufficient visual quality for detailed analysis; (f) contains visual elements relevant to the four analytical aspects of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006).

Each poster was analyzed using the Grammar of Visual Design by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), focusing on four aspects. Modality analysis assessed the level of realism and visual credibility, identifying whether the dominant coding orientation was naturalistic or sensory by examining color saturation, lighting, contrast, detail, and perspective. Composition analysis examined how visual

elements are arranged to form the overall message, including layout, balance, information value, salience, and framing. Represented participants' analysis identified who or what is depicted and whether the representation is narrative or conceptual. Interactive participants analysis examined the communicative relationship between the advertisement producer and the audience, focusing on gaze, shot distance, and perspective.

The data were analysed through the following steps:

1. Collecting and identifying advertising posters from the official Instagram account of each brand.
2. Categorizing visual elements based on the four aspects of analysis.
3. Interpreting the visual meanings that appear on each poster.
4. Comparing findings across the four brands to explore similarities and differences in how they use visual strategies to convey messages, build brand identity, and attract consumers.

This study has several limitations. First, the research objects include only four brands based on the 2025 Top Brand Award, so the results cannot be generalized to all soda drink brands or other product categories. Second, data sources are limited to static digital advertising posters from Instagram, excluding other forms of media such as videos, billboards, or television advertisements. Third, the analysis does not cover the visual or narrative dynamics that appear in moving media such as Instagram Reels or TikTok videos. These limitations enable a more focused and in-depth analysis of visual messages in static image media.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents the findings from the analysis of eight posters across four brands, organized poster by poster, followed by a cross-brand synthesis that addresses the two research questions.



**Figure 1.** *Poster Coca-Cola, April 2025*

**Coca-Cola.** The first poster was uploaded in April 2025. It features three drink bottles held by teenagers with name labels such as 'Nadine,' 'Dinda,' and 'Rangga' in a shared social moment.

The represented participants form a narrative representation: hands holding bottles and bottles pointing toward the center create vectors signifying the act of sharing, positioning the product as a symbol of kebersamaan (togetherness). The poster employs an offer image with no direct eye contact, placing the viewer as an observer. The medium close-up builds emotional connection through the participants' expressions, while the eye-level perspective creates an equal relationship (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Modality operates within a naturalistic coding orientation: facial expressions are lifelike, lighting mimics natural conditions, and bottle textures and dew are rendered realistically. Compositionally, the three bottles are centered as the focal point. Text at the top functions as the ideal, while the Coca-Cola logo at the bottom anchors the real.



**Figure 2.** *Poster Coca-Cola, October 2025*

**Coca-Cola.** The second poster was uploaded in October 2025. It removes all human figures, centering the glass bottle with spurting liquid and a floating bottle cap.

The liquid spray and floating cap form a narrative representation through vectors indicating dynamic movement and the sensation of freshness. This poster is also an offer image; the viewer is positioned as a passive observer of the product. Naturalistic modality remains high through detailed liquid splashes, bottle texture, and lifelike dew. Compositionally, the bottle is placed at the top as the ideal of refreshment, while the text 'SEGARRRNYA NIKMAT' at the bottom functions as the real. The curved white line creates a reading flow from product to text.



**Figure 3.** *Poster Fanta, January 2025*

**Fanta.** The first poster was uploaded in January 2025. It centers a bottle of grape-flavored Fanta with dewdrops, surrounded by vivid graphic elements.

The visual is a conceptual representation: the product functions as a symbol of the grape flavor's identity, with no action depicted. The offer image positions the viewer as an observer. While the product itself is rendered naturalistically, the highly stylized background featuring bright green, purple, and yellow graphic elements reflects a sensory coding orientation. Modality is high not because the image resembles reality, but because its saturated vivid colors create strong affective impact and visual pleasure (Wen et al., 2022). Compositionally, the bottle is centered as the primary focal point with text at the top as the introductory message.



**Figure 4.** *Poster Fanta, October 2025*

**Fanta.** The second poster was uploaded in October 2025. It features four teenagers holding Fanta bottles against a Halloween-themed backdrop, laughing and interacting.

Body movements, facial expressions, and hand positions form vectors signifying action and social interaction, making this a narrative representation. The poster employs an offer image with an eye-level perspective creating an equal and natural connection (Vincent & Kolade, 2019). The modality blends orientations: facial expressions and Halloween decor are rendered with high naturalistic detail, but the dramatic contrasting colors of orange, black, and purple push the overall image toward a sensory coding orientation where visual pleasure and thematic atmosphere are paramount. Compositionally, the participants are centered with bottles as supporting elements and text at top and bottom highlighting the verbal message.



**Figure 5.** *Poster Sprite, August 2025*

**Sprite.** The first poster was uploaded in August 2025. It centers two Sprite bottles with water droplets on their surfaces, surrounded by soda bubbles and lemon and lime slices.

With no action or interaction, this is a conceptual representation where the product symbolizes freshness and carbonation. The offer image contains no human figures or direct gaze; the viewer is a passive observer at eye level (Vincent & Kolade, 2019). High naturalistic modality is evident through the condensation, soda bubble effects, and a highly saturated yet realistic green that reproduces what the eye would see. There is little stylization; the image conveys an almost tangible sense of coldness and authenticity (Wen et al., 2022). Compositionally, the two bottles are centered with text 'EKSTRA HAUS?' at the top as the ideal.



**Figure 6.** *Poster Sprite, November 2025*

**Sprite.** The second poster was uploaded in November 2025. It features a human hand opening a Sprite bottle as the central element, with soda spraying out.

The liquid spray functions as a vector indicating a dynamic process, the hand as agent and the bottle as the object, forming a narrative representation that emphasizes the spontaneous sensation of freshness. The offer image contains no facial contact with the audience, building engagement through visual intensity rather than direct interaction (Chandler, 2017). Modality remains high and naturalistic through detailed liquid splashes and bottle texture. The bottle is positioned diagonally, directing attention to the spray as the primary element, while the text 'PAS HAUS, WAKTUNYA SPRITE' at the top functions as the ideal.



**Figure 7.** *Poster BIG-Cola, February 2025*

**BIG Cola.** The first poster was uploaded in February 2025. It features three Manchester City players on the right and a can of BIG Cola on the left.

The representation is conceptual: the players serve as symbolic figures representing identity, strength, and professionalism in the world of sports. This poster is critically distinct from all others in the dataset because it employs a demand image: the players make direct visual contact with the audience through their gaze toward the camera, creating a stronger interpersonal connection and inviting engagement (Feng & Zhao, 2024). In the context of Instagram, where users are accustomed to direct eye contact from influencers and peers, this demand image likely feels native and potentially increases engagement. The coding orientation is a hybrid: the players and product are rendered with naturalistic precision, but the dominant red background pushes the image toward sensory modality. Compositionally, the product on the left represents given information while the players on the right represent new information, lending the brand borrowed credibility through the given-new structure.



**Figure 8.** *Poster BIG-Cola, October 2025*

**BIG Cola.** The second poster was uploaded in October 2025. It centers the BIG Cola bottle surrounded by hands of different skin tones forming a heart-shaped circle.

The representation is conceptual: the bottle is the focal point of meaning, while the variation in skin tones symbolizes social diversity united within a single context. The offer image positions the viewer as an observer who interprets the visual symbols (Chandler, 2017). The poster again employs a hybrid modality: the bottle exhibits high naturalistic detail, while the bold saturated red background and stylized hand arrangement function within a sensory coding orientation. The bottle is centered as the primary focal point framed by the circular arrangement of hands. The BIG Cola label functions as the real, while the text at the top functions as the ideal.

### ***Cross-Brand Comparison***

#### **Modality**

All four brands consistently employ high visual realism in depicting product details such as condensation and packaging texture, effectively creating impressions of freshness and quality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). However, the coding orientation differs meaningfully. Coca-Cola and Sprite operate within a naturalistic coding orientation, where visual details replicate unmediated reality of Coca-Cola through lifelike expressions and liquid splashes, Sprite through photorealistic condensation and soda bubbles. Fanta and BIG Cola, by contrast, achieve high modality through a sensory coding orientation, prioritizing affective and aesthetic impact over photorealism. Fanta's vivid, non-naturalistic backgrounds maximize visual pleasure, while BIG Cola's dominant red background functions as a sensory signifier. The key distinction is therefore not the level of modality, but which coding orientation governs its expression and the brand personality it constructs.

#### **Composition**

Across all brands, the product is consistently centered as the primary visual focus, reflecting a dominant convention in Indonesian soda advertising suited to Instagram's fast-scrolling interface. Each brand, however, structures its composition

distinctively. Coca-Cola uses dynamic vectors formed by hands and liquid to evoke shared experience. Fanta employs a busy, graphic-heavy layout to project fun and energy. Sprite adopts a clean, minimalist approach emphasizing clarity. BIG Cola is the most structurally distinct, using a given-new layout in the first poster to borrow sports credibility, and a symbolic circular hand-frame in the second to position the brand as a unifying symbol.

### **Represented Participants**

The product is universally present as the primary visual element. Coca-Cola and Fanta feature human figures alongside the product, producing narrative representations that embed the brand in social experience togetherness for Coca-Cola, youthful Halloween fun for Fanta. Sprite relies solely on the product, constructing a conceptual representation centered on freshness and carbonation. BIG Cola takes the most diverse symbolic approach, using football players to invoke sports prestige and multiracial hands to represent social unity, both as conceptual representations that attach cultural meaning to the brand.

### **Interactive Participants**

All four brands predominantly use the offer image, with no direct eye contact between visual subjects and the audience, maintained at eye-level perspective. Coca-Cola and Fanta build emotional resonance through expressive close-ups, while Sprite creates engagement through visual intensity of product details and liquid movement. The most significant finding is BIG Cola's use of a demand image, the only one in the dataset where Manchester City players gaze directly at the audience. This parasocial strategy reduces social distance and feels native to Instagram's influencer culture, demonstrating that the offer-demand distinction is a meaningful strategic variable in brand positioning.

### **Discussion**

#### **RQ1: Modality and Composition**

High visual realism is a shared semiotic convention across all brands, constructing meanings of freshness and credibility. The primary differentiator is coding orientation: Coca-Cola and Sprite use naturalistic coding to signal

authenticity and trust, while Fanta and BIG Cola use sensory coding to project energy and aspiration. Composition reinforces these meanings: Coca-Cola's vector-rich layout evokes kebersamaan, Fanta's graphic-heavy design targets youth, Sprite's minimalism conveys simplicity, and BIG Cola's given-new structure and symbolic framing signal credibility and inclusivity. Modality and composition consistently work together as an integrated semiotic system. These findings extend da Silva's (2017) observation that color and naturalistic detail project freshness, confirming this pattern holds across multiple brands and platforms. However, the present study reveals that the mechanism is more differentiated: where da Silva treated visual realism as a single construct, this study demonstrates that naturalistic and sensory orientations function as strategically distinct tools for constructing divergent brand personalities authenticity versus aspiration within the same product category. This distinction has direct implications for brand identity formation, as each brand's compositional choices consistently reinforce its core positioning: Coca-Cola as communal and trusted, Sprite as pure and refreshing, Fanta as youthful and playful, and BIG Cola as aspirational and bold.

## **RQ2: Represented and Interactive Participants**

Represented participant choices directly shape brand identity: Coca-Cola signals communal warmth, Fanta anchors in pop-cultural fun, Sprite emphasizes sensory purity, and BIG Cola constructs an aspirational yet inclusive identity through celebrity athletes and multiracial symbolism. Interactively, BIG Cola's demand image is the dataset's sole instance of direct visual address, transforming viewers from observers into addressees. This deliberate semiotic strategy compensates for lower brand recognition through parasocial intimacy, confirming that visual strategies in digital advertising actively construct meaning and shape distinct audience relationships. These findings align with Enemuo and Chukwu's (2023) demonstration that gaze direction and viewing distance build emotional closeness in advertising; however, the present study reveals a more nuanced picture by situating this mechanism within a competitive brand landscape. While market leaders (Coca-Cola, Fanta, Sprite) rely on the offer image and build emotional

resonance through expressive content, BIG Cola's deployment of the demand image represents a deliberate semiotic disruption that leverages parasocial connection, a strategy native to Instagram's influencer culture as a compensatory positioning tool. This finding extends Febhimaesuri and Pratama's (2021) work on symbolic identity construction by demonstrating that interactive participant choices, not only symbolic attributes, are central to how challenger brands differentiate themselves in digital advertising environments.

## **CONCLUSION**

Addressing RQ1, the analysis reveals that all four brands construct meanings of freshness and quality through high visual realism, yet diverge fundamentally in coding orientation: Coca-Cola and Sprite employ naturalistic coding to project authenticity and trust, while Fanta and BIG Cola adopt sensory coding to communicate energy and aspiration. Compositionally, each brand structures its visual space distinctively: Coca-Cola through social vectors, Fanta through graphic density, Sprite through minimalism, and BIG Cola through given-new credibility framing. Addressing RQ2, represented participant choices embed each brand's core identity in social or symbolic experience, while interactive participant analysis reveals that BIG Cola's demand image uniquely transforms the audience from passive observers into active addressees through parasocial engagement. While high visual realism and product-centric composition are shared conventions, coding orientation is the primary differentiator; naturalistic coding constructs authenticity and trust for Coca-Cola and Sprite, while sensory coding projects energy and aspiration for Fanta and BIG Cola. Representational choices further reflect each brand's core values and communicative goals.

The most consequential finding is BIG Cola's deployment of a demand image through the direct gaze of internationally recognized football players, the only such instance in the dataset. This single semiotic choice transforms the audience from observers into addressees, creating parasocial intimacy well suited to Instagram's influencer culture.

These findings carry practical implications for scholars and practitioners alike. The Grammar of Visual Design proves a robust framework for analyzing

contemporary digital media, particularly the underexplored distinction between naturalistic and sensory coding orientations. For practitioners, subtle but consistent choices in modality, composition, and interactive positioning can meaningfully shift brand perception without departing radically from industry conventions offering a transferable framework for visual brand identity design across social media platforms.

Future research should examine short-form video content such as Instagram Reels or TikTok, incorporating audio, motion, and narrative elements within a broader multimodal framework.

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