



K-Pop demon hunters: Visual analysis of costume design in character design to differentiate the eras

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Abstract.

This study examines how costume design functions as a visual mechanism for temporal differentiation in the animated film *K-Pop Demon Hunters*. While costume is widely recognized as a semiotic tool in character design, few studies have analyzed its capacity to communicate historical era transitions within animated storytelling. Addressing this gap, the research aims to identify how specific clothing elements—such as silhouette, fabric behavior, color palette, and stylistic detailing—are deployed to signify the narrative’s generational shifts. This study employs a qualitative visual analysis grounded in social semiotic theory by examining costume design as visual signifiers through systematic denotative and connotative interpretation, supported by comparative historical fashion references. The results indicate that each hunter generation is visually anchored to recognizable fashion eras, from early traditional attire to 1920s flapper silhouettes, 1940s wartime utility wear, 1960s mod styles, and contemporary K-Pop aesthetics. Findings further show that costume design not only conveys an era through appearance but also through stylistic choice, where fashion personality reinforces temporal and narrative authenticity. The analysis concludes that costume design serves as a narrative scaffold, enabling viewers to understand chronological progression without verbal exposition. These insights underscore the importance of integrating fashion history and digital costume practices in animation pipelines. Future projects may expand this framework by exploring audience perception studies or cross-cultural interpretations of era-based costume cues.

Keywords: Costume Design, Character Design, Animated Film, Temporal Recognition, K-Pop

Introduction

In animation, character design constitutes the visual embodiment of personality: formal properties such as silhouette, proportion, facial features, gesture, and color operate as semiotic resources through which animators encode psychological traits and narrative roles (Lucas, 2020). There is an argument of how designers must consider both still-image and kinetic legibility—which means that characters must read clearly in static compositions and remain expressive throughout movement and performance (Ekawardhani et al., 2020; Xia & Lin, 2019). The international reception of transnational animated properties further demonstrates how visual identity (including clothes) functions as cultural signifier and a tool for global storytelling, enabling producers to situate characters in social or temporal context without explicit exposition (Mussel et al., 2018).

Beyond culture and identity, fashion and clothing are recognized in semiotic studies as a marker that vary across time, which reflects the shift of social norms, technology, and aesthetic trends. In

social view, clothing is not merely conceptualized as a personal choice, but also as a communicative signal. Through garments, people and fictional characters can decipher messages about social group, era, status, or identity (Aghaei et al., 2017). Although relatively few empirical studies have examined how costume design within character design had explicitly functioned to differentiate historical eras, the broader study on the semiotics of dress and clothing as socio-cultural signifiers provides a strong conceptual foundation for such an analysis (Hardy & Coronas, 2016; Tennent, 2018; Kalmakurki, 2021)

Produced by Sony Pictures Animation Inc. and released by Netflix on June 20th, 2025, KPop Demon Hunters became a new global sensation. Based on Netflix data, KPop Demon Hunters overtook Squid Game as the most-watched program, with its several songs dominated the Billboard Top 100 Charts. Originated from Maggie Kang's, the director, desires to create a story inspired by her Korean heritage, K-Pop Demon Hunters revolves around Korean heritages – where the roots came from the elements of mythology, demonology, and modern K-pop. It had quickly become a worldwide hit, where it surpassed the global music charts (Hoskins, 2025). This animated film told the story of how friendship can overpower the force of evil, with its resplendent visual around the character design, fantasy worldbuilding, and music. With the growing familiarity of Korean culture, Kpop Demon Hunters carefully integrates the elements of Korean life into its visual narration, from the landmarks of Seoul to the traditional clothing which can be seen in its characters. As the focus of the animated film, the HUNTR/X acts as the main protagonists, consisting of the characters named Rumi, Mira, and Zoey which designed in such a way to portray Kang's desires of representing K-pop.

Therefore, costume design can function as a visual shorthand that enables audiences to situate characters within particular eras while maintaining narrative flow. Despite that, there remains a gap in understanding how costume design in character design simultaneously supports temporal narration, character personality construction, and narrative coherence in animated films. Addressing this gap, this study investigates how costume design in character design functions as a narrative tool to differentiate eras within animated storytelling. The contributions of this research are both theoretical and practical; where theoretically, it extends semiotic and visual narration into the area of animation-specific costume analysis, emphasizing how costume design is a support of narrative structure rather than merely a decorative element. Practically, the study offers insights for the reader how historically informed and personality-driven costume decisions in character design can strengthen the narrative clarity and character coherence. This study advances the understanding of costume design as an integral component of storytelling in animated film where it can bridge time, implicitly exposing the characters' personality traits, and visual narration.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative visual analysis approach by proceeding by treating stills and moving-image frames as interpretable social texts. This analytical process is supported with social semiotic theory, which conceptualizes the visual elements as culturally situated signs where the meanings emerge through design choices and contextual interpretation (Jewitt et al., 2016). Besides that, outfit attributes such as colour, garment, type, and stylization systematically influence observers to map out the character's personality traits (Cheng & Wang, 2024). For historical or temporally oriented analyses, researchers employed a systematic qualitative visual analysis that treats visual materials as historical texts, identifying and comparing visual signifiers such as costume, stylistic choice, and other production design elements across selected frames and sequences. This method emphasizes careful observation, descriptive analysis, and interpretive patterning so that era-specific features are reconstructed and justified analytically through comparison with contextual historical sources and scholarly reference points (Kritis Teori Bordwell et al., 2025; Puspitasari et al., 2025)

Result and Discussion

Results

Visual Analysis of Costume Design in K-Pop Demon Hunters

The result of this analysis is derived from a systematic visual analysis from the official artbook, a curated set of captured scenes from the animated film, and images of fashion styles through historical lenses. These three primary sources will be used as a comparative examination between pre-production design intention, on-screen realization, and indication of fashion era to enable the identification of visual patterns across character design, costume elements, and era-defining stylistic cues. By juxtaposing between the concept art, completed frames, and fashion stylistic cues, this section presents the key visual findings that emerged from the visual analysis to differentiate narrative timelines and reinforce the intended historical era.

Table 1. Costume Design in K-Pop Demon Hunters


No.	Character/Group	Era (Temporal Label)	Appearance Type	Costume Design	Costume Analyzed
1.	Ancient HUNTR/X	Ancient	Stage Performance and Ritual		3

Figure 1. Ancient Hunters Concept Art
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Official Artbook



Figure 2. Ancient Hunters in Animated Film
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 3. Village Mudangs, c. 1900
Source: Korean Shamanism,
<https://shamanism.sgarrigues.net/vintage-shaman-photos.html>

2. Previous HUNTR/X 1920's Stage Performance

3



Figure 4. 1920's Hunters Concept Art
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Official Artbook



Figure 5. 1920's Hunters in Animated Film
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film





Figure 6. Modes for Afternoon and Evening in 1920

Source: The Fashion Folks,
<https://www.rokit.co.uk/blogs/news/1920s-fashion-guide>

3. Previous HUNTR/X 1940's Stage Performance



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Figure 7. 1940's Hunters Concept Art
 Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Official Artbook



Figure 8. 1940's Hunters in Animated Film
 Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 9. Women's Wartime Utility Fashion in 1942
 Source: Hulton Deutsch, Getty Images





Figure 10. Hardy Amies preparing his spring collection in 1940

Source: Fred Ramage, Getty images

4. Previous HUNTR/X 1960's Stage Performance

1960s HUNTERS

4



Figure 11. 1960's Hunters Concept Art

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Official Artbook



Figure 12. 1960's Hunters in Animated Film

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 13. Audrey Hepburn in a Givenchy suit, "Paris When it Sizzles", 1962

Source: Bob Willoughby



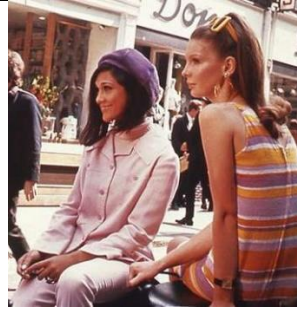


Figure 14. Teenagers in London's Carnaby Street, 1969

Source: The National Archives UK

5. Previous HUNTR/X 1980's Stage Performance

7



Figure 15. 1980's Hunters Concept Art

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Official Artbook



Figure 16. 1960's Hunters in Animated Film

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 17. Destiny's Child in Tommy Hilfiger, 1988

Source: Time & Life Pictures, Huffington Post



Figure 18. Linda Evangelista in Martha Sturdy, 1987

Source: Irving Penn, Vogue December



Figure 19. Mini skirt, Low Rise Jeans, and Athleisure in, 2000's

Source: Cosmopolitan,

<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/fashion/celebrity/g65020886/2000s-outfits/>

6. Modern HUNTR/X Modern Stage Performance

4



Figure 20. HUNTR/X, the modern generation of the Hunters

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 21. "Next Level" MV by aespa in 2021

Source: aespa Official Youtube Channel





Figure 22. HUNTR/X “Golden and Takedown”
Costume Design
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 23. TWICE’s Concert Tour Stage Costume,
2025
Source: Richard Tabigue

7, Saja Boys Modern Stage Performance



4

Figure 24. Saja Boys, “Your Idol” Costume Design
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 25. (Left) Traditional Joeseung Saja;
(Right) Modern Depiction of Grim Reaper
Source: (Left) Joseon Dynasty Scroll Paintings;
(Right) Modern Artwork



Figure 26. Lee Dong-wook, “Goblin” Depiction of
Grim Reaper, 2016
Source: Promotional Photos of Goblin K-Drama
Series

8. Modern HUNTR/X Modern Casual Stage



3

Figure 22. HUNTR/X's Leather Costume Design
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 23. "You and I" MV Costume Design, by Dreamcatchers in 2018

Source: allure,
<https://www.allure.com/story/dreamcatcher-k-pop-interview-makeup-skin-care>



Figure 24. Modern Gothic Punk Rock Fashion
Source: anydeath, Instagram

9. Saja Boys Modern Casual Stage



3

Figure 29. Saja Boys' First Appearance with "Soda Pop"

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 30. EXO Chen and Suho's Airport Fashion, 2019

Source: Chen's Light



Figure 31. EXO Sehun's Airport Fashion, 2015

Source: dazzling_921412, Twitter

10. Modern Modern Personality Indicator
HUNTR/X:
Rumi

6



Figure 33. HUNTR/X's Rumi Concept Art
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Official Artbook

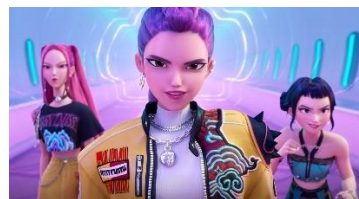


Figure 34. HUNTR/X's Rumi (Middle) in Animated Film

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 35. HUNTR/X's Rumi (Right) in Animated Film
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 36. HUNTR/X's Rumi in Animated Film
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 37. HUNTR/X's Rumi (Middle) in Animated Film
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film

11. Modern HUNTR/X: Mira Modern Personality Indicator



4

Figure 38. HUNTR/X's Mira Concept Art
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Official Artbook



Figure 39. HUNTR/X's Mira in Animated Film
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film





Figure 40. HUNTR/X's Mira (Right) in Animated Film

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 41. HUNTR/X's Mira in Animated Film

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film

12. Modern HUNTR/X: Zoey Modern Personality Indicator

4



Figure 42. HUNTR/X's Zoey Concept Art

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Official Artbook

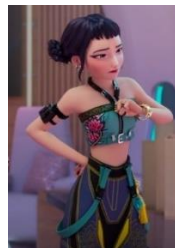


Figure 43. HUNTR/X's Zoey in Animated Film

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film



Figure 44. HUNTR/X's Zoey in Animated Film

Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film

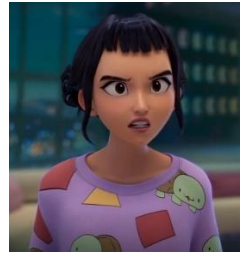


Figure 45. HUNTR/X's Zoey in Animated Film
Source: K-Pop Demon Hunters Animated Film

Source: Personal Documentation, 2025

Discussion

Based on the data of 12 categorized costume designs in Table 1, the first category is showing the costume design of ancient HUNTR/X. The artist of K-Pop Demon Hunters' Ancient Hunters (*Figure 1*), Won Sul Hyun referred to the memories of his mother, a Korean shaman. The origin of Korean shamanism is recorded as a ritual and practice which believed to perform divination, healing, and communal ceremonies (Baker, 2008). By assessing the visual similarity between vintage picture of Korean Shaman (*Figure 3*), Ancient Hunters' concept art (*Figure 1*), and the realization of these characters within the appearance of ancient Hunters in the animated film (*Figure 2*), it appears the artist's depiction of ancient hunters is a contemporary reimagining of traditional ancient costume, mixed with the fantasy worldbuilding. The contemporary aspect is portrayed with how the traditional clothing is adorned with weapons and armours that is not present in the traditional clothing.

In the 1920's within second category, women's fashion is characterized by the rise of the flapper style, where dresses became shorter, hemlines rest above the ankles, silhouette of the figures became straightened, and women adopted a looser, more androgynous shapes that rebelled against the restrictive, corseted fashions from previous decades as it can be seen in *Figure 6*. From historical perspective, this is done to reflect broader social changes in greater female autonomy, a loosening of Victorian moral codes, and women's desire for modernity and more leeway of movement. This trend can be recognized by its bobbed hair, simpler and geometrical dress lines, and dropped waists. As drawn in 1920's Hunters Concept Art (*Figure 4*), the three hunters can be visually assessed to mirror the written history of 1920's fashion with little to no changes – which directly translated into the animated film (*Figure 5*) to visually communicate the timeline transition of hunters' generational history positioning.

As the timeline within the animated movie progressed in third category, the costume design for the hunters can be seen as something different from the previous picture. Within the K-Pop Demon Hunters official artbook, the hunters' art concept moved into the fashion of 1940's (*Figure 7*). During the 1940's, women's fashion was shaped by the impact of World War II, resulting in a look characterized by its utility, practicality, and understated elegance (*Figure 9*). The dress' hemlines mostly fall around mid-calf, where the tailoring became sharper and structured, and clothing often featuring sharp shoulders, nipped-in waists, knee-length skirts, and simpler silhouette (*Figure 10*). This style reflected wartime fabric rationing, which causing designers and manufacturers to adopt a more economical strategy to produce materials. However, a subtle kind of glamour persisted in the form of emphasized clean lines and practical cuts on dresses and suits. In the animated film of K-Pop Demon Hunters, the costume design of the hunters is designed with little to no change, where the audience can see the timeline sequence of the characters placement within the storytelling.

After the previous scene, the fourth category is shown how the hunters emerge with another set of costume design. From the 1960's Hunters concept art, the three characters depicted with each different set of style (*Figure 11*). As it is realized into animated film (*Figure 12*), the hunters pose a little change that still within the characteristic of 1960's fashion (*Figure 13*; *Figure 14*). Women's fashion in

the 1960's was identified with mini shirts, bold geometric prints, vibrant colours, and simplified A-line silhouettes. These designs were influenced by the growing culture from teenage consumers.

In 1980's Hunters' concept art (Figure 15) within the fifth category, there is a slight change in design as the characters portrayed in the animated film (Figure 16). Women's fashion in 1980's was defined by bold silhouettes, vivid colours, and an emphasis on an individual's expressions. The main features of 1980's fashion was broad, padded shoulders, sharply tailored blazers, and structured suits. At the same time, the emergence of music videos aerobic culture, and celebrity influence brought change into styles in the form of bright neon colours, leggings, oversized sweaters, leather jackets, and extravagant accessories. These prominent characteristics does not appear that strongly when compared to previous eras in the Hunters' concept design, where their costume design leaning heavily into 2000's fashion instead. As the fashion timeline progressed, the women's fashion in 2000's was marked by technological influence and celebrity-driven trends. This era was marked by the popularized culture of low-rise jeans, crop tops, velour tracksuits, visible logos, and hyper-feminine styling (Figure 19); which these characters can be seen in how the Hunters depicted in the animated film (Figure 16). However, the characteristics of the Hunters within the animated film can be visually assessed to be a contemporary mix between the 1980's fashion and 2000's fashion. Despite the differences between concept art and storytelling timeline within the animated film, the temporal position of the characters still can be recognized by the audiences as the past hunters.

As the story progresses once again, the sign of modern timeline can be visually analysed from the first stage appearance of HUNTR/X within sixth category, which included the main characters named Rumi, Mira, and Zoey (Figure 20). The visual recognition of modern fashion can be seen between the similarities of HUNTR/X's stage costume design and aespa's MV costume; with their tight short skirt, cropped top, bomber jacket, high boots, and form-fitting silhouette. By the end of the story's climax, the last famous costume design of the HUNTR/X (Figure 22) can be assessed visually that the structure of the styling is visually similar to current K-Pop Girlband, TWICE (Figure 23). This stylistic choice is remarked with the short pants, short skirts, pleated skirts, leather crop-top outer, tight-fitting inner, boots, and exaggerated decorations on their outfits.

Within the seventh category, the last stage appearance of Saja Boys (Figure 24) was seen with something very grim and dark, where their design is adorned with an all-black clothing. However, Jeoseung Saja (저승사자) is a prominent figure within Korean folk narrative tradition and religion, often translated as the "Messenger of the Underworld" or "Korean Grim Reaper" (Shin Gwang-seop, 2014). Traditional grim reaper was sometimes depicted wearing red robes, colourful sashes, or detailed patterns (Figure 31, Left), meanwhile the modern pop culture often depicts them as figures donned in black robes and a black gat (Figure 25, Right). This contemporary depiction of costume design is supported by the famous portrayal of Lee Dong-wook's Grim Reaper costume within the K-Drama series entitled "Goblin" (Figure 26). As it is seen with Saja Boy's costume design within the scene of "Your idol" performance, they took bigger leap of costume design by integrating the costume design of old folktale about Jeoseung Saja, with modern depictions of Grim Reaper which inspired by Joseon scholar clothing, and modern K-Pop costume design. It can be seen with their black robes, a black gat, tight inner shirt, tight leather pants, high platform boots, and glamorous accessories around their costume.

As another set of costume appeared along with the HUNTR/X's story, they had appeared with a costume that resembled modern contemporary blend of Gothic, Punk, and Rock fashion (Figure 26; Figure 28) within eighth category. One of the visually similar costume stylings in modern K-Pop group is Dreamcatchers for their "You and I" MV (Figure 27), where this contemporary fashion style is marked with all-black fabric, leather, belts, and high-platform boots.

Through the verbal storytelling, Saja Boys were the demons that took form of humans, where they copied the concept of modern K-Pop Boyband (Figure 29) to fight the modern hunters as it can be seen in ninth category. As analysed visually, the Saja Boys are wearing something that mimic a



modern casual outfit, where this trend of fashion usually prominent in how K-Pop Boy Bands set the trend of Airport Fashion (Figure 30; Figure 31). The characteristics of this costume styling or design are jeans, ripped jeans, skin-tight pants, baggy shirts, an outer, hats, and sneakers.

In the tenth category, the costume design is focused more on personality indicator of modern HUNTR/X's Rumi. Stated in K-Pop Demon Hunters Concept Art Book (Figure 33) and through the narrative and her inner dialogue, Rumi is characterized as someone who wants to fix herself and the world without speaking to anyone else but Celine, her aunt who nurtured her since she was a child. She carried this internal emotional weight. Rumi is designed to portray a character who shouldered heavy responsibilities and carried hidden stories; hence, between the three of them, Rumi has the widest stylistic silhouette. This portrayal of a secretive and self-conscious character can be seen from the way she is always wearing a wide-shouldered outer/top (Figure 36; Figure 37), and often layered heavier than other modern HUNTR/X characters (Figure 34; Figure 35). Rumi is almost never seen in public scenes within the animated film with costume/stylistic choice of exposed arms due to the hidden nature of her birth from demon's blood.

As it was in the tenth category, the eleventh category is focused on personality indicator of modern HUNTR/X's Mira. Stated in K-Pop Demon Hunters Concept Art Book (Figure 38) and through the narrative within the animated film, Mira is characterized as a character that is rebellious, stern, and yet fluid. This personality of hers can be visually analyzed through the silhouette of her costume design throughout the animated film, where her clothes switched between sharp angles (Figure 41) and softer flow (Figure 40). One of the most striking parts of her character costume design is her rebellious stylistic choice, where it can be seen with her choker, sharper cuts, spiked or sharp accessories, and layered leathers (Figure 39; Figure 40; Figure 41). Throughout fashion history, these fashion items are often recognized as the Punk or Gothic Fashion, where these styles are born from the rebelling movement, whether against the stereotypes, expectations, or rules. Despite that, Mira is still a very dynamic character that embraces her elegance and herself.

For the last category, the twelfth category is focused on personality indicator of modern HUNTR/X's Zoey. Stated in K-Pop Demon Hunters Concept Art Book (Figure 42) and through the narrative within the animated film, Zoey is portrayed as a bubbly character due to her spot as the *maknae* or the youngest of the group. One of the striking parts of her design is that Zoey has softer and rounder curves in her silhouette; be it from the body, or her stylistic choice. This bright and cheerful persona of her can be seen from how her clothes are often colored in brighter shades, with fun stripes or motifs (Figure 44; Figure 45), and dynamic layering (Figure 43) that allows her to move more freely than the other modern HUNTR/X characters.

Conclusion

The combined findings of this study demonstrate that costume design in character design within animated film performs as a crucial narrative element through which temporal, cultural, and stylistic fashion can be recognized by the audiences to differ each character positioning within the storytelling timeline. Across the film's sequential timelines, the Hunters' costume designs in their character design incorporate historically recognizable silhouettes, textiles, and stylistic signatures – through the design of early shamanic attire, to 1920's flapper style, 1940's wartime utility wear, 1960's youth culture aesthetics, 1980's expressive silhouettes, and 2000's celebrity-driven trends. These costume design and styling shifts had been assessed through comparative study of the animated film's official artbook, on-screen frames, and verified historical fashion codex. Thus, the animated film had successfully demonstrated a coherent translation from conceptual design to animated realization. Alongside the understanding of the temporal narration within the animated film, the costume designs also function as visual cues that articulate character personality, role, and emotional disposition. Variations in colour

palette, silhouette rigidity or fluidity, layering, and accessory use are strategically designed to externalize individual traits such as leadership, resilience, rebelliousness, or vulnerability, allowing the audiences to infer character psychology without the sole reliance on dialogue. The integration of K-Pop modern fashion within the storytelling timeline further illustrates how modern styling practices as temporal markers, where the clear semiotic cues for the present era are promoted through idol-driven aesthetics, performance outfits, and airport fashion.

From scholarly perspective, this study contributes to animation and visual communication design research by advancing costume design analysis beyond cultural or stylistic interpretation toward an integrated understanding of costume as a tool for temporal differentiation and character construction within animated storytelling. By combining semiotic visual analysis with production materials such as official artbooks, this research offers a methodological contribution for studying design intention and its realization in character design for animation. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of historically informed and personality-driven costume design in supporting narrative clarity and audience comprehension, which could offer insights for character designers and animation practitioners. Future study may build upon this study by incorporating audience reception analysis to empirically examine how viewers interpret era-based costume cues, or by comparing costume-driven temporal narration across different animation styles, or cultural contexts.

In conclusion, this study affirms costume design as an integral narrative component in animated film, where it functions as era differentiation through temporal recognition, supported through character personality and within comprehensive visual storytelling.

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