SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE RESONANCE OF NEGATIVE CHARACTERS IN FILM AND TELEVISION DRAMAS——TAKING THE TYPICAL NEGATIVE CHARACTERS IN THE AMERICAN DC EXTENDED UNIVERSE FILM SERIES AS AN EXAMPLE

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Abstract

The social psychology of villains has always attracted much attention. They have evolved from a single "evil" image to a complex character, which resonates with the audience and reflects people's understanding of the pressure, dilemma, and moral ambiguity in real life. For example, the Joker in The Dark Knight reveals the hypocrisy and moral double standards of society, Ares in Wonder Woman shows the violent tendencies of human beings, and Steppenwolf in Justice League touches on the threats and insecurities in the context of globalization. These villains are catalysts for the growth of heroes and trigger discussions about morality, philosophy, and human nature.

This article adopts a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data is to collect audience reviews through film review websites such as Douban and IMDb and adopts the method of coding analysis. Quantitative data collection collects audiences' immediate reactions and comments on these villains through social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, providing intuitive feelings and personal insights. The diversity of data collection ensures the comprehensiveness of the data and the depth of analysis, providing a rich material basis for subsequent coding and qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis methods such as reliability and validity tests and regression analysis are used.

Introduction

This article aims to explore the social and psychological reasons why villains in film and television works resonate with the audience, especially by analyzing the Joker, Ares, and Steppenwolf in the DC Extended Universe, exploring how these characters reflect the psychological attitudes and cultural anxieties of contemporary society. Villains embody the dark side of society, such as abuse of power, moral conflicts, and rebellious behavior against the system. Studying the performance of these characters and the audience's response can reveal the public's attitudes and feelings toward social issues. For example, the Joker

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challenges the moral and legal system in The Dark Knight, reflecting people's reflections on social injustice. This study will also explore the complexity of villains in moral and philosophical issues, and by analyzing these characters, reflect on the challenges of contemporary society, and provide a unique perspective for understanding the psychological state of modern society.

Research Problem

1. How do villains reflect real-world social issues and cultural anxieties?

2. Why do audiences resonate with certain villains?

3. How do the design and representation of villains affect the themes and narratives of films?

4. What role do villains play in cultural and media representations, especially when dealing with moral and philosophical issues?

5. What universal or unique cultural values and beliefs do villains in the DCEU express?

Literature Review

Countries outside China have conducted extensive and in-depth research on villains in movies. Research scholars believe that villains not only promote the development of the plot, but also reflect social reality and the complexity of human nature, and inspire the audience to think about social values, moral concepts, and the nature of human nature. For example, Young (2018) proposed the theory of moral repulsion and attraction, Propp (1968) believed that the moral conflicts caused by villains challenged the audience, Dines (2017) analyzed the villains' exploration of power, control, and moral boundaries, and Happer & Catherine (2013) pointed out that audiences from different cultural backgrounds have different understandings and emotional responses to the same villain. Overall, foreign research has revealed the diversified shaping of villains and their appeal to the audience.

In recent years, domestic scholars have paid attention to the social psychological phenomena caused by villains. Although started late, they have achieved remarkable results. Research shows that villains can resonate because their distinctive personalities and complex character traits make the audience feel identified. In addition, villains often carry deep-seated social problems and values, reflecting reality and human nature. These studies are mainly divided into the following types: First, in terms of the shaping and construction of villains, Ge C. et al. (2024) analyzed the shaping of villains in European and American animated films, and Wang K.W (2023) explored the construction of the image of the clown in superheroes. Secondly, in terms of the evolution and evolution of the image of villains, Chen K.W (2021) studied the evolution of the image of villains in science fiction films, and Zhan Y.M. (2021) analyzed the evolution of the image of the clown in European and American films. In addition, in terms of symbolic construction and comparative analysis, Sun Z.R (2021) explored the symbolic construction of the image of the clown in DC comics-adapted movies, and Zhen Y. (2020) compared the image of the clown in different movies. Finally, in terms of the importance and influence of characters in movies, Duan X.Y. (2018) studied the villains in American superhero movies; Zhang C.Y (2018) analyzed the image of villains in American movies, and Ma Q.H (2017) explored the image of villains in superhero movies. These studies emphasized the importance of villain characters in movies and their impact on the audience and society.

Social Psychology Theory

The social psychology theory framework includes identification theory, group dynamics, and moral repulsion and attraction theory. Identification theory argues that audiences connect cognitively and emotionally with villain characters, especially when the

characters represent conflicts or insecurities that the audience experiences in real life. For example, the Joker in The Dark Knight resonates with the audience with his rebellious personality and questioning of authority. Group dynamics studies the impact of group norms on audience response, such as Steppenwolf in Justice League attracting audiences who are dissatisfied with the existing order. Moral repulsion and attraction theory reveal audience responses to morally ambiguous characters. Ares in Wonder Woman inspires the dark side of humanity and makes the audience reflect on the boundaries between good and evil.

Narrative Theory and Cultural Studies

Narrative theory analyzes character construction and its impact on the audience, helping to understand how story structure affects the audience's emotional response. Villains are shaped into complex characters through background stories, motivations, and development. For example, the Joker's behavior reveals social contradictions and triggers the audience's thinking about justice and chaos. The invasion of Steppenwolf in Justice League becomes a catalyst for the unity of the league members, reinforcing the theme of cooperation and sacrifice.

Cultural studies theory emphasizes the exploration of cultural symbols and meanings, as well as the study of media and social influences. Villains often become symbols of specific social and cultural anxieties, and their behaviors and images reflect social contradictions and conflicts. For example, the villains in the DCEU reflect the exploration of the boundaries of power and morality and reveal the deep problems of society. How the media shapes and disseminates the perception of villains is crucial, and audiences from different cultural backgrounds may have different understandings and emotional responses to the same villain.

Combining the above theoretical framework, this study will explore in depth how the villains in DCEU affect the audience and resonate with them, and reveal the social psychology and cultural mechanisms behind these resonances. This will not only enhance the understanding of specific film and television works but also help to grasp the complex interaction between media content and audience response.

Research result

Research methods

This article adopts a mixed research method of qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative method adopts a three-level coding analysis method to collect data through film review websites, social media platforms, and academic databases. For example, Douban, IMDb, and other film review websites have collected more than 70,000 words of text data, and a large number of professional and audience reviews, which not only evaluate the overall performance of the film but also deeply analyze the specific villains. Secondly, through social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, the audience's immediate reactions and comments on these villains are collected, providing intuitive feelings and personal insights. Finally, through academic databases such as CNKI NET and Google Scholar, relevant academic articles and analysis reports are collected to explore how villains affect narrative structure and social values from a theoretical and critical perspective. The extensive collection and diversity of these texts ensure the comprehensiveness of the data and the depth of analysis, providing a rich material basis for subsequent coding and qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis adopts reliability and validity tests, regression analysis, and other analysis methods.

Sample Selection

The article selected three representative movies in the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) and their key villains: The Joker in The Dark Knight, Ares in Wonder Woman, and Steppenwolf in The Justice League. These characters have attracted global attention due to their unique story backgrounds and profound motivations, showing the diversity and complexity of villains in superhero movies, and reflecting the deep-seated problems and cultural dynamics of society. The three characters were selected based on their wide cultural influence and strong emotional impact on the audience. Through the collected data, the Joker

in The Dark Knight, Ares in Wonder Woman, and Steppenwolf in Justice League are explored to study how these characters resonate with the audience on an emotional and cognitive level, and how they reflect the deep anxieties and conflicts in current society and culture. These characters not only evoke audience empathy through background stories, motivations, and development but also play a key role in the narrative structure, increasing the drama and sense of conflict in the story.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Table 1 Selective Coding

Main theme	Subtopics	Describe	Example
The Exploration of Morality and Power	The pursuit of power	The villain's quest for power reflects his deeper motivations and social criticism	In Justice League, Steppenwolf not only desires to consolidate his position among the "New Gods" by conquering the Earth but also hopes to prove himself to the Dark Lord Darkseid and ensure that he can win more power and recognition.
	Moral Conflict	The villains challenge traditional moral concepts and trigger the audience's moral thinking.	The Joker constantly tests Batman's bottom line in The Dark Knight, using various means to force Batman to break his principle of not killing. This behavior prompts the audience to reflect on whether they should break their principles when justice cannot be maintained.
Social and cultural reflection	Social Criticism	The villain's criticism and comment on the existing social structure	The Joker represents the strong dissatisfaction of the lower classes of Gotham City with the corrupt government and the elite, and vents this distrust and powerlessness of society through violent resistance.
	Cultural influence	Villains as symbols of specific cultural and historical contexts	Ares in Wonder Woman not only symbolizes the ancient Greek god of war, but also reveals the selfishness and greed of human beings behind war, thereby criticizing the endless wars in modern society.
Exploration and display of human nature	Complexity and Humanity	Exploring the multifaceted nature of human nature through the complexity of villains	Ares' inner conflict and disappointment with humanity make him extreme, but his hidden complexity still reveals a certain concern for humanity, suggesting that he is not purely evil.
	Emotional resonance	The villain's emotional depth and vulnerability allow the audience to relate to him	The Joker's loneliness and pain in The Dark Knight stem from the psychological trauma of his inability to integrate into normal society. This emotion makes the audience feel that he is also a lonely person abandoned by the world, which arouses the audience's resonance.

This detailed division of main themes and sub-themes helps us understand why the villain resonates with the audience on different levels, from morality, and social culture to the multi-dimensional display of human nature, enriching the narrative level of the story and reflecting the audience's interest in complex moral conflicts, social contradictions and the exploration of human nature.

The Exploration of Morality and Power

Pursuit of power: The psychological motivation and social influence of villains in their pursuit of power become the key to resonating with the audience. For example, Steppenwolf desires to dominate everything in Justice League, the Joker pursues

psychological control through criminal activities in The Dark Knight, and Ares achieves his goals through the war in Wonder Woman. In terms of moral conflict, villains challenge traditional moral concepts and prompt the audience to reflect on morality. For example, the Joker mocks the social order, Ares arouses human desire for violence, and Steppenwolf sacrifices innocent people to rule the earth, revealing the conflict between morality and power.

Social And Cultural Reflection

In terms of social criticism, villains reflect social flaws and injustice. For example, the Joker reveals the fragility and corruption of the social system, and Ares provokes a war to show the violent tendencies of human civilization. In terms of cultural influence, villains use cultural symbols to show cultural dynamics in a specific social and historical context. For example, the Joker symbolizes the conflict between capitalism and anarchism, Ares represents the god of war in ancient Greek mythology, and Steppenwolf symbolizes the image of a conqueror in ancient mythology.

Exploration And Display of Human Nature

Villains show complex human nature, allowing the audience to understand their actions and motivations. For example, the Joker's twisted psychology and morbid behavior, Ares's desire for war, and Steppenwolf's obsession with domination and conquest. At the same time, villains trigger emotional resonance in the audience by showing the fragility and true emotions of human nature. For example, the Joker's disappointment, Ares's complex emotions, and Steppenwolf's fear of failure.

Conclusion and Discussion

From the perspective of social psychology, the complexity of villains and their behavioral motivations reflect the psychological and emotional needs of the audience. By stimulating the audience's identity or empathy, villains highlight their charm and influence; from the perspective of narrative theory, the villains are very three-dimensional in the story, with complete background stories, motivations, conflicts, and development contexts. The narrative structure and the villains' behavior complement each other, making them more memorable. From the perspective of cultural studies, the villains have become a symbol of social and cultural anxiety, and the media's interpretation and dissemination of villains have enhanced their cultural and social influence. In summary, the resonance of villains in modern film and television works reflects the deep combination of the audience's psychological needs, social and cultural background, and narrative structure. Through the analysis of these villains, the study can deeply understand the complexity and deep appeal of villains, and provide a rich theoretical basis for further research on the importance of villains in film and television.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The hypothesis obtained from the qualitative research was verified by quantitative analysis methods, and the resonance mechanism of different audience groups towards the villain role was further revealed. The choice of questionnaire distribution was to send the questionnaire link to major film and television forums and social media groups through the WeChat platform, including Douban movie groups, Zhihu film and television discussion areas, Weibo movie topics, and some WeChat groups where film and television enthusiasts gather. After the questionnaire was released, a total of 881 valid questionnaires were received, with participants from all over the country, covering almost all provinces. This large-scale sample provides sufficient data support for the study. The questionnaire data was imported into professional data analysis software for sorting and preprocessing to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the data.

Figure 1 Questionnaire collection distribution

Hypothesis

Three hypotheses were proposed based on theory and previous research:

Hypothesis 1: The villain's pursuit of power and challenge to social and moral norms resonate with the audience.

Hypothesis 2: The more complex the villain's background story and behavioral motivation, the higher the audience's empathy.

Hypothesis 3: As a social or cultural symbol, the villain reflects the audience's cognition or anxiety about specific social issues, thus triggering resonance.

Questionnaire design

To verify these three hypotheses, the questionnaire design includes the following questions:

Hypothesis 1: The villain's pursuit of power and challenge to social and moral norms resonate with the audience

Code	Question (- (1 Strongly Disagree - 5 Strongly Agree, the same below)
A1	1. Do you feel an emotional connection with villains who seek power or challenge society's mores?
A2	2. Does the villain's quest for power make you feel more connected to the character?
A3	3. Does the villain's behavior that challenges existing moral norms make you rethink those moral norms?
A4	4. Do you think challenging moral norms is the main reason why villains are attractive?

Hypothesis 2: The more complex the villain's background story and motivations, the higher the audience's empathy

Code	Question (- (1 Strongly Disagree - 5 Strongly Agree, the same below)
B1	5. Do you empathize with villains who have complex backgrounds and motivations?
B2	6. Do you think villains are more likely to be empathetic to you if they have a detailed backstory?
B3	7. Do the villains' complex motivations make you understand their actions better?
B4	8. Are you more likely to sympathize with villains who have complex emotions and psychological histories?

Hypothesis 3: Villains, as social or cultural symbols, reflect the audience's cognition or anxiety about specific social issues, thus triggering resonance

Code	Question (- (1 Strongly Disagree - 5 Strongly Agree, the same below)
C1	9. Do you relate to villains because of the social or cultural issues they embody?
C2	10. Do villains make you more concerned about the social issues they represent?
C3	11. Do you think villains add depth and relevance to a story by showcasing specific cultural symbols?
C4	12. Do villains that reflect social anxieties resonate more with you?

Quantitative Data Analysis

Table 2 Reliability analysis

	Cronbach reliability analysis		
Code	**Corrected Total Correlation (CITC)**	**α coefficient with term removed**	**Cronbach's alpha coefficient**
A1	0.793	0.954	
A2	0.804	0.954	
A3	0.727	0.956	
A4	0.584	0.961	0.958
B1	0.827	0.953	
B2	0.816	0.954	
B3	0.850	0.953	
B4	0.838	0.953	
C1	0.847	0.953	
C2	0.851	0.953	
C3	0.842	0.953	0.958
C4	0.735	0.956	
Standardized Cronbach α coefficient: 0.958			

Validity Analysis

The validity of the questionnaire was evaluated by exploratory factor analysis:

The factor loading coefficient is high: For example, the factor loading coefficient of "Do the complex motivations of the villains make you understand their behavior more?" is 0.883, showing a high correlation.

The factors explained 69.08% of the total variance: the KMO value was 0.931, and the Barthes sphericity value was significant (p=0.000), confirming that the data is suitable for factor analysis.

The results of the validity analysis verified the structural rationality and measurement accuracy of the questionnaire.

Table 3 Validity analysis

Code	Factor loading coefficient Factor 1	Commonality (common factor variance)☐
A1	0.828	0.685
A2	0.837	0.701
A3	0.766	0.587
A4	0.631	0.754
B1	0.863	0.745
B2	0.851	0.725
B3	0.883	0.779
B4	0.869	0.754
C1	0.874	0.764
C2	0.881	0.776
C3	0.875	0.765
C4	0.781	0.610
Eigenvalue (before rotation)	8.290	-
Variance explained% (before rotation)	69.080%	-
Cumulative variance explained% (before rotation)	69.080%	-
Eigenvalue (after rotation)	8.290	-
Variance explained% (after rotation)	69.080%	-
Cumulative variance explained% (after rotation)	69.080%	-
KMO value	0.931	-
Bart spherical value	1126.880	-
df	66	-
p-value	0.000	-

Note: If the numbers in the table are colored: blue means the absolute value of the load coefficient is greater than 0.4, and red means the commonality (common factor variance) is less than 0.4.

Regression Analysis 1

Power pursuit: significantly positively correlated with emotional resonance (B=0.547, Beta=0.549, p=0.000).

Moral challenge: significantly positively correlated with emotional resonance (B=0.274, Beta=0.287, p=0.002).

Overall, the R^2 value of this regression analysis is 0.606, and the adjusted R^2 value is 0.594, indicating that the selected variables can explain about 60.6% of the variation in the audience's emotional resonance. The F value is 49.184 and the p value is 0.000, indicating that the model as a whole is statistically significant. Collinearity diagnosis shows that the VIF values of each variable are less than 10, and the tolerance is greater than 0.1, indicating that there is no serious multicollinearity problem in the model. The D-W value is 1.879, close to 2,

indicating that there is no autocorrelation problem in the residual.

Therefore, the power pursuit and moral challenge of the villain are indeed important factors that trigger the audience's emotional resonance, which partially verifies the rationality of hypothesis one.

Table 4 Regression Analysis 1

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	t	p	Collinearity diagnostics	
	B	Standard error	Beta			VIF	Tolerance
constant	0.144	0.240	-	0.600	0.550	-	-
A2	0.547	0.088	0.549	6.187	0.000**	1.920	0.521
A3	0.274	0.084	0.287	3.250	0.002**	1.905	0.525
A4	0.017	0.080	0.018	0.216	0.829	1.641	0.610
R^2	0.606						
Adjust R^2	0.594						
F	F (3,96) =49.184,p=0.000						
D-W value	1.879						
Dependent variable: A1							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							

Linear regression analysis results (n=881)

Regression Analysis 2

Background story: significantly positively correlated with empathy (B=0.205, Beta=0.214, p=0.016).

Complex motivation: significantly positively correlated with empathy (B=0.552, Beta=0.551, p=0.000).

Overall, the R^2 value of this regression analysis is 0.715, and the adjusted R^2 value is 0.706, indicating that the selected variables can explain about 71.5% of the variation in the audience's empathy. The F value is 80.206 and the p value is 0.000, indicating that the model is statistically significant as a whole. Collinearity diagnosis shows that the VIF values of each variable are less than 10 and the tolerance is greater than 0.1, indicating that there is no serious multicollinearity problem in the model. The D-W value is 1.914, close to 2, indicating that there is no autocorrelation problem in the residual.

In summary, the regression analysis results verify hypothesis 2, that is, the detailed background story and complex motivation of the villain can indeed significantly enhance the audience's empathy.

Table 5 Regression Analysis 2

	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	t	p	Collinearity diagnostics	
	B	Standard error	Beta			VIF	Tolerance
constant	0.092	0.207	-	0.447	0.656	-	-
B2	0.205	0.084	0.214	2.449	0.016*	2.570	0.389
B3	0.552	0.097	0.551	5.719	0.000**	3.129	0.320
B4	0.136	0.083	0.145	1.647	0.103	2.599	0.385
R^2	0.715						

Linear regression analysis results (n=881)

Linear regression analysis results (n=881)							
	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	t	p	Collinearity diagnostics	
	B	Standard error	Beta			VIF	Tolerance
Adjust R^2			0.706				
F□			F (3,96) =80.206,p=0.000				
D-W value			1.914				
			Dependent variable: B1				
			* p<0.05 ** p<0.01				

Regression Analysis 3

Test hypothesis three: "Villain characters, as social or cultural symbols, reflect the audience's cognition or anxiety about specific social issues, thus triggering resonance":

Social issue concern: significantly positively correlated with the degree of resonance (B=0.518, Beta=0.507, p=0.000).

Cultural symbols: significantly positively correlated with the degree of resonance (B=0.218, Beta=0.218, p=0.012).

Social anxiety: significantly positively correlated with the degree of resonance (B=0.083, Beta=0.086, p=0.005).

Overall, the R² value of this regression analysis is 0.587, and the adjusted R² value is 0.574, indicating that the selected variables can explain about 58.7% of the variation in the audience's resonance. The F value is 45.527 and the p value is 0.000, indicating that the model is statistically significant as a whole. Collinearity diagnosis shows that the VIF values of each variable are less than 10, and the tolerance is greater than 0.1, indicating that there is no serious multicollinearity problem in the model. The D-W value is 1.920, which is close to 2, indicating that there is no autocorrelation problem in the residual.

In summary, the regression analysis results verify the third hypothesis, that is, the villain role can significantly resonate with the audience by reflecting social problems and cultural symbols.

Table 6 Regression Analysis 3

Linear regression analysis results (n=881)							
	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	t	p	Collinearity diagnostics	
	B	Standard error	Beta			VIF	Tolerance
constant	0.353	0.260	-	1.360	0.177	-	-
C2	0.518	0.126	0.507	4.112	0.000**	3.541	0.282
C3	0.218	0.125	0.218	1.744	0.012*	3.619	0.276
C4	0.083	0.100	0.086	0.829	0.005*	2.512	0.398
R^2			0.587				
Adjust R^2			0.574				
F□			F (3,96) =45.527,p=0.000				
D-W value			1.920				
			Dependent variable: C1				
			* p<0.05 ** p<0.01				

Through questionnaire surveys and quantitative analysis, the mechanism of emotional resonance between villains and audiences in film and television works was explored.

First, the results of hypothesis 1 verification showed that the audience's emotional resonance with villains was mainly concentrated at a medium level. The reliability and validity analysis performed well. The regression analysis showed that the pursuit of power significantly affected the audience's emotions, but the appeal of moral challenges was not significantly supported, and part of the hypothesis was established.

Secondly, the results of hypothesis 2 verification showed that the audience had higher empathy for villains with complex backgrounds and motivations, and the reliability and validity analysis was good. The regression analysis verified that the background story and motivation significantly affected the audience's empathy, and hypothesis 2 was completely established.

Finally, the results of hypothesis 3 verification showed that the audience had a high degree of attention to the social issues represented by the villains, and the reliability and validity analysis were good. The regression analysis showed that social issues and cultural symbols significantly affected the audience's resonance, and hypothesis 3 was completely established.

Findings

The villain's pursuit of power resonates significantly with the audience, reflecting the audience's profound reaction to challenging the existing power structure and social norms. Villains with complex backgrounds and motivations can enhance the audience's empathy, and these backgrounds and motivations provide emotional rationality for the character's behavior. As a social and cultural symbol, the villain resonates with the audience by reflecting on social problems and cultural anxieties, enhancing the appeal and educational significance of the work.

Research contribution and practical significance

This article deeply analyzes the mechanism of emotional resonance between villain characters and audiences and provides a new perspective and theoretical basis for film and television creation and character creation. In theory, the article expands the framework of character attractiveness and emphasizes the importance of power pursuit, moral challenges, complex backgrounds, and social and cultural symbols. In practice, the article provides valuable insights for film and television producers and screenwriters to help them create more attractive villain characters and enhance the emotional depth and audience experience of film and television works. In addition, the article also prompts creators to use villain characters to reflect and comment on social phenomena, stimulate public attention to important social issues, and thus enhance the social influence and cultural value of film and television works.

Research Deficiencies and Future Prospects

This article does not provide a deep enough understanding of the emotional resonance mechanism between villains and audiences. Future research can be deepened from the following aspects: First, cross-cultural comparative studies can be conducted to explore the emotional responses of audiences to villains under different cultural backgrounds and understand the impact of cultural factors on the emotional resonance mechanism of characters. Secondly, the types of villains can be subdivided to study the different effects of different types of villains on the emotional resonance of the audience and provide more accurate guidance for character creation. In addition, physiological measurements and dynamic interview methods can be used to track the emotional responses of the audience in real-time and reveal the impact of specific behaviors or plots on the audience. Finally, the influence of villains on social media and their impact on the audience's emotional identification and social discussion can be explored to understand the dissemination and acceptance of film and television content in the digital age.

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