

The changing nature of the ‘atmosphere’ in B2B relationships

Work-in-Progress Paper

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Abstract

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This paper uses Fiske’s Relational Model Theory to develop an analysis which will take account of the interplay between the macro and micro level dimensions of B2B interactions. The paper does not contain any empirical work and at this stage is only seeking to develop a theoretical approach which may later be empirically tested. However, the paper shows that the use of Fiske’s work does provide valuable insights into the interplay of the macro and micro interactions which occur in B2B relationships as they change over time.

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Introduction The overall ‘atmosphere’ of a relationship is a critically important factor determining the nature of the environment within which exchanges occur (Sutton-Brady, 2000, 2001; Roehrich and Spencer, 2001). Indeed the IMP Group states that “the atmosphere” is one of the four basic elements that it uses when analysing industrial marketing and purchasing situations. The view of the IMP Group is that: “The atmosphere is built up by specific episodes of exchange as well as by the long-term process of interaction” (Turnbull and Valla, 1986, p.6) and that the ‘atmosphere’ will change as the relationship develops. This paper uses Fiske’s Relational Theory to discuss the manner in which the atmosphere evolves and to provide a link between the macro and micro issues of managing B2B interactions.

‘Atmosphere’ The IMP Group suggests that: “atmosphere can be described in terms of the power dependence relationship which exists between the companies, the state of conflict or co-operation and overall closeness or distance of the relationship as well as by the companies’ mutual expectations.” (IMP Group, 2002, p.28) ‘Atmosphere’ is thus considered to be an intervening variable which explains differences in the nature of the relations which occur between interacting parties. During the life of a B2B relationship the ‘atmosphere’ will change.

Young and Wilkinson (1997) observed that, in the context of B2B marketing, the construct of ‘atmosphere’ has been defined quite broadly to include a variety of other constructs used by researchers to characterize the dimensions of a relationship.

Indeed while some researchers (e.g. Hallén and Sandström, 1991) have created classifications of the various ‘atmosphere’ constructs, others have argued that ‘atmospheres’ themselves need to be categorized (e.g. Leonidou, 2004). Various aspects of the nature of and the role of ‘atmosphere’ have been examined either directly (e.g. Leek and Mason, 2009) or as part of wider studies (e.g. Ka-shing and Ennew, 2004).

This paper suggests that the nature of the ‘atmosphere’ which develops between two organizations as they interact with each other is strongly influenced by two factors. First, the macro strategies that determine which B2B relationships each party develops. Second, the way in which these macro strategies are implemented through the micro interpersonal interactions of the parties’ boundary spanners. However, one of the shortcomings of the literature on inter-organizational relations is the limited discussion of the processes that characterise interpersonal relations within and between organizations. In particular there has been a failure to recognize that “whilst day-to-day actions of boundary-spanning agents are dependent on organizational goals, they have some independence to produce and reproduce patterns of behaviour that bind organizations together or weaken levels of collaboration and trust.” (Marchington and Vincent, 2004, p.1037) Thus the overall strength and closeness of an on-going relationship is presumably not determined by macro factors alone but is strongly influenced by the micro personal interactions of boundary-spanners. Therefore, following examination of the studies mentioned above, this paper will follow Hallén and Sandström, in taking ‘atmosphere’ to be “a perceptual construct describing the emotions of the parties towards each other and towards the relationship between them.” (1991, pp.115-6) That is, the atmosphere determines the extent to which it is considered acceptable for specific emotions to influence behaviour in a relationship. Thus the extreme emotions which are displayed and accepted in the Chicago Mercantile Exchange¹ - which is very close to the Economist’s model of a perfect market - would not be acceptable in an exchange between two charities and vice versa.

A small number of studies have attempted to overcome the assumption that “individuals at lower levels in the hierarchy merely implement strategies without deviation” (Marchington and Vincent, 2004, p.1030). For example Humphrey and Ashforth (2000) attempted to separate out the macro-level strategies which set the context for the micro-level interactions between buyer and suppliers. However, such studies have not succeeded in ‘integrating’ the macro and micro but have treated them as separate components. The challenge therefore is to provide an analysis of an interaction’s ‘atmosphere’ which encompasses the macro decisions that set the context within which a B2B exchange will take place but also to incorporate within the analysis the impact on this context of the interpersonal behaviour of boundary spanning personnel through the life of the relationship. This paper argues that Fiske’s Relational Models Theory provides a form of analysis which encompasses both levels of analysis.

¹ “There is an angry mob out there. Its shape is dimly perceived, but the terrifying shadows cast by its burning torches are clear enough. This is the bond market in full cry.” (The Independent, 2010, p.10)

Fiske's Relational Theory Fiske's Relational Models Theory (Fiske, 1992) proposes that all social relationships are constructed according to just four elemental models as "people relate to each other in just four ways." (Fiske, 2004, p.3) These four models provide the scripts or schemata that allow individuals to relate to the behaviour of others. The theory assumes that people are inherently sociable and that consequently "the relational models are not merely cognitive capacities: they are intrinsically motivating." (Fiske, 2004, p.9) As a theory it has the aspiration of being an account of the fundamental forms of social relations.

Fiske's argument is that interactions can be structured with respect to: a Market Pricing Model (MP); an Authority Ranking Model (AR); an Equality Matching Model (EM); or, a Communal Sharing Model (CS) [see Table 1].

TABLE 1 Fiske's Four Relational Models

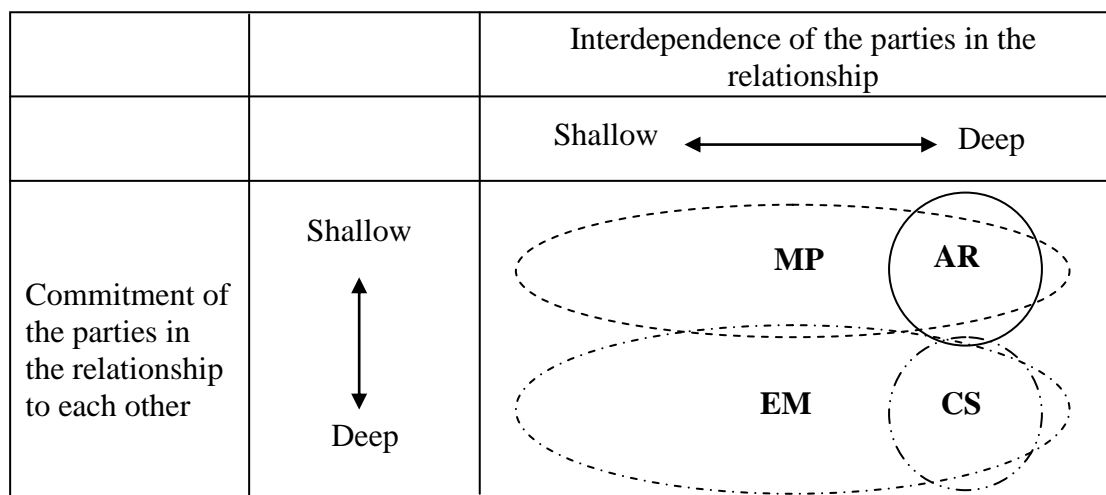
Relational Model	Interpretation
Market Pricing (MP)	An MP relationship organises interactions with reference to ratios or rates and people evaluate exchanges using agreed quantifiable (usually monetary) metrics. In a MP relationship it becomes possible to combine quantities and values of diverse entities – oranges can be exchanged for apples!
Authority Ranking (AR)	AR relationships arise where the relationships between people are determined by a hierarchical ordering in which a person is, for example, higher, better, or more powerful than another.
Equality Matching (EM)	An EM relationship is where people are distinct but equal and exchanges between them are evaluated by a 'swings and roundabouts' approach rather than exact quantifiable measures. An EM relationship differs from a CS relationship (see below) in that accepting help would come under the CS model while a transaction that entails reciprocity but not gratitude, such as receiving a service from others comes under the EM model.
Communal Sharing (CS)	CS relationships exist where a group of people have something (usually not a material 'thing') in common which makes the members of the set in some sense socially equivalent to each other and also acts to distinguish members from non members. It is a relationship within which members recognize collective responsibilities towards each other.

The core of Fiske's theory is that "people use the same set of four implicit cognitive schemas to organise all the diverse domains of sociality most of the time." (2004, p.7) Relational Theory recognises that these four models can guide behaviour or be used to evaluate a situation only with the use of "implementation rules that specify when they apply, to what and to whom, and how." (Fiske and Tetlock, 1997, p.259) Although people may use just one of these four models to coordinate a simple interaction, in general "the various aspects of interactions among a dyad or group are governed by more than one relational model." (Fiske 2004, p.9) and, as will be discussed below, different models may simultaneously apply to aspects of an interaction.

The value of Fiske's model in discussions of 'atmosphere' is that expectations of different sets of behaviours are associated with each of the four types of relationship. For example, in a MP relationship self-centred and competitive actions will be the norm, whereas such behaviour would be contrary to the very essence of an EM relationship. So, if an exchange between two firms is conducted as a MP relationship, then different behaviours will be observed than if any of the other three relationship models are applied and the existence of different behaviours would imply that a different 'atmosphere' exists. These behaviours are "descriptors" (Hallén and Sandström, 1991, p.116) of the 'atmosphere'. The following section, by analyzing the opportunities and risks associated with each of the four models, draws out the types of behaviours which can be expected to be associated with them and thus the 'atmosphere' of any exchange conducted under these models.

The Opportunities and Risks associated with each Relational Model Depending upon which of the four models applies to an interaction an individual will be confronted by different risks and opportunities and these are determined by the degree of commitment and interdependence associated with the four relational forms. 'Commitment' being the degree to which an exchange partner believes the relationship "is so important as to warrant maximum efforts at maintaining it" (Morgan & Hunt, 1994, p.23). 'Interdependence' is an indicator of the extent to which "the completion of one's own consequential activities depend upon the prior actions or ongoing cooperation of another" (Sitkin and Roth, 2006, p.298). Both commitment and interdependence can be characterized as "shallow" or "deep"² and Fiske's four types of relationship can be positioned as in Figure 1 and the types of opportunities and risks associated with them are discussed below.

Figure 1 The four relational models and commitment and interdependence



² The dichotomy shallow or deep is being used as a presentational convenience. In fact both commitment and interdependence are spectrums running from shallow to deep.

Market Pricing (MP) While in terms of interdependence a MP relationship may be either shallow or deep, with regard commitment it is shallow. Indeed the MP relationship is one in which exchanges are most frequently discrete (Macneil, 1983). In a MP relationship substantial possibilities for cheating exist as is indicated by Coase's comment that: "They (viz. markets) also require the establishment of legal rules governing the rights and duties of those carrying out transactions in these facilities" (1988, p10) and this is emphasized by the rigorous assumptions³ on which Economists' market models are based. Indeed, in markets where complex transactions occur, the opportunities for cheating multiply, especially as information asymmetries are endemic in such markets. Also within a MP relationship, because the supplier's behaviour is primarily determined by price, its commitment to the customer is low and there is therefore a risk of unreliable and opportunistic behaviour. Thus, in a time of shortage a supplier might simply sell to the highest bidder - ignoring other aspects of its relationship with a customer. However, MP relationships do provide the opportunity for any object or service to have a value placed on it. For example, the Lloyds of London Insurance Market boasts that it can offer insurance cover for anything or in other words a price can be placed on any risk.

Thus in a MP relationship one party depends upon the other for the provision of a product but, other than payment, there is no expectation of reciprocation of any kind. The absolute essence of the relationship is a calculated exchange of a good for payment and nothing else – there is minimal commitment to the relationship. Indeed at an extreme it has been argued that: "Relations based on market pricing are incompatible with expressing concern for others." (Roccas and McCauley, 2004, p.273). The risks seem to exceed the opportunities associated with this type of relationship and the basic argument for working within such a relationship is that the pricing mechanism is, in the specific context, efficient.

Authority Ranking (AR) Deep interdependence exists in an AR relationship because authority is usually only asserted where the response sought is of importance to the dominant party. However, commitment is shallow because the subservient party only responds to the dominant party's requirements because of its authority. In an AR relationship the risks for the subservient party arise from 'fate control' (Kelley and Thibaut, 1978) which exists where one party can unilaterally determine another's behaviour with regard to particular actions. Thus, within legal limits, a manager can unilaterally determine many aspects of an employee's working life. One opportunity associated with the AR model is the possibility of passing responsibility to a superior by seeking their advice. There is also the opportunity of enabling somebody to act, by virtue of the authority vested in them by their superior, beyond their remit.

Where the AR model is applicable the balance of these opportunities and risks suggests that the subservient party needs to be willing to exercise considerable trust that the party exercising authority will not behave unreasonably. Because the nature of the AR situation is deep interdependence but with shallow commitment, there is

³ For example, Shavell's *main* assumptions are: "that parties are risk neutral, that they have symmetric information, that they do not renegotiate contracts, that all variables are contractible, but that writing contracts involves costs that rise with the number of contractual terms" (2006, p.290). Furthermore, Shavell states that these studies' rigorous assumptions mean that their conclusions have to "be applied with caution to the actual world of contracts and judicial practice" (2006, p.292).

also a need for the party with authority to trust that the subservient party will not exceed its delegated authority. Both parties therefore need to believe that structures have been put into place that limit the superior's ability to disadvantage the subordinate and that also give the subordinate confidence, when taking actions on behalf of their superior, that they will receive their superior's support.

Equality Matching (EM) The EM relationship involves deep commitment because the 'swings and roundabouts' approach between members of the relationship is typically extended through time. Yet in terms of interdependence EM can be either shallow or deep. For example, many social interactions of minor importance to the participants are based on EM relationships – "isn't it my turn to buy the drinks?" However, EM relationships may be deeply interdependent – "it is our turn to hold the Chair of Committee A and if we don't get your support then we won't back your proposal in Committee B". The biggest risk in EM relationships is poor coordination, one form of which is time coordination - that is, over what period of time do the EM principles operate? A second risk relates to the 'rate of exchange' which is often loosely defined and not quantified (otherwise the relationship becomes a MP one). Where there is no explicit measure of 'equality' there is a risk of moral hazard where members exploit the lack of precision or feel they are being exploited by it⁴. A third coordination problem arises when it is felt that the 'rate of exchange' needs changing. The flexibility with regard to both the time period over which a balance can be achieved and what is being balanced against what, thus provides participants with the opportunity of delaying their reciprocal actions and also changing the items they offer to their partner as recompense for their actions.

An EM relationship can only exist where turn-taking, reciprocity and balance over time is the norm and where the parties believe in each others' good faith, good intentions, and integrity. It thus relies upon the acceptance of one party of the other party's reputation for dealing fairly and also for being concerned about a partner's welfare. Furthermore it must seem reasonable to expect these beliefs to be pertinent to future behaviour.

Communal Sharing (CS) CS relationships are deep in terms of commitment as members of a communal group typically demonstrate mutual altruism to each other. CS is also deep in terms of interdependence as the cohesiveness of a communal group is dependant on its members 'watching each other's back'. Membership of a CS relationship typically involves the acceptance of some norms of behaviour. These may relate to apparently quite trivial matters such as dress codes through to substantive issues such as ethical standards. However, it may require prolonged membership of the group⁵ for a full understanding of a norm to be obtained and there is therefore a risk, where new circumstances arise, that some members of the group interpret the situation in a manner which others regard as contrary to the group's

⁴ Some friends recently had a small dispute over an existing car sharing arrangement – a typical EM arrangement. The owner of a 2 litre car arguing that they should do less than 50% of the journeys as each of their journeys cost them more than their friend who owns an 850 cc vehicle.

⁵ A Canadian colleague, shortly after arriving in England, thought he understood the aspect of English humour which involves being rude to one's friends and went around insulting people to demonstrate that he regarded them as friends.

norms. Some such misinterpretations have insignificant effects but others can lead to the group re-appraising the underpinning of the norms which have been misinterpreted. A second type of risk is that of presumptive behaviour for “It is when unexpected circumstances arise that discretionary acts may be most valued, and yet it is exactly in these circumstances that there is the greatest probability that they are incorrect.” (Blois, 1999, p.205). Within the CS model there is the opportunity, indeed the expectation, that those in the relationship will demonstrate mutual support and altruistic behaviour towards each other over a wide range of activities. Indeed one test of the existence of a CS relationship is whether or not members are offered support when an unpleasant and unforeseen event occurs to one of them.

In CS relationships there is extensive communication between the parties over a wide range of topics. Even so there is the possibility that others will make incorrect interpretations and/or act presumptively but this is balanced by a sense of mutual altruism and “expectations of benign action” (Govier, 1994, p.238). Indeed the values associated with a CS relationship emphasize honesty, helpfulness and kindness – values which stand in stark contrast to those found in a MP relationship.

Table 2 Categories of opportunity and risks associated with Fiske’s four relational models

Relational Model	Major categories of opportunity	Major categories of risk
Market Pricing	(i) Possibility of a monetary value being placed on any object or service.	(i) Unreliability; and, (ii) Cheating.
Authority Ranking	(ii) ‘delegation’ of authority to a superior; and, (iii) acting with a superior’s authority.	(iii) Fate control; plus (i) and (ii).
Equality Matching	(iv) delayed ‘payment’; and, (v) changed value system.	(iv) Poor coordination; plus (i)-(iii).
Communal Sharing	(vi) mutual altruism; and, (vii) expectations of benign action.	(v) Incorrect interpretations; and (vi) Presumptive behaviour; plus (i)-(iv).

Table 2 summarizes the above discussion but also stresses that any of the four relational models may be subject to a limited extent to a type of risk predominately associated with one or more of the other three models. For example, unreliability and/or cheating is not totally unknown within CS situations but, because such behaviour runs counter this type of relationship’s fundamental norms, it will be relatively uncommon.⁶ As Table 2 indicates, the risks involved with each type of relationship are additive with MP, the shallowest relationship type in terms of commitment and interdependency, being associated with only two categories of risk

⁶ Indeed there is evidence (Henrich, 2010) that members of well integrated groups (such as those where CS relationships exist) are more likely punish those who do not ‘play fair’ than members of less integrated groups.

but with potentially all the categories of risk being found in CS, the deepest relationship type.

The dominant Relational Model and the nature of the ‘Atmosphere’ As was pointed out above, these four relational models may simultaneously apply to different aspects of an interaction. Indeed Fiske has commented that: “People commonly use a combination of models ... Generally, people string the models together and nest them hierarchically in various phases of an interaction or in distinct activities of an organization.” (1992, p.711). Yet unfortunately, as Haslam has pointed out, “...the general area of relations among relations – how relationships governed by particular models combine, interlock, or conflict with one another – has yet to attract adequate theoretical or empirical attention” (2004, p.53). It is though argued here that, within a specific interaction, the actual behaviours under each of these four models are not independent of each other. Indeed this paper suggests that one relational form may dominate the context within which the other models *have* to operate and that, in response to changing circumstances, the emphasis given to each of the relational models may vary over time.

Within a B2B relationship the relational model which is dominant will be dependent upon the extent to which the relationship has developed. Thus at the initiation of a relationship it is reasonable to assume that MP model will prevail because the customer will only seek to build a relationship when it has calculated “ ‘a relationship’ as providing a more economical way of transacting than the cheapest alternative form of supply of which it is aware” (Blois, 1996, p. 171)⁷. It is therefore to be expected that the role of EM and CS relationships will be limited at this point in the relationship. Yet over time the success of relationships can become more dependent on the day-to-day interactions of boundary spanning agents than on the direct actions of senior managers. These “backstage interpersonal dynamics” (Ring and Van de Ven 2000, p.179) growing in importance as “*Qua persona* behavior substitutes for role behavior as personal relationships build and psychological contracts deepen.” (Ring and Van de Ven, 1994, p.103). Indeed as the boundary spanners come to know each other better, CS relationships will gain in importance and may become the over-riding feature of their interactions⁸. For example, consider a situation where in a new business interaction the Purchasing Manager and the Salesperson find that they already know each other in another context – say they are members of the same golf club. Their willingness to apply the norms of a CS relationship to the new business interaction will initially be constrained by their consciousness that the context within which this new interaction has been initiated is a business one and as such is primarily a MP relationship. However, as the relationship develops then it would be anticipated that CS relationships will become more important and even possibly dominant⁹.

⁷ It is important to accept that the same argument applies to the supplier’s position.

⁸ It must not be assumed that *qua persona* factors are always positive. Getting to know a person better can lead to less, rather than more, liking!

⁹ The difficulties that micro-level interactions can cause when a relationship is coming to an end have been discussed in Ryan and Blois (2010).

It is not being claimed that the movement from MP to CS relationships is predetermined or indeed unidirectional. Indeed given that the evolution of a B2B relationship does not follow a predetermined path this cannot be the case. At any stage in a B2B exchange the centrality of one relational model rather than another will be emphasized as a result of decisions made by or imposed on either party. For example even within a stable long-term relationship where CS relationships have become dominant, new events may cause a move back to a MP emphasis. The event might be a macro issue, such as one party's response to an economic downturn in their business, or a micro issue, such as the replacement of one of the boundary-spanners by somebody with a different business style. However, if a strong CS relationship has been developed it is unlikely that such a change will lead immediately to a move back to a pure MP relationship because, initially, remnants of the CS mode of working will remain¹⁰.

Granovetter (1973) and Mainela (2007) offer frameworks to distinguish the different forms of social bonds that can emerge in business relationships, that is: reporting relationships; organisational contacts; personal relationships; and, friendship relationships. Reporting relationships are considered to be formal and professional and serve primarily as channels for transferring simple information. Organisational contacts involve more face-to-face interaction involving negotiations and assessments of work. Personal relationships are defined as "ties between individuals that know each other well and have developed a kind of common language for smooth interaction" (Mainela, 2007, p.94). Friendship relationships are one form of *qua persona* interactions within which people that are well known to each other can call upon each other to help in times of crisis or urgency.

However, personal and friendship relationships can weaken the commercial element of a relationship. For example, Humphrey and Ashforth's (2000) research into interpersonal relationships in the automobile industry indicates that many organisations try to prevent buyers from establishing personal ties with suppliers' representatives. They do this because of a concern that emotional responses may undermine rational decision-making - as is illustrated by Humphrey and Ashforth's evidence that managers find it emotionally distressing to identify with others "who are suffering, especially if the actors perceive that they are in some way responsible for the other person's discomfort" (2000, p.728).

At the start of a new business-to-business relationship the interactions will be dominated by the MP model. Then, as the relationship grows a CS element is likely to develop between the boundary spanning employees. Indeed, as Anderson and Yap commented, "At the start of the relationship, these goals (viz. why the relationship was formed in the first place) are critical for establishing expectations, clarifying roles and communicating intentions. When all is well, these goals seem to fade into the background as business is carried out." (2005, p.80) Thus over time the recognition that the relationship is fundamentally based on a MP model may become much less explicit. Because it is normal for boundary spanning employees to develop *qua*

¹⁰ This is particularly likely to be the case where the move away from a CS type relationship involves 'taboo trade-offs' (Fiske and Tetlock, 1997). Taboo trade-offs occur where a person is required to change the nature of their behaviour in a manner which challenges their self-respect.

persona relationships, so in what might have started as a MP relationship, CS aspects can develop and become the context within which much micro-personal activity occurs.

Summary This paper has discussed the nature of ‘atmosphere’ in business relationships. It has been suggested that the primary focus of research on ‘atmosphere’ has been in regard to its dimensions as outlined in the original IMP model (IMP Group, 1982). Progress within this stream has been limited to developing the notion that ‘atmosphere’ is subjectively experienced and its relationship with relationship performance (e.g. Sutton-Brady, 2001; Ka-shing and Ennew, 2004)). However, this paper suggests that such an approach ignores the interplay between the micro and macro level dimensions of B2B interactions. By utilizing Hallén and Sandström’s (1991) conceptualisation of ‘atmosphere’ as relating to the emotional setting in which an interaction takes place, this paper puts forward Fiske’s Relational Models Theory (Fiske, 1992) as an alternative approach to the study of a relationship’s ‘atmosphere’. Rather than differentiating between ‘atmospheres’ either on the basis of a relationship structure (i.e. strategic alliance, joint venture etc) or by the type of buying situation (Leoindou, 2004), Fiske’s theory makes it possible to consider the more abstract conceptualisation of relationship type as falling within AR, MP, EM and CS relational model. As has been discussed, there are inherent risks and opportunities associated with each of these four models and these describe the nature and scope of relationship ‘atmosphere’. It must be stressed that this is not a prescriptive, static or deterministic approach. Indeed events can trigger a shift in the dominance of one type of relational model over another and the prior nature of a relationship’s development will strongly influence the nature and direction of any change.

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