A Comparative Study of the Effectiveness of Moral Education in a Cross-Cultural Context: Evidence from Malaysian Educational Institutions

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Abstract

Moral education has long been aimed at developing moral concepts, but its effectiveness in a cross-cultural environment is often questioned. This study explored the impact of cultural identity on the effectiveness of moral education in a multicultural context, focusing on moral behavior and moral values. A quantitative research design was employed, involving a sample of 314 respondents from various cultural backgrounds in Malaysia. Using a convenient sampling method, questionnaires were distributed to measure respondents' perceptions of cultural identity, moral values, and moral behavior. The study was conducted in educational institutions across Malaysia, providing a diverse setting for assessing cross-cultural

differences. A regression analysis was performed to examine the relationships between cultural identity and the effectiveness of moral education. The findings revealed that cultural identity significantly influences moral behavior and moral values, suggesting that the effectiveness of moral education varies depending on the cultural background of the students. The study concludes that while moral education is influenced by cultural identity in a cross-cultural context, its impact on moral behavior and values differs among students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: moral education, cross-cultural education; teaching effectiveness, Malaysia

1. Introduction

The more dominant consensus of core ethical values is for an appreciation based on dialogue, life practice, directed activity, emotion and caring (Cheng et al., 2021; Hand, 2017). This also brings a clear goal to moral education, which, broadly speaking, aims to enable learners to adhere strictly to core moral standards (Gao & Wang, 2021). This is most evident in those areas with a long history and deep cultural heritage, because morality is the consensus of people in the culture and at a particular historical time (Dahlsgaard et al., 2005). However, with the development of population migration, globalization and international education, moral education which relies on local culture is no longer suitable.

With the attention paid to cross-cultural issues in education, the development of moral education must also face the problems brought by cross-cultural issues (Bravo et al., 2019).This dilemma is reflected, on the one hand, in the question of how to achieve, through education, the shaping of the moral values of those who are educated in different cultural backgrounds and habits(Harmadi et al., 2022), and more importantly, in the question of how the effectiveness of moral education can be carried out in a cross-cultural context (Suyahman, 2023).

1.1 Problem Statement

In practice, the problem faced by moral education in an intercultural environment is that it is difficult to specify effective educational methods and strategies. Many international secondary schools are only able to consider the most universal values as the core of moral values teaching in the development of moral education programmes (Tang & Wang, 2021), but this is a clear avoidance of cross-cultural issues in the face of cultural diversity (Kvamme, 2020). Many studies have pointed out that moral education at the secondary level may be influenced by the language, historical stories, and social relationships that students receive (Siddiqui & Habib, 2021; Yang, 2021; Rusmin et al., 2020). Unfortunately, in many international high school ethics classrooms, there is no instructional design that allows students to experience cross-cultural ethical values through the perception of cultural factors or cultural differences (Heng, 2018).

Similarly, there are many shortcomings in the existing research, which is excessively homogenous in terms of the perspective of moral education, with a large number of repetitive studies using different stages of education as a perspective (Zhang & Zhou, 2020). Then there is a lack of empirical research on many dimensions that should be noted such as region,

culture, ethnicity, etc., which leads to low transferability and expandability of existing research (Cheng, 2019; Harmawati et al., 2022). In addition, much of the research on moral education does not take into account that cultural context may have an impact on the effectiveness of moral education (Yuan, 2022). This also makes it difficult to test the effectiveness of moral education in some multicultural areas (e.g., the United States, Singapore, Malaysia).

1.2 Research Objective and Research Question

This study makes a comparative analysis of the effectiveness of moral education in Malaysia under different cultural backgrounds. This study compares the effectiveness of moral education under cultural differences by answering the following questions.

1) What are the differences in levels of moral reasoning among students from different cultural backgrounds？
2) What are the predominant values emphasized in moral education programs across different cultures?
3) What is the influence of cultural context on students' perceptions of ethical behavior and decision-making?
4) What specific cultural factors significantly contribute to differences in moral development?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Development of Moral Education

Moral education has for a long time served to satisfy people's quest for moral values. The origin of moral education can be traced back to Confucian moral education in ancient China, which developed in a wave-like process because moral education served politics in ancient times (Cheng et al., 2021). In the same period, the study of classical philosophy in the West also aroused concern for 'virtue'. Although these are not the same, they both contain a concern for moral values (Darnell et al., 2019). At the macro level, the establishment of a fair and just society can be promoted through moral education in conjunction with the law. Moral education is reflected in the religious and philosophical values of many cultures. At the micro level, morality is important in shaping the character and behaviour of individuals; the study of ethics helps students to understand their own moral values and behaviour (Frisancho & Delgado, 2018).

As far as current research is concerned, researchers believe that it is important to categorise studies according to the age and stage of education, as the purpose of education and learning styles vary from one stage to another (Shaidullina et al., 2023). Many studies consider early childhood education to be important, as it is the initial stage in which a person's values are shaped and he or she is exposed to society (Cline, 2017). Therefore, researchers believe that the first education at this stage passively receives moral education in the contact environment, so the main areas of research include health, language, social, science and art. Secondly, many researchers have studied the impact on morality that arises from the cultural education received at different ages.

2.2 Moral Education Across Cultural Contexts

Moral education aims to develop moral understanding, reasoning and behaviour. It is strongly influenced by cultural contexts as different societies emphasise different moral values and ethical principles. This literature review explores key research and theoretical perspectives on moral education in different cultural contexts, highlighting how cultural factors influence moral development and educational approaches (Cao & Meng, 2022). Haidt and Joseph (2004) propose that while some aspects of morality, such as harm and fairness, might be universally recognized, cultural contexts significantly shape the specific virtues and moral priorities emphasized within a society. Dahlsgaard et al. (2005) support this view by identifying core virtues such as wisdom, courage, and humanity that appear across cultures and historical periods. However, they also note that the expression and teaching of these virtues vary significantly, suggesting a nuanced approach to moral education that respects cultural differences (Patton, 2023), and the need for culturally responsive teaching in moral education is a recurring theme. Nucci and Narvaez (2008) stress that educators must understand and respect cultural differences in moral values. They suggest that moral education should be inclusive, integrating diverse cultural perspectives and encouraging students to critically engage with different moral frameworks.

2.3 Effectiveness of Moral Education in Cross-Cultural Settings

The effectiveness of moral education programs is a critical area of study, particularly in an increasingly globalized world where diverse cultural values intersect. But for the complex and uncertain cultural environment, the effectiveness of moral education has long been questioned (Lisievici & Andronie, 2016).

Studies have shown that moral education can be effective in enhancing students' moral reasoning abilities, particularly when it includes active engagement with ethical dilemmas and opportunities for reflection and discussion (Nucci, 2006). Some studies also emphasize the harvest of moral concepts and values in moral education (Julia et al., 2020). This shows that cultural factors may have a potential impact on moral education value and moral education on people's mental change. Purwaningsih and Ridha (2024) explore the effectiveness of different educational approaches to culture from a moral perspective, and how cultural values and moral education can mutually promote each other.

However, the effectiveness of moral education is also influenced by how well the curriculum aligns with the students' cultural values and experiences. For instance, a moral education program rooted in Western ethical theories may not resonate with students from non-Western backgrounds, potentially leading to disengagement or conflict (Narvaez& Hill, 2010). This highlights the need for culturally responsive moral education that considers the values and moral frameworks of the student population. Unfortunately, since mainstream scholars began to focus on mainstream cultural values and the cognitive convergence brought about by globalization, the research on the effectiveness of moral education from the cultural perspective has gradually decreased.

In terms of the practice of moral education, cross-cultural moral education has been

supported in many countries that carry out international education. Zhang et al. (2024) investigated the experience and effectiveness of students from different ethnic and family backgrounds participating in moral education at university level, and the results showed that there are obvious differences in moral education among students from different cultural backgrounds. Before that Nieuważny et al. (2021) discussed the potential impact of moral education on the inherent values in culture from the perspective of the core moral values in the cultural environment. They believed that moral education in line with the core values of a nation is effective in cultivating people's morality.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in two key theories: Social Domain Theory and Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development, both of which provide a foundation for understanding how cultural identity influences moral reasoning and behavior. Social Domain Theory, initially proposed by Turiel, offers a nuanced perspective on moral reasoning by distinguishing between three distinct domains of social knowledge: the moral, social-conventional, and personal domains (Msuya, 2019). According to this theory, the moral domain involves universal principles of justice, rights, and welfare that apply across cultural contexts, while the social-conventional domain encompasses norms that are specific to particular societies, such as social etiquette or dress codes (Andrews & Talwar, 2023). The personal domain, on the other hand, refers to individual preferences and choices that are not regulated by moral or social rules, thereby allowing for personal autonomy. This framework suggests that while cultural identity significantly influences how individuals interpret and prioritize these domains, there remains a distinction between moral rules, which are seen as universal, and social conventions, which are culturally specific. Thus, cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping moral values, the perceived effectiveness of moral education, and ultimately, moral behavior.

In addition to Social Domain Theory, Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development (TMD) developed by Lawrence Kohlberg on 1956, which provides a developmental perspective on moral reasoning that has been widely influential in the field. Kohlberg's theory posits that individuals progress through a series of stages of moral development, beginning with the pre-conventional level, where moral reasoning is primarily driven by self-interest and the desire to avoid punishment (Zhang & Zhao, 2017). As individuals mature, they enter the conventional level, where they begin to conform to societal norms and seek approval from others by adhering to established rules and expectations. The final stage, the post-conventional level, is characterized by the development of autonomous ethical principles that may transcend societal norms, focusing on abstract concepts such as justice and human rights.

However, Kohlberg's theory has faced criticism for its lack of cultural sensitivity, as it was largely based on studies conducted in Western contexts and does not adequately account for the diversity of moral reasoning across different cultures (Garrigan et al., 2018). Critics argue that Kohlberg's stages may not fully capture the moral reasoning processes in collectivist cultures, where communal values and social harmony often take precedence over individual rights and autonomy. To address these limitations, this study adopts a neo-Kohlbergian approach, which

seeks to incorporate cultural variability into the understanding of moral development. The neo-Kohlbergian approach acknowledges that while Kohlberg's stages provide a useful framework for understanding moral development, cultural context plays a critical role in determining how individuals navigate these stages. By integrating insights from cultural psychology, this approach aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which cultural identity influences moral reasoning.

In summary, the theoretical framework (Figure 1) of this study draws on Social Domain Theory and a culturally adapted version of Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development to explore the complex relationship between cultural identity and moral reasoning. This framework underscores the importance of considering cultural context in the study of moral development, as cultural norms and values significantly shape individuals' moral judgments and behaviors. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which cultural identity influences the effectiveness of moral education and the development of moral values and behaviors across different cultural contexts.
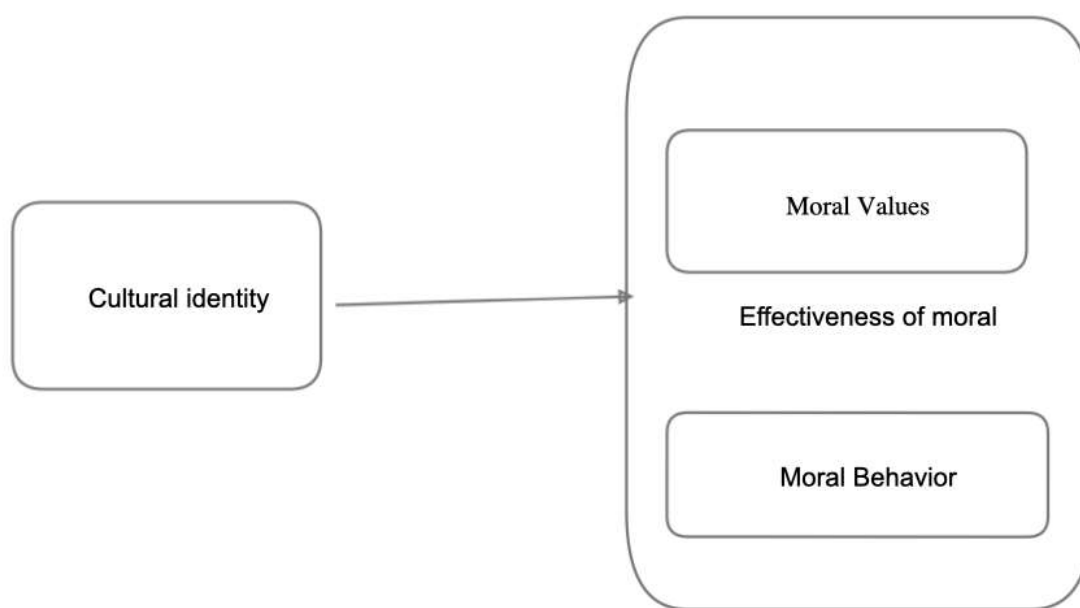
Figure 1. Conceptual Framework: Cultural Identify Development

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study is a comparative study using quantitative research methods to describe the differences in cross-cultural moral education (CME) and the cultural factors that contribute to the effectiveness of moral education (EME) by measuring and analyzing the moral behaviors and moral values of students from different cultural backgrounds who participate in moral education. By employing a quantitative approach, the study aims to objectively assess how cultural variables influence both the moral development of students and the overall success of

moral education programs. The analysis focuses on identifying significant differences in moral values and behaviors across cultures, providing insight into the cultural factors that enhance or hinder the effectiveness of CME (Andrews & Talwar, 2023).

3.2 Sampling Method

This study used convenience sampling to collect data from 314 respondents from a Public University (Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur). Due to time cost constraints, the researcher selected students who participated in the cross-cultural class from a part of the interpersonal relationship to distribute the questionnaire based on the online interactive form. Convenience sampling has been conducted due to this study has a specific group of people who are already involved around the researcher (Etikan, et al., 2016)

3.3 Instrument

The Instrument of this study completed using a self-report scale with the Moral Judgment Test (MJT) developed by Georg Lind (1998). The questions were based on the construction of a moral evaluation model based on quality development of college students proposed by Yuan (2022), overall, the questions were consisted from 36 questions (5 degrees Scale) and 6 multiple choose questions. It is applicable to study the different educational effects of students' participation in moral education under the influence of cultural differences. These questions reflect different aspects of moral education from three dimensions: perception of moral behavior, moral values, and cultural identity. The scale was created as an online interactive form for distribution and data recovery using an online questionnaire distribution tool. Before we conduct the Data Collection, the reliability was tested from a pilot test, presented in Table 1 using Cronbach's α coefficient. The findings imply that all items are reliable.

In addition, for the four-factor structure of the scale (2 dimensions of Moral Values + 2 dimensions of Moral Behavior), the CFA fit indices are as Table 1, the overall CFA fit indices meet academic standards, supporting the construct validity of the scale.

Table 1. Reliability Test and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Scale and Sub-dimension	Cronbach's α	Number of Items
Moral Values Scale - Collectivism Dimension	0.82	6
Moral Values Scale - Individualism Dimension	0.78	5
Moral Behavior Scale - Prosocial Behavior Dimension	0.85	7
Moral Behavior Scale - Norm Compliance Dimension	0.75	4

Table 2. Model Fit Indices for the Structural Equation Model

Fit Index	Value	Fit Criterion
χ^2/df	2.37	< 3
CFI	0.93	> 0.9
TLI	0.92	> 0.9
RMSEA	0.065	< 0.08
SRMR	0.058	< 0.08

3.4 Power Analysis

To analyze the power of this study within a small sample size context, G*Power version 3.1.7 software was used to conduct a multivariate linear regression analysis of the effect sizes for the variables. Results indicate that the original sample size (n=314) provides sufficient power for medium-effect analyses (e.g., cultural identity to moral values), far exceeding the required 67 participants. It also largely meets requirements for small-effect analyses (e.g., cultural identity to moral behavior, intergroup racial differences), with 285/308 participants meeting the threshold.

Table 3. Power Analysis Results for Effect Sizes and Required Sample Sizes

Dependent Variable	Effect Size (f^2)	Rationale for Effect Size	Required Sample Size	Sample Size
Moral Values	0.14	β=0.35 (Cohen, 1988)	67	314
Moral Behavior	0.04	β=0.20 (Cohen, 1988)	285	314

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were coded and data analysed using IBM SPSS. A T-Test was conducted on the variables related to the respondents' cultural background (including ethnicity, mother tongue, and religious affiliation) with the moral behaviour and moral values scales. To determine the relationship between cultural factors and moral behaviour and moral values. Also, a linear

regression analysis was conducted to analyse cultural identity in moral education in relation to moral values and moral behaviour. The analysis determines the impact of cultural factors on the effectiveness of moral education for students.

4. Findings and Discussion

From the regression test, the unstandardised coefficient (B) for Ethical Behaviour is 0.25 with a standard error of 0.10. The standardised coefficient (Beta) is 0.20 indicating that for every unit increase in Cultural Identity, there is a 0.25 unit increase in Ethical Behaviour. This relationship is statistically significant with a t-value of 2.50 and a p-value of 0.015. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is 1.20 indicating that there is no significant problem of multicollinearity. The unstandardised coefficient (B) from Moral Values is 0.40 with a standard error of 0.12. The standardised coefficient (Beta) is 0.35 indicating that for every unit increase in cultural identity, there is an increase in moral values by 0.40 units. This relationship is also statistically significant with a t-value of 3.33 and a p-value of 0.001. Similarly, the VIF for moral values is 1.20 which is similar to that for ethical behaviours indicating that there is no significant problem of multicollinearity.

Table 4. Independent Samples Test for Ethnicity

Component	Malay	Chinese (Local)	Chinese (International)	Indian	Others	T	P
Cultural identity	3.10±0.25	3.21±0.24	3.15±0.26	3.18±0.22	3.17±0.27	1.033	0.16
Moral behaviour	4.80±0.22	4.86±0.21	4.83±0.20	4.85±0.19	4.84±0.23	1.023	0.02
Moral value	4.00±0.24	4.01±0.23	3.98±0.22	4.02±0.21	4.00±0.25	1.352	0.08

Table 5. Regression analysis

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
(Constant)	1.5	0.3		5	0	1.5
Moral behaviour	0.25	0.1	0.2	2.5	0.015	0.25
Moral value	0.4	0.12	0.35	3.33	0.001	0.4

R Square	0.5
F	22.12
P	<0.001
Independent variable: Cultural identity	

In summary, the regression analysis reveals that cultural identity significantly influences both moral behavior and moral value, explaining half of the variance in these moral dimensions. Both dependent variables show positive and statistically significant relationships with cultural identity, suggesting that stronger cultural identity is associated with higher levels of moral behavior and moral value. Combined with previous studies, it is found that moral values and moral behavior represent people's behavioral norms for their own principles and morals, while cultural identity represents a person's core cultural perception (Jia & Krettenauer, 2017; Graham et al.,2016). The research on this regression reflects the influence of culture itself on people's moral behavior and moral values.

The study revealed that the levels of moral reasoning among students from different ethnic groups in Malaysia were remarkably similar. While there were statistically significant differences in moral behavior across these groups, the variations were minimal, indicating that students from diverse cultural backgrounds exhibit comparable levels of moral reasoning. The slight differences observed were influenced by specific cultural factors but did not signify major disparities in moral reasoning. Additionally, the study found that moral values were consistently emphasized across all cultural backgrounds, with no significant differences detected. This consistency suggests that the moral education curriculum in Malaysia is designed to be universally relevant, appealing to students from various ethnicities by promoting common moral principles. Moreover, the study highlighted that cultural identity plays a subtle yet important role in shaping students' ethical behavior and decision-making. The regression analysis showed that students with a stronger cultural identity demonstrated higher levels of ethical behavior and moral values, indicating that cultural identity has a nuanced influence on moral development.

The study's finding that cultural identity positively influences moral behavior and values. This is consistent with the views of researchers who have emphasized the importance of cultural identity in moral development (Ceccon et al., 2024). This study extends these findings by showing that even in a multicultural society like Malaysia, where ethnic groups are diverse yet integrated, cultural identity remains a key factor in moral development. However, unlike studies that have found significant differences in moral reasoning across different cultural contexts (Baldwin et al., 2024), this study suggests that within the Malaysian context, cultural differences do not lead to significant disparities in moral reasoning. The consistency in moral values across different cultural backgrounds found in this study also supports the idea of moral universalism, which posits that certain moral principles are universally recognized across cultures. This finding contrasts with cultural relativism, which suggests that moral values are

entirely culturally dependent. Instead, the results support a balanced view where universal moral principles coexist with culturally specific influences, moral foundations are both universal and culturally influenced (Atari et al., 2023). Thus, this study contributes to the understanding of how moral education can be designed to respect cultural diversity while promoting universal moral principles. It reinforces the notion that while cultural identity plays a subtle role in shaping moral behavior, there is a shared foundation of moral reasoning that transcends cultural differences, at least within the context of Malaysia's multicultural society.

Like most studies, this research has certain limitations, although the 314 samples in this study provided sufficient statistical power for detecting small to moderate effect sizes, the convenience sampling method limited to a single organization necessitates caution when generalizing findings to all multicultural students in Malaysia. Future research may benefit from employing stratified random sampling to cover diverse regions, institution types, and grade levels, thereby enhancing external validity.

Overall, the analysis suggests that there is a high degree of similarity in the T-test between cultural identity, moral behaviour, and moral values across the different ethnic groups, with only minor variations. The statistically significant difference in moral behaviour, while small, points to the influence of specific cultural factors that may shape behaviour in nuanced ways. These findings highlight the potential for universal approaches in moral education, while also acknowledging the subtle cultural differences that may influence moral development. This balance is crucial for developing inclusive educational programs that respect and integrate the diverse cultural backgrounds of students.

5. Implication

In the past research, the effectiveness of moral education has been analyzed from different perspectives, including educational technology, curriculum design, and educational psychology. However, few people pay attention to the effectiveness of moral education from the perspective of cultural studies (Hang, 2021). Obviously, moral education's emphasis on human behavior and mind should require us to deal with cultural differences in mind and development (Zhang et al., 2023). The findings of this study have significant implications for educators, policymakers, and researchers involved in moral education. For educators, the high degree of similarity in moral values and behaviors across different cultural groups suggests that a universal moral education curriculum can be effective (Winkler, 2022).

However, it is crucial to incorporate cultural nuances to make the curriculum more relatable and impactful for all students. Educators should also focus on strengthening students' cultural identities, as this has been shown to positively influence moral behavior and values. For policymakers, the study supports the development of inclusive moral education programs that address common ethical principles while respecting cultural differences. Adequate resources should be allocated for training educators in culturally responsive teaching methods and for developing diverse teaching materials. Continuous monitoring and evaluation of moral education programs are essential to ensure they meet the needs of all cultural groups. For researchers, the study highlights the need for further exploration of the subtle cultural factors influencing moral development. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the

evolution of cultural identity and its long-term impamoral reasoning (Bendermacher et al., 2021). Comparative studies with other countries can enhance understanding of how different educational systems address moral education and the role of cultural identity in moral development globally. Additionally, investigating the impact of specific policies on the effectiveness of moral education programs can provide valuable information for improving educational strategies.

6. Conclusion

The effectiveness of moral education is increasingly challenged by the complexities of teaching in a culturally diverse environment, where the acceptance of a singular set of moral values is no longer guaranteed. The findings of this study underscore the critical importance of adapting moral education to account for the intercultural dynamics that influence moral reasoning, behavior, and values. It is evident that cultural identity plays a significant role in shaping students' moral development, which suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach to moral education is insufficient in a multicultural context. Educators must recognize and address the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students, incorporating intercultural teaching and learning strategies that respect and integrate these differences. This may involve developing more inclusive curricula that reflect the values of various cultural groups, as well as fostering environments where students can critically engage with and reflect on their own cultural identities. Moreover, the study highlights the need for ongoing research to better understand the nuanced ways in which cultural factors influence the effectiveness of moral education. Without such considerations, moral education risks being ineffective or even counterproductive, potentially reinforcing cultural divisions rather than fostering a shared understanding of moral principles. Therefore, a more critical and reflective approach to moral education is necessary, one that is responsive to the cultural diversity of the student population and capable of evolving alongside it.

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