

# Emotional Manipulation: An Analysis of Bullying in Secondary Schools in Selangor

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the role of emotional manipulation in bullying cases among secondary school students in Selangor, Malaysia. With a focus on vulgar language and body shaming, this research identifies the prevalence of bullying and highlights how verbal abuse and appearance-based insults are used to manipulate and control victims. Data collected from 182 students reveal that verbal abuse is prevalent, with significant instances of body shaming. The findings underscore the need for targeted anti-bullying policies addressing these psychological forms of bullying. Future research should explore the deeper mental health implications, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts, stemming from prolonged bullying.*

**Keywords:** Emotional manipulation, Verbal abuse, Body shaming, Bullying

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of Study

Bullying in schools is a growing concern, impacting the emotional and psychological well-being of students worldwide (Olweus, 1994). In Malaysia, bullying has emerged as a critical issue, particularly in secondary schools across Selangor, where cases of verbal abuse and body shaming are prevalent. Emotional manipulation in bullying involves subtle tactics, such as the use of vulgar language and body shaming, to establish dominance and control over the victim. According to the Ministry of Education Malaysia (MOE), cases of school bullying remain high despite ongoing interventions (MOE, 2021). The emotionally manipulative forms of bullying, often overlooked, can have lasting effects on students' mental health and self-esteem, underscoring the importance of this study.

### 1.2 Problem Statement

Although physical bullying often draws attention due to its visibility, emotional manipulation, including verbal abuse and body shaming, can cause equally severe psychological harm (Discroll et al., 2011). In Selangor, such forms of bullying frequently go undetected or unreported, leaving students vulnerable to continued abuse. This study seeks to explore these overlooked forms of bullying, providing data to advocate for more inclusive anti-bullying policies.

### 1.3 Importance of the Study

Addressing the prevalence and impact of emotional manipulation in bullying is crucial for fostering a safe and supportive school environment. By examining how vulgar language and body shaming are used as tools for emotional manipulation, this study aims to contribute valuable insights for educators and policymakers to develop comprehensive anti-bullying measures.

### 1.4 Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are focused on understanding the multifaceted issue of bullying in secondary schools in Selangor, emphasizing its prevalence, the use of specific tactics for emotional manipulation, and the psychological impacts these tactics create. Firstly, the study aims to identify how widespread bullying is within secondary schools across Selangor. By examining the frequency and distribution of reported cases, this objective seeks to shed light on the extent of the problem, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the issue at the community and institutional levels. Understanding the prevalence is crucial in addressing and mitigating the underlying causes of bullying effectively.

Secondly, the research delves into the use of vulgar language as a means of emotional manipulation by bullies. Language, particularly when crude or offensive, can serve as a powerful tool to demean and control victims. This objective explores the dynamics of how vulgar language is employed in bullying incidents, focusing on its psychological effects on victims and its role in maintaining power imbalances within peer groups. Investigating this aspect will provide valuable insights into the verbal strategies used in bullying, contributing to the development of more targeted interventions.

Finally, the research highlights the role of body shaming in the emotional manipulation characteristic of school bullying. Body shaming, a form of harassment targeting individuals' physical appearance, has significant implications for the emotional well-being of students. This objective aims to uncover the patterns and consequences of body shaming in bullying scenarios, emphasizing its impact on victims' self-esteem and mental health. By addressing this form of bullying, the study seeks to promote awareness and foster environments that discourage such harmful practices, ultimately supporting the creation of safer and more inclusive school communities.

### 1.5 Research Questions

- a. What is the prevalence of bullying cases in Selangor's secondary schools?
- b. Why is vulgar language a chosen method for emotional manipulation in bullying?
- c. How does body shaming serve as a tool for emotional manipulation in school bullying?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Definition of Emotional Manipulation in Bullying

Bullying is widely understood as a repeated, aggressive behavior aimed at harming another individual, typically involving a power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim (Olweus, 1994). Emotional manipulation, as a subset of bullying, involves psychological tactics used to control or degrade others, often through methods like verbal abuse, insults, and social exclusion (Espelage & Swearer, 2004). According to Rivers and Smith (1994), emotional manipulation in school settings is particularly damaging due to its covert nature, making it difficult for educators to detect and address effectively.

Verbal abuse is a prominent form of emotional manipulation, including insults, mockery, and the use of vulgar language intended to undermine the victim's confidence (Rigby, 2003). Emotional manipulation is further compounded by factors such as social media, which extends the reach of bullying beyond the school environment, enabling cyberbullying that perpetuates emotional and psychological harm (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Kowalski et al., 2014).

## 2.2 Prevalence of Bullying in Malaysian Schools

The prevalence of bullying within Malaysian schools is a growing concern, as research reveals that both physical and psychological bullying are common (MOE, 2021). Studies by Shariff (2008) and Tan (2017) indicate that Malaysian students frequently experience verbal abuse and body shaming, which impacts their mental health and academic performance. Selangor, a diverse and urbanized area, presents unique challenges with bullying dynamics influenced by ethnic and cultural factors (Mokhtar & Jusoh, 2016; Mahmud, 2020).

## 2.3 Impact of Emotional Manipulation in Bullying

The psychological impacts of bullying, especially through emotional manipulation, are well-documented. Verbal abuse, including vulgar language, leads to significant mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003; Swearer et al., 2006). Body shaming, which often targets students' physical appearance, can have long-lasting effects on body image and self-worth, frequently resulting in social withdrawal (Puhl & Latner, 2007).

In a study by Ditch the Label (2021), victims of body shaming reported higher levels of social isolation and lower self-confidence, suggesting that this form of bullying is deeply rooted in societal standards around physical appearance. Additional studies by Jackson and Cohen (2002) and Fekkes et al. (2006) emphasize the relationship between emotional bullying and the development of mental health disorders in adolescence.

## 2.4 The Role of Social Media in Cyberbullying

The rise of social media has intensified the impact of bullying, transforming it into a pervasive experience for many students (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Cyberbullying, defined as bullying that occurs through digital platforms, allows bullies to engage in emotional manipulation with relative anonymity, which exacerbates the victim's psychological distress (Kowalski et al., 2014). Research by Slonje and Smith (2008) found that cyberbullying can be even more damaging than in-person bullying, as victims feel a sense of inescapability and constant vulnerability.

The anonymity provided by digital platforms also encourages aggressive behavior, as bullies are less likely to face immediate consequences (Mishna et al., 2010). This shift has significant implications for school policy, as the line between in-school and out-of-school bullying becomes blurred (Belsey, 2005; Beran & Li, 2007).

## 2.5 Theoretical Framework: Social Dominance and Identity Theories

This study employs Social Dominance Theory and Social Identity Theory to examine how emotional manipulation is used to assert dominance within a school setting. Social Dominance Theory posits that individuals engage in behaviors that reinforce social hierarchies, which is particularly relevant in bullying where the aggressor seeks to maintain a position of power over the victim (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Social Identity Theory further suggests that group dynamics play a significant role, as bullies may use emotional manipulation to enhance their social standing (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Studies by Espelage and Holt (2001) and Salmivalli et al. (1996) support this view, demonstrating that students involved in bullying often perceive themselves as part of a higher social status group. Such dynamics contribute to bullying behaviors and can perpetuate cycles of abuse within school environments (Hawker & Boulton, 2000).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research approach to systematically explore the prevalence and types of emotional manipulation in bullying among secondary school students in Selangor. The primary method involves administering structured surveys to a representative sample of students, enabling the collection of numerical data that can be analyzed statistically. These surveys will include carefully designed questions to capture the frequency of bullying incidents, the use of vulgar language, and the prevalence of body shaming as forms of emotional manipulation.

The quantitative approach ensures objectivity and allows for the identification of patterns and relationships within the data. This method provides a broad understanding of the issue by capturing responses from a diverse group of students, ensuring that findings are generalizable to the larger population. The survey will employ a combination of closed-ended questions for measurable outcomes and scaled items to assess the intensity and impact of specific behaviors.

Additionally, this design facilitates the comparison of bullying trends across different demographics, such as gender, age groups, and school settings, to uncover underlying factors contributing to bullying. The data collected through this approach will be analyzed using statistical software to identify correlations, trends, and significant findings, which will inform evidence-based recommendations for intervention strategies to address and reduce bullying in schools.

#### 3.2 Sampling

A total of 182 students from various secondary schools in Selangor were selected to participate in this study through simple random sampling. This method provides each student in the population with an equal chance of being included in the study, reducing selection bias and enhancing the validity of the results. By employing this technique, the sample is more likely to reflect the diversity within the student population, capturing variations in age, gender, and school environments.

The sample size of 182 students was determined to balance feasibility and statistical power, ensuring that the data collected is both manageable and sufficient for meaningful analysis. This representation allows the study to draw generalizable conclusions about the prevalence and characteristics of bullying in Selangor's secondary schools.

Moreover, the random selection process strengthens the reliability of the findings by minimizing external influences that could skew the results. This sampling approach ensures that the study provides an accurate and comprehensive understanding of bullying behaviors and emotional manipulation tactics, serving as a robust foundation for developing targeted interventions and policies to combat bullying effectively.

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods

The data for this study were gathered using structured surveys designed to comprehensively capture information on the various forms of bullying encountered by secondary school students in Selangor. The surveys consisted of multiple-choice questions, which allowed for clear and categorical responses regarding the types and frequency of bullying incidents. Additionally, Likert-scale questions were included to measure the intensity and emotional impact of specific behaviors, providing nuanced insights into students' experiences with bullying. This combination of question formats ensured that the data collected were both detailed and measurable.

The surveys were specifically tailored to investigate three main aspects of bullying: physical, verbal, and emotional. A significant focus was placed on examining the prevalence and impact of verbal bullying, particularly the use of vulgar language as a tool for emotional manipulation. Questions were designed to uncover patterns in how vulgar language is employed by bullies to demean, intimidate, and control their peers, as well as its perceived effects on victims' emotional well-being.

Another critical component of the surveys addressed body shaming, a form of bullying that targets individuals based on their physical appearance. Questions explored the frequency of body shaming incidents, the settings in which they occurred (e.g., classrooms, social media), and their psychological impact on students. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the role body shaming plays in school bullying dynamics. The structured format of the surveys ensured consistency in data collection, enabling reliable comparisons across different schools and demographic groups.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were analyzed using descriptive statistics, a method chosen for its effectiveness in summarizing and interpreting large sets of data in a clear and understandable manner. Descriptive statistics provided an overview of the patterns and trends in bullying behaviors among secondary school students in Selangor, particularly focusing on emotional manipulation. This approach allowed for the identification of key findings that are both accessible and actionable for stakeholders such as educators, parents, and policymakers.

Frequency analysis was employed to determine how often specific types of bullying behaviors occurred, such as the use of vulgar language and body shaming. This method helped highlight the most prevalent forms of emotional manipulation, offering insights into which tactics are most commonly used by bullies. Alongside this, percentage analyses were conducted to illustrate the proportion of students affected by different bullying behaviors, enabling comparisons across demographic groups such as gender, age, and school type.

These statistical tools provided a comprehensive understanding of the data, revealing not only the extent of bullying but also the relative significance of each form of emotional manipulation. For instance, identifying whether vulgar language or body shaming is more frequently reported can guide targeted intervention strategies. Additionally, the use of descriptive statistics ensured that findings were presented in an organized and interpretable manner, laying the groundwork for further in-depth analyses or follow-up research.



## 4. Findings

This section presents detailed findings on the types and prevalence of bullying in secondary schools in Selangor, focusing on emotional manipulation tactics. Out of 182 respondents, the study identified three primary forms of bullying: physical bullying, vulgar language, and body shaming. Each category is discussed in depth, including its frequency, psychological impact, and implications for school policies.

### 4.1 Prevalence and Types of Bullying

The study reveals three distinct forms of bullying experienced by students:

Physical bullying was reported by 17% of the students surveyed, indicating that nearly one in five students experienced this type of aggression in secondary schools across Selangor. This form of bullying is characterized by direct physical actions intended to cause harm or discomfort to the victim. Common examples include pushing, hitting, kicking, slapping, or other forms of physical assault, which are often used as a means to assert dominance, intimidate, or control the victim in a school setting.

This type of bullying typically occurs in environments where adult supervision is minimal, such as playgrounds, hallways, or during transitions between classes. The physical nature of this form of bullying makes it one of the most overt and recognizable, often leaving visible injuries or marks that can serve as evidence of the harassment. However, beyond the immediate physical harm, such incidents can have long-term effects on the victim's mental health, leading to feelings of fear, insecurity, and low self-esteem.

The data suggests a critical need for schools to implement strategies aimed at reducing physical bullying. This includes increasing teacher and staff presence in high-risk areas, promoting peer intervention programs, and fostering an environment where students feel safe reporting incidents. Addressing physical bullying is essential not only for protecting students from immediate harm but also for creating a school culture that values respect and safety for all.

Verbal abuse emerged as the most prevalent form of bullying reported in the study, with 37.4% of respondents indicating they had experienced it. This type of bullying involves the use of harmful language, including curse words, derogatory remarks, and insulting phrases, designed to belittle, humiliate, or emotionally manipulate the victim. Unlike physical bullying, verbal abuse leaves no visible scars, making it less immediately apparent to adults or authority figures, yet its impact can be equally, if not more, damaging to the victim's psychological well-being.

The study revealed that verbal abuse often targets sensitive aspects of a victim's identity, such as their appearance, academic abilities, family background, or other personal traits. By exploiting these vulnerabilities, bullies aim to undermine the victim's self-confidence and exert control over them. This form of bullying frequently occurs in social settings such as classrooms, hallways, and online platforms, where peers may witness or even participate in the behavior, further amplifying its emotional impact.

The pervasive nature of verbal abuse highlights the urgent need for schools to address this issue through comprehensive anti-bullying programs. Such initiatives could include teaching students about the harmful effects of their words, fostering a culture of respect and empathy, and training educators to recognize and intervene in instances of verbal abuse. Tackling this form of bullying is essential not only to protect victims from its immediate emotional toll but

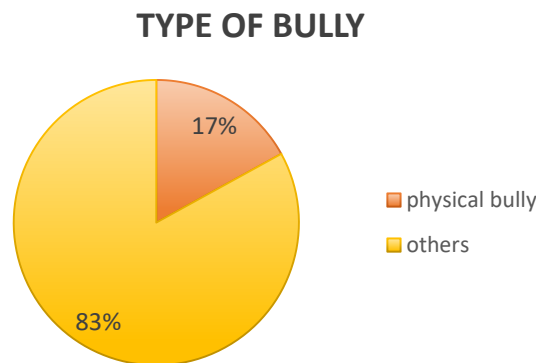
also to prevent the long-term consequences it can have on their mental health and social development.

Body shaming was reported by 5.49% of respondents, highlighting it as a less prevalent but deeply impactful form of bullying. This form of harassment targets an individual's physical appearance, including aspects such as weight, height, skin tone, facial features, or overall body shape. Unlike physical bullying, which is more overt, body shaming often manifests as a covert or insidious behavior, including subtle comments, snide remarks, or even jokes disguised as humor. These actions, while seemingly minor, can have a profound and lasting effect on the victim's emotional and social well-being.

Victims of body shaming frequently experience significant harm to their self-esteem, as the ridicule reinforces negative self-perceptions and insecurities. This can lead to withdrawal from social activities, reluctance to participate in school events, or avoidance of environments where their appearance might be scrutinized, such as sports or physical education classes. Over time, these experiences may contribute to the development of mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, or even eating disorders, as victims struggle to cope with the ongoing criticism of their bodies.

The findings point to the importance of addressing body shaming as part of broader anti-bullying initiatives in schools. Raising awareness about the damaging effects of body shaming through education campaigns can foster empathy and respect among students. Additionally, schools can implement policies that encourage body positivity and inclusivity, helping to create an environment where all students feel valued and accepted regardless of their physical appearance. By tackling body shaming, schools can play a critical role in promoting mental well-being and fostering a healthier, more inclusive social climate for all students.

## 4.2 Physical Bullying

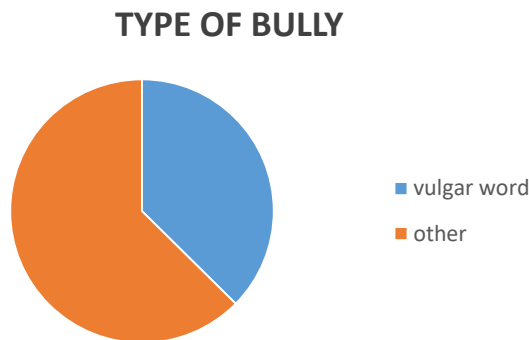


Physical bullying is often more visible and widely recognized due to its direct nature. Among the 17% of students who reported experiencing physical bullying, most incidents occurred in school environments lacking supervision, such as during break times or in hallways. The physical acts varied in intensity, from minor pushing and shoving to more severe acts like punching. Research shows that physical bullying impacts not only the victim's physical well-being but also affects their psychological health, leading to anxiety and depression (Olweus, 1994).

Many students who reported physical bullying also experienced other forms of abuse, suggesting that physical bullying often coincides with verbal or emotional bullying. This dual

exposure can exacerbate the psychological impact on victims, increasing the likelihood of adverse mental health outcomes. For instance, Ladd and Troop-Gordon (2003) found that students subjected to multiple forms of bullying are at a higher risk of developing chronic mental health issues compared to those who experience only one type. In line with this, our findings suggest the need for more vigilant monitoring of school spaces to prevent instances of physical bullying, as well as implementing support systems for affected students.

### 4.3 Vulgar Language as a Tool for Emotional Manipulation



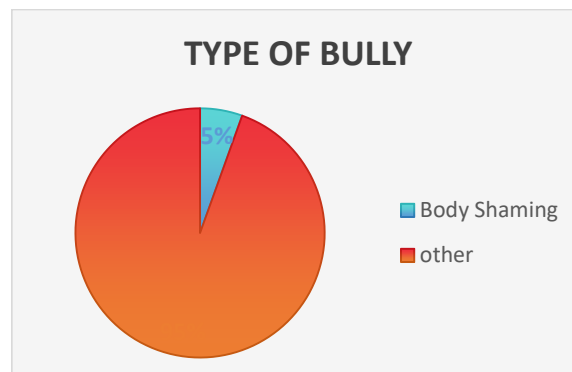
Verbal abuse, involving the use of vulgar language, is the most common type of bullying reported, with 37.4% of students indicating they have been targeted with insults and curse words. This form of bullying operates as a tool for emotional manipulation, allowing bullies to degrade the victim's self-worth and establish dominance. Verbal abuse through vulgar language can be especially harmful as it often leaves no physical evidence, making it harder for teachers and administrators to detect and address (Rigby, 2003).

The psychological impact of verbal abuse is significant, as it can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and social withdrawal. According to Rivers and Smith (1994), the repetitive nature of verbal abuse can result in long-term self-esteem issues, as victims internalize the negative language used against them. In the context of this study, vulgar language frequently included derogatory remarks about students' intelligence, appearance, and social status, reinforcing social hierarchies and isolating the victim from their peers.

Furthermore, verbal abuse often goes beyond the school environment, as bullies use digital platforms to continue their harassment through cyberbullying. This extension of bullying into online spaces exacerbates the victim's emotional distress, as they feel continuously targeted and unable to escape the abuse. The prevalence of vulgar language in bullying highlights the need for schools to address verbal abuse specifically, incorporating language into their anti-bullying policies and ensuring that students are educated about the harmful effects of using vulgar language.



#### 4.4 Body Shaming as Emotional Manipulation



Body shaming, reported by 5.49% of respondents, is a subtle but powerful form of emotional manipulation, targeting students based on physical appearance, weight, and body size. Although less common than physical and verbal abuse, body shaming carries deep psychological impacts, often leading to severe issues with body image and self-esteem (Puhl & Latner, 2007). Body shaming in schools typically involves mocking students for characteristics that are difficult to change, such as height, weight, or facial features, reinforcing negative body image and promoting unhealthy comparisons.

Victims of body shaming often experience isolation, depression, and anxiety, and are at higher risk of developing eating disorders. In the school context, this form of bullying tends to happen covertly, as bullies may use subtle remarks or "jokes" that downplay the severity of their comments. This subtlety makes body shaming harder to address, as it is often dismissed as harmless teasing (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). However, research by Fekkes et al. (2006) reveals that students subjected to body shaming are likely to experience diminished self-worth, leading to withdrawal from social interactions and even academic decline.

The relatively low percentage of students reporting body shaming (5.49%) suggests that it may be underreported due to social stigmas attached to body image issues. Victims may feel embarrassed or ashamed to disclose these experiences, fearing further judgment or rejection. This underreporting highlights the need for school programs that create safe spaces for students to discuss body image openly and seek support without fear of stigma.

#### 4.5 Comparative Analysis of Findings

The three types of bullying reported by students, physical bullying, verbal abuse (vulgar language), and body shaming, each affect students in different ways. Physical bullying is the most visible, often causing immediate fear and sometimes physical harm. Verbal abuse, including vulgar language, was the most common form, affecting nearly 40% of students. This type of bullying often targets a student's self-worth, making them feel bad about themselves and leading to isolation. Body shaming, though less common, has a strong impact on a student's self-image and confidence, sometimes leading to social withdrawal.

**Table 1: How Different Types of Bullying Affect Students**

Bullying Type	Percentage	Main Impact on Students	Other Effects
Physical Bullying	17%	Causes fear and anxiety	Can lead to physical injuries
Verbal Abuse (Vulgar Language)	37.4%	Lowers self-worth	May lead to isolation and low self-esteem
Body Shaming	5.49%	Hurts self-image and confidence	Causes social withdrawal can lead to eating disorders

In Table 1, Physical Bullying happens less frequently but has a direct, visible impact, often causing fear and physical injuries. Verbal Abuse through vulgar language is the most common and affects students emotionally, making them feel ashamed or worthless. Body Shaming is the least common but has a strong effect on students' self-esteem and mental health. Together, these findings show that schools need to address both visible (physical) and invisible (emotional) bullying to support students' well-being.

#### 4.6 Implications for School Policy and Intervention

Based on these findings, schools should develop specific strategies to address each type of bullying. Physical bullying can be reduced by increasing supervision in common areas, like hallways and playgrounds, where bullying might happen. For verbal abuse and body shaming, schools can create programs that teach respect, empathy, and positive communication skills.

Schools could also promote body positivity and self-acceptance through campaigns and supportive programs. By creating a positive environment, schools can help students feel more confident and less likely to be affected by body shaming.

**Table 2: Suggested Actions for Schools to Reduce Bullying**

Bullying Type	Action Schools Can Take	Expected Result
Physical Bullying	Increase adult supervision in common areas	Fewer cases of physical bullying
Verbal Abuse (Vulgar Language)	Teach students about respectful communication	Reduced incidents of verbal abuse
Body Shaming	Run body positivity campaigns	Improved self-confidence among students

In Table 2, we can see how schools can take simple, targeted actions to address each bullying type. For Physical Bullying, extra supervision in crowded areas may discourage bullying. For Verbal Abuse, teaching students about respect and the impact of hurtful words can help reduce incidents. Promoting Body Positivity can encourage students to feel comfortable in their own bodies, helping prevent the effects of body shaming. By using these specific approaches, schools can help create a safer and more supportive environment for all students.

#### 5. Limitation

Given the concerning link between bullying and suicidal thoughts identified in this research, the next study will focus specifically on understanding the prevalence and factors contributing to suicidal ideation among students who experience bullying. This future research aims to provide deeper insights into how bullying affects mental health, enabling schools and mental health professionals to develop more effective support systems and interventions.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights the serious issue of bullying among students in Klang Districts. The findings show that a significant number of students experience various forms of bullying, particularly verbal abuse, which affects their mental health and well-being. Understanding the extent of this problem is crucial for schools, parents, and policymakers to implement effective interventions.

To tackle bullying effectively, creating a supportive school environment where students feel safe and valued is important. Schools should develop clear policies and programs to educate students about the consequences of bullying and encourage them to speak up when they witness or experience bullying. We can work together to reduce bullying incidents and help students thrive.

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