

Narratives of ‘learning-unlearning-relearning’ during craft interventions - A case-based analysis of transformative journeys of craft communities

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ABSTRACT

Learn, unlearn, relearn theory is a cycle of gaining and applying knowledge, discarding out-of-date information, and gaining new information that builds upon and updates the previous knowledge. It involves staying current in the world and reflecting on one's current opinions and beliefs to potentially revise them (Klein, 2008). Learning is the act of gaining knowledge, skills, practices and behaviors. It happens through new content and pedagogical tools. Unlearning is the act of unknowing, and entails discarding deeply held assumptions, beliefs and practices. Relearning is the process of creating new understanding and behavior around the existing concepts, tasks or ways of doing something.

India is a land of diverse craft cultures. The tradition and legacy of authenticity and value-orientation is reflected in the craft work of the country's craft communities. As they evolve, struggle and progress, craft communities are subjected to the learning, unlearning and relearning phenomenon, either in a self-induced manner or through external interventions.

The LUR cycle can result in transformative changes, but is many times challenged by psychological and technical impediments. The current study explores the transformative journeys of selected craft clusters that are propelled by interventions of craft experts, curators, design educators and social entrepreneurs towards the restoration and growth of crafts and craft communities. The aim is to unveil the nature, challenges, and outcomes of craft interventions for facilitating learning-unlearning-relearning (LUR). The research uses narrative analysis to deduce commonalities and distinctions that emerge from the stories of facilitators of LUR interventions. A framework for Learning-Unlearning-Relearning is proposed to facilitate more impactful and meaningful interventions in craft communities for their revival and resilience.

Keywords: Learning, Unlearning, Relearning, Craft Communities, Identities, Interventions, India, Framework

INTRODUCTION

The quote “The illiterates of the future are not those who can’t read or write but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.” by Alvin Toffler (Amdur, 2022), is a strong affirmation of the unquestionable and undeniable need for the skills of ‘learning, unlearning and relearning’ for survival and sustenance in the evolving and unprecedented times.

Learn, unlearn, relearn (LUR) theory is a cognitive cycle that entails gaining and applying knowledge, discarding obsolete or irrelevant information, and gaining new information that synthesizes previous knowledge, builds upon it further and updates it. It involves staying current in the world and reflecting on one’s current opinions and beliefs to potentially revise them (Klein, 2008). The theory, when applied through practical approaches, facilitates desired transformations (Shauk, 2024).

Learning is the act of gaining knowledge, skills, practices and behaviors. It happens through new content and pedagogical tools. Unlearning is the act of unknowing, discarding or purging established knowledge and skill sets, in the event of their obsolescence, cessation of need or requirement of new knowledge set. It entails discarding deeply held assumptions, beliefs, practices, approaches and perceived outcomes. Relearning is the process of creating new understanding and behavior around the existing concepts, tasks or ways of doing something. Relearning refers to re-memorizing and retention of relevant and updated knowledge, in new contexts and perspectives. These processes may occur in an interconnected and sequential manner as learning new skills may require unlearning and then relearning.

The LUR cycle can result in transformative changes, but is many times challenging to adopt due to psychological and technical impediments. The current study is based on analysis of the narratives of facilitators of the LUR phenomenon in craft communities. It unveils the types of interventions, challenges faced, and outcomes of the interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indian craft communities

The culture of crafts is as old as human civilizations. India holds pride in its multiple cultural origins. It is a land of diversity. Crafts are an integral part of India’s rural communities. Craft is the process of processing materials with the aim of creating something valuable. Each region of the country specializes in a unique craft mastered by local artisans over generations. The regional essence, history, culture and identities

are reflected and expressed through crafts. Thus, crafts are a form of regional language, and depict the unique value system, social fabric and traditional practices of a region. Artisans practicing a craft generally work in a congregation, known as craft cluster or community, that facilitates social bonding and fosters unity.

Indian crafts have evolved amidst diversity and are mostly community-based, tradition-driven, and purchased for cultural or utilitarian reasons (Sinha, 2019). Traditional Indian crafts enable communication between maker and user. They have a very indigenous face and roots. Indian crafts have also been turning the wheels of the economy (Jaitly, 2005). Across the country, there are multiple craft communities- Kutch embroidery, Tangaliya in Surendranagar, Handloom weaving of Varanasi, Pashmina shawls of Kashmir, Chikankari of Lucknow, Madhubani in Bihar, Warli paintings in Maharashtra and Phad scroll painting, Dabu block print, blue pottery, puppet-making and Bandhani of Rajasthan to name a few.

Traditionally craftwork was completely based on manual dexterity, using natural material from local areas, drawing inspiration from nature and life, and applying traditional craft wisdom by native artisans. Craft products were made by artisans at their leisure, for own use or for gifting in the community. Modernization witnessed the appreciation and demand of crafts in national and international markets, competition from mass-produced items, and subsequent commercialization of craft. Crafts started languishing or changing form, and struggled to sustain themselves in the hyper-competitive environment. These developments created a need for interventions of various experts to give impetus to craftwork, facilitate the sustainable development of craft communities, and also to act as a bridge between the craft sector and the commercial world.

Learning Unlearning Relearning (LUR) in context of craft communities

Craft communities have been an important and integral part of human civilization since its evolution. These communities have learned sustenance and adaptation in changing times through repeated cycles of unlearning and relearning as societies progressed, became more tech-oriented, fast and competitive. Craft communities depend on 'invisible' knowledge exchange networks (Sinha, 2019). During their craft journeys, craftsmen as well as the craft, are influenced by various social, environmental and technological factors. Lave (1996) asserted that "learning is changing participation as part of changing social practice when participants engage with each other in a social-historical world. Knowledge is constructed and modified in use." The statement holds immense relevance of LUR in the evolution of craft communities as a response to changing lifestyle and environmental demands, through participation and practice while insisting on upholding historical association and relevance to the social fabric. Craft communities evolve, sustain and develop either through self-learning or through interventions of external agents or facilitators. These facilitators generally include craft experts, educators, craft and design institutes, governmental and non-governmental

organizations, designers, brands and business entities as part of CSR activities. Role of external agents in inducing learning is critical for introducing different perspectives (Louis, 1980); external agents increase receptivity (Sieber et al., 1972).

Learning is the act of gaining knowledge, skills, practices and behaviors. Learning happens through observing, studying, practicing and experiencing. Learning takes place either through self-initiation or is induced by external agents through their interventions. Learning process happens over time, through the right attitude of engagement and practice. Unlearning is the act of unknowing, discarding or purging established knowledge and skill sets, in the event of their obsolescence or need of new knowledge. Unlearning creates room for fresh knowledge. It challenges previously held conceptions and biases and fosters required changes in mindset and attitude. It might lead to new discovery and introspection. Relearning refers to re-memorizing and retention of relevant and updated knowledge, in new contexts and perspectives. It is a powerful concept that can help people stay relevant and updated with the latest developments. Relearning can help people refresh their skills, gain insights, and put what they've learned into practice

Craftsmanship signifies the basic human impulse to do a job well for its own sake, and good craftsmanship involves developing skills and focusing on the work rather than ourselves (Sennett, 2008). 'Doing a job well' and 'developing skills' are depictions of the quintessential role of LUR in the sustenance and progression of craft communities. The LUR phenomenon is inherent to the existence of craft communities and is inseparable from the evolutionary journeys of crafts and craftsmen. Originally LUR has been taking place in craft communities in a natural, self-learned and self-induced manner since ages. The need for involvement of facilitators emerged due to threats of declining product demand, modern styles, availability of affordable, durable and trendy products and the constraints of resources.

The objectives of craft interventions span from design, new product development, market linkages, marketing, packaging, branding, pricing; although scope may vary but effective LUR remains a constant requisite for making an intervention impactful. As external agents started getting involved in the development of craft communities, new perspectives and discussions emerged in terms of the types of interventions, objectives, modes and deliverables. The external agents here, can be understood as individuals and organizations outside the core system of the craft community. In the times of uncertainties and rapid changes, a deeper insight is needed in modalities and effectiveness of such interventions. The Covid-19 pandemic further disrupted the socio-economic landscape, increasing the need to revisit and re-design interventions to make them more meaningful and relevant to the craft communities.

There is dearth of research in the areas of analysing the experiences of facilitators engaging with craft communities. This research was undertaken to address the gap

by unveiling craft intervention challenges, outcomes and facilitators' perspectives through the lens of the Learning-Unlearning-Relearning phenomenon of the craftsmen.

METHODOLOGY

The specific objectives of the research were to:

- i. Gain insights into the nature of LUR interventions, challenges, and outcomes
- ii. Unveil the perspectives of facilitators on making the process of learning-unlearning-relearning more meaningful for craft communities
- iii. Propose a framework for meaningful and thoughtful LUR interventions for craft communities

Semi-structured personal interviews with 7 craft experts (facilitators of craft intervention) were conducted. These experts comprised of curators, designers, design educators, social entrepreneurs, and consultants. They had rich experience of working with diverse crafts for more than 10 years. Their interventions included craft communities of Rajasthan (Block printing, Bandhani, Handmade tassels, Dabu printing, Applique, and Sindhi embroidery, Kota doria, Tie & dye, Salawas Durries, Gota patti, Bagrua and Sanganer block printing), Venkatagiri in Andhra Pradesh, Narayanpet Sarees in Hyderabad, Mysore Silk Sarees in Mysore, Manyavanda Ikkat in Orissa, Gopalpur Tussar silk in Orissa, Jadopatia in Jharkhand, Puans in Mizoram, Kutch textiles (Batik block printing, Bhujodi, Ajrak block printing, Tie-dye), Patan Patola and Tangaliya of Gujarat, Himroo weaving in Aurangabad, Solapur Durri Maharashtra, Kashmir crafts- Pashmina shawls, Kanni shawl weaving, Carpet weaving, Sozni embroidery and Papier-mâché.

Transcripts were prepared and subjected to narrative analysis to deduce commonalities and distinctions that emerge from the narratives about craft communities' learning, unlearning, and relearning processes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents the narratives of the interview respondents, summarized in three sub-sections in accordance to the research objectives.

(I) Types of intervention

Initiatives for the revival, development, and resilience of craft communities are diverse ranging from skill development and upgrading, design intervention, new product development, product diversification, material manipulation, pattern making, sewing, draping, 'create from waste', sourcing, production efficiency, quality management, inventory management, packaging, branding, marketing, retailing, social media marketing, digital presence management, Intellectual Property Rights, Geographical

Indications (GI tag), Marketing, Retailing and craft education reveals that and customer relationship management. Several innovative techniques such as new embroidery stitches, waste minimization and utilization etc are introduced to the craftsmen, highlighting the potential of merging traditional craftsmanship with modern methods. New product ranges are suggested for product category diversification; new markets are explored. Through the intervention, craftsmen are assisted for website development, social media marketing and connecting with consumers through storytelling.

In most cases, interventions are required for developing forward and backward linkages to facilitate sourcing, marketing, retailing, financing, knowledge sharing with craft centres, access to craft repositories, hand-holding by government craft bodies and understanding the downstream supply chain dynamics.

Craftsmen, traditionally have always been inclined to get more design inputs and assistance in design explorations but in recent years their focus has been on learning social media marketing and branding skills. Many craft clusters have shown interest in the presentation and packaging of their products. They have begun to understand that such elements carry value in consumer decision-making.

Craftsmen need entrepreneurial inputs; they should be developed into 'craftpreneurs' and not simply as skilled artisans; strategic thinking and systematic designing are essential inputs for creatively and intelligently crafting their artwork.

(II) Challenges in the LUR interventions

Various challenges are encountered during interventions; these challenges are geography-, culture- and craft-specific. As stated by experts during interviews- "Craft communities from Southern India, like Venkatgiri cluster, are not very open to suggestions especially coming from someone outside their region or not practicing the craft himself. Craftsmen approve of male facilitators more than females. Some communities from Southern and Eastern India (Orissa, West Bengal) show a lack of work discipline and time management. They enjoy a more relaxed lifestyle, have attitudinal barriers and are hesitant in accepting changes, working on set targets and specific timelines. Craft communities from Western India (Gujarat) participate in workshops and interact with interest; they are good listeners and talkers. However, while practicing, they filter the information and incorporate what they feel is required according to their discretion. Working with Northeast clusters has always been challenging. These communities open up only with people who understand and respect their history and culture."

Local language is a challenge; there is higher acceptance of a facilitator who can converse in the native dialect. Interventions fail to fulfill purpose due to language barrier. It is difficult to make artisans understand the market requirements in terms of

colors, processes, placements etc. In many clusters, it is difficult to motivate craftsmen; they are either diverted towards fancier, higher-paying jobs or are frustrated due to irregular and scarce money inflow. At times, it becomes challenging to submit orders on time due to the casual attitude of artisans as very few would take it as a serious time-bound commitment. There are challenges in maintaining the product quality for large orders. With the purpose of economizing, some craft communities have started using cheaper quality raw material. During workshops and training programs, craftsmen are either distracted due to their social engagement or are concerned about their wage loss compensation. Monetary gains remain the most influential motivational factor for craft communities to engage in the LUR processes. There is a strong depiction of perceived roles in the craft communities, which inhibits their learning. Craftsmen do not have visibility and understanding of the markets; they make what they think is in trend, and are reluctant in exploring new ways.

Craft clusters are 'communities of practice', hence whatever is the core objective of an intervention, it has to be practice-based. For LUR to be effective, openness and receptivity needs to be nurtured amongst craft communities.

As design is always evolving, and market needs are fast changing, systematic, well-planned interventions are critical for the sustenance of hand-crafted products. Experiments with improvements in existing products by changing one aspect at a time such as raw material, colour, style, silhouette, structure or quality, have established that interventions must be thoughtful, optimally paced and must have a feedback mechanism. Carefully designed interventions enable craftsmen to understand, acknowledge and implement the changes.

Most craftsmen attempt to inhibit new learning due to four major reasons (a) a strong belief that the approach used by them in their crafts work and the designs created by them are the best, (ii) sense of insecurity of detaching with something that has been an inherent part of their lives and that establishes connection with their former generations (iii) uneasiness of moving out of a comfort bubble (iv) perceiving the interventions to have false pretense of empathy and support, and even actually being exploited for gains by brands, NGOs, government departments, craft and design institutes, and designers.

Apart from modernization challenges, stress of keeping up with latest trends, competitors, marketing their products and developing reliable market linkages are amongst the biggest challenges. These are not just technical or trade difficulties; the psychological pressure built by them has to be considered while designing an LUR intervention. LUR has majorly hinging around scouting the right market opportunities, addressing difficulties of keeping pace with current trends, and combatting uncertainties in the ecommerce era.

Unlearning has a huge resistance and is the most challenging phase of the craft intervention. The craftsmen have a deep emotional connection with their craft practices; for some it is a way to cherish their age-old traditions and honor their forefathers and for some it has memories, nostalgia and a sense of 'inseparability'. Relearning is completely driven by attitude formation and change. Case studies have stimulated craftsmen to develop acceptance for new approaches. Relearning is completely driven by attitude formation and change. Case studies stimulate craftsmen to develop acceptance towards new approaches. Relearning takes place when a context is provided, and relevance for this context is established. This can be done through inspirational tales, life journeys, transformations and specific impacts such as an increase in sales and market reach or positive customer feedback. Relearning initiatives must introduce refocusing, critical thinking and change management.

(III) Outcomes or impacts of LUR interventions

LUR interventions encourage craft communities to experiment with new approaches, incorporate new elements in their processes and explore avenues to improve product look, appeal and functionality. Design interventions result in creating contemporary designs, new motifs, exploration of new material and colour palettes, and designing products for the modern day consumers. Through interventions, craftsmen are able to rethink their art, celebrate its unique identity, while accentuating cultural richness, pride and authenticity of handmade goods.

Management and marketing interventions have played crucial role in identifying new markets, participation in crafts fairs and exhibitions, exports management, financial management, inventory management, products and processes certifications, promotions, sales management, digital communication, social media presence, market analysis, customer experience management, collaboration with brands, businesses and other agencies. Business incubation and support for craftsmen's entrepreneurial journeys have emerged as much sought-after intervention areas.

Another category of interventions that have reformed crafts are ethnographic interventions. These initiatives introduce craftsmen to art appreciation, cross-cultural inspirations, artistic fusion, ethical reflection, inclusion of diverse perspectives and advanced sensibilities for self and surroundings.

Social interventions have always proved to be impactful in strengthening the social thread and at the same time inducing preparedness for change. Such intervention build community support, cohesion and interactions; they bring a positive change in communities, organize social events, initiate health and education services and promote well-being.

Recent years have witnessed promising impact of technological interventions in the craft sector. Inputs related to ergonomics, time and motion study, work space design,

work flow optimization have not only increased the practical efficiency but also the morale and productivity, while reducing health risks.

Constructive and functional LUR interventions take place by incorporating context-building, cultural relativism and traditional ethics. Learning, unlearning and relearning happens for both craftsmen and the facilitator through constant exchange of ideas, perspectives, problems, concepts and methods. Openness and trust are strong pillars that support LUR interventions. There is higher receptivity when interventions are thoughtful, introducing minor or phased modifications, and not radical changes. Altering or introducing multiple concepts in a small duration may create confusion and repulsion. Small, well-planned, preferably uni-dimensional inputs are perceived better by craftsmen. For instance, teaching new designs, without changing the design aesthetics much, or simply changing the block spacing may create a new look and appeal, or changing the cotton and gold zari composition in saree weaving.

The approach, attitude and persona of the facilitator impacts the interest and persistence of the learners. When communities connect with the facilitator and resonate with him, learning becomes easier. The facilitator should be able to encourage curiosity and different viewpoints by asking open-ended questions; he should be able to engage participants, should be an active listener and must adorn an objective, open and empathetic attitude.

The Indian craft sector is the second largest employer, next only to agriculture, with more than 200 million craftsmen. It experienced dramatic changes because of the pandemic. According to a 2021 report by the British Council in partnership with Fashion Revolution India, the pandemic had a massive social and economic impact on craft communities; it impeded employment opportunities, and triggered a mass exodus of artisans from cities to villages. The journey for survival and adaptation, gaining resilience from the disruption of lives and livelihoods, compelled craft communities to learn the new normal, unlearn old practices, and reconfigure their existence. LUR for craft communities in the post-pandemic world require empathetic, innovative, and more practical approaches. In the VUCA world, LUR programs for craft communities need to be oriented towards not only upskilling but also on their psychological flexibility and adaptability.

Figure 1 depicts the types of interventions that facilitate LUR in craft communities.

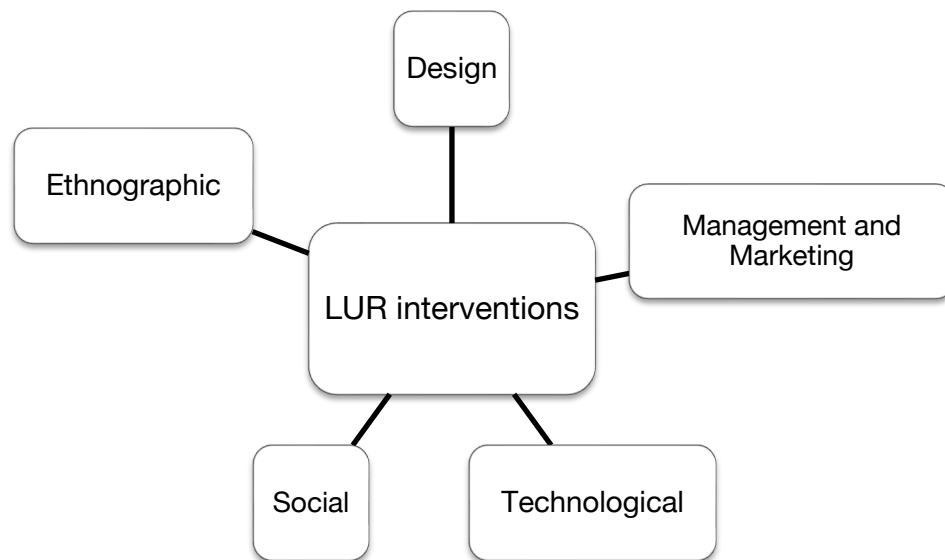


Figure 1. Major types of intervention facilitating LUR in craft communities

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Craftsmen are repositories of community knowledge and skills. Their creative intelligence and local wisdom are the pillars of their unique identity. The changing times of uncertainties and modernization compel them to upgrade and re-skill. They must rethink and redefine their crafts, without losing their uniqueness and socio-cultural essence. The LUR interventions for craft communities need to be specially designed using altered approaches that are based on empathy and transformative strategies.

Since crafts are inseparable from traditions and history, value-centred and contextual learning environments need to be crafted. In the post-pandemic era, LUR modules for craft communities must include capacity building and 'new' skills for resilience, preparedness for reformatory journeys, reference to regional context and cultural appropriation.

LUR modules for craft communities should be ambitious and reforming, yet craft- and culture-appropriate. The interventions have to be crafted uniquely based on geography, gender, culture, and may differ from cluster to cluster. Intervention curricula must not only accentuate upskilling and diversifying, but the aim should be on entrepreneurial development using mix-method pedagogies, audio-visual aid, social media, visits, experts, customer and brand interactions.

Based on the findings of the research, a framework is proposed for facilitating LUR interventions in craft communities for holistic development. The framework proposes an ecosystem approach for interventions in craft communities to facilitate learning, unlearning and relearning. For impactful interventions, the framework suggests LUR modules be prepared in five phases. The proposed framework is depicted in Figure 2.

Tenets for the LUR Intervention <i>Cultural Preservation</i> <i>Integrity</i> <i>Legacy</i> <i>Entrepreneurial Aptitude</i>	Purpose	Why is the intervention needed?
		What is expected from it?
	Specific Objectives	Specific area of intervention
		LUR context
	Synergization	Communication
		Collaboration
		Innovative adaptability
		Resilience
	Modalities	Contents
		Methods
		Execution and follow-up schedule
		Impact assessment

Figure 2. Proposed framework for LUR interventions in craft communities
Source: Compiled by authors

Description of the phases is given below

Phase 1 - Establishing reference to the core tenets of craft communities	Cultural preservation for ensuring connectedness to the community history, heritage and traditions
	Integrity through building an environment of trust and transparency
	Legacy of passing of wisdom through the craft, with pride in its preservation or evolution.
	Entrepreneurial aptitude signifying passion, leadership, creative problem solving, risk taking
Phase 2 - Formulate clarity of purpose	Stating the need and rationale of the intervention
	Identifying the expected outcomes or deliverables
Phase 3 - Identify the specific objectives	Delineating the specific areas of intervention
	Outlining the context in which learning, unlearning and relearning have to be facilitated
Phase 4 - Synergization	Communication for encouraging exchange of ideas, concepts, problems, journeys
	Collaboration for developing and fostering supportive, inter-connected systems
	Innovative adaptability for facilitating vision, adaptability, creativity, versatility and newness
	Resilience for moving forward in the face of challenges and cultivating ability to bounce back from setbacks
Phase 5 - Modalities	Well-structured, thoughtful and relevant contents for the intervention
	Appropriate Methods according to socio-cultural and technical dimensions of the craft
	Execution and follow-up schedule for implementing the module and planning continued support
	Impact assessment that helps in evaluating the effectiveness of intervention and provides feedback for future endeavours

CONCLUSION

Craftsmanship is 'an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake. The craftsman explores these dimensions of skill, commitment and judgement by focusing on the intimate connection between hand and head' - Sennett (2009) interestingly aligns the LUR perspective in the journeys of craftsmen, emphasizing the impulse of exploring, improving and enduring in their evolution.

The research concludes by establishing that learning, unlearning and relearning processes are the instruments through which craft communities establish and refine their social and cultural identities. Facilitator persona, empathy and respect for crafts and communities are as important as the design, content and methods of interventions. To be effective, the LUR modules must be contextual, pertinent and nuanced to the complexities and subtleties of the respective craft community.

The research proposed a framework for effective LUR suggesting the meta aspects which can be used to design craft interventions according to specific requirement of a craft community. The aims of these interventions, should be to nurture ecosystems to develop 'craftpreneurs'. While adopting innovation and newness, craft communities should be able to uphold their cultural continuity and traditional practices. The facilitator must take into cognizance the barriers in the LUR interventions and employ a solution that is most suitable according to the craft, culture, and geography. Empathy and trust also emerged as critical elements that could positively alter craftsman attitudes and receptivity towards the intervention.

The research finding have implications for design educators, practitioners, craft-based brands, non-governmental organizations, and social enterprises that facilitate craft communities through various interventions and contribute to the mission of social sustainability and environmental leadership.

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