

THE INFLUENCE OF PRODUCT PLACEMENT BY VIRTUAL INFLUENCERS ON INSTAGRAM ON AUDIENCE ATTITUDE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the influence of product placement on the Instagram account of a virtual influencer (@allysagladys) on audience attitudes. The research sample consists of 308 students from Tarumanagara University in West Jakarta. The method employed for data collection in this study is convenience sampling, where questionnaires were distributed directly to the respondents. The results indicate that product placement on the virtual influencer's account can influence the formation of audience attitudes. Furthermore, the study suggests that companies should enhance their social media promotion through collaborations with influencers to shape and maintain audience attitudes toward their products.

Keywords: *Product Placement, Virtual Influencer, Attitude, Promotion*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the current era of digitalization, the potential use of technology and digital media is on the rise. Digitalization has prompted many companies to utilize digital platforms as their marketing channels (Koay *et al.*, 2022). Social media marketing has become a common strategy employed by brands, especially in efforts to strengthen relationships and communicate effectively with their customers. This strategy allows companies to connect with their customers, enhance brand awareness, and influence consumer attitudes, ultimately contributing to increased sales (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2021).

Gucci, an Italian luxury fashion brand has embraced Instagram as its primary platform for promotional activities. Through social media, the brands have the opportunity to expand its audience reach and engage with customers in real-time. Social media serves as an interactive technological platform, providing strong brand knowledge through collaborative interactions and projecting a personality that can shape consumer perceptions (Cheung *et al.*, 2021).

Instagram has experienced tremendous growth in popularity and has become an effective marketing tool for brands. A notable 58% of its users actively seek information about products and brands, surpassing other social platforms (Data Reportal, 2023). As the primary platform for sharing photos and videos, Instagram is known to have over 1 billion monthly active users and 500 million daily active users (Rejeb *et al.*, 2022), facilitating interactive brand-customer interactions with engaging features (Rietveld *et al.*, 2020). In Indonesia, Instagram ranks as the second favorite platform after WhatsApp (Data Reportal, 2023), preferred over TikTok due to its higher level of interactivity (Lydiawati *et al.*, 2023).

On Instagram, influencers emerge as key elements in promoting specific products and brands (Gamage & Ashill, 2022). This practice is also known as influencer marketing, involving brand integration into content shared by influencers (Dencheva, 2023). With significant

followers on social media platforms, they are trusted by brands as credible sources of information to stimulate consumer purchasing decisions towards the offerings presented (Agnihotri et al., 2023). It is known that many companies have utilized influencer marketing to drive consumer engagement and purchasing behavior with estimated expenditures reaching \$16.4 billion by the end of 2022 (Barari, 2023).

In the continuously evolving marketing landscape supported by technological advancements, a new phenomenon emerges—virtual influencers. Empowered by artificial intelligence, virtual influencers replicate human behaviors and wield strong influence on social media platforms through interactive communication (Mouritzen et al., 2023). For instance, Lil Miquela (@lilmiquela) has successfully collaborated with various renowned brands on Instagram, driving new innovations in influencer marketing practices. Studies suggest that engagement with virtual influencers can reach up to three times higher than human influencers with lower costs and lower scandal risks (Baklanov, 2020; Thomas & Fowler, 2021). Moreover, without physiological limitations and with more controlled imagery in social media content, this strategy is increasingly adopted by brands (Appel et al., 2020; Drenten & Brooks, 2020). Collaborations between brands and both types of influencers aim to influence audiences and shape positive brand perceptions in their minds.

Currently, Gucci is collaborating with social media influencers to showcase their products. They carefully integrate fashion elements such as clothing, bags, and shoes into the content shared by influencers. This practice, known as product placement, is a marketing strategy that inserts products into specific media to indirectly influence consumers (Balasubramanian, 1994; Liu et al., 2015). Digitalization has also brought about the development of product placement practices from conventional media to digital media. Initially, product placement practices were mainly done in films and novels (Newell et al., 2006), but now product placement is also carried out in various other media such as web series (Cokki et al., 2019) and social media (Alassani & Göretz, 2019; Suková & Miková, 2022).

Product placement practices are not new in marketing. However, interestingly, this practice is still rarely implemented and researched, especially in developing countries (Guo et al., 2019). This may limit the understanding of the application of such practices in developing countries like Indonesia. Studies on product placement in Indonesia are also limited in terms of methodology (Perwitasari & Paramita, 2020; Purnomo, 2023; Nadeak & Setiawan, 2024). The use of non-experimental methods can affect the external validity of research results. Empirical research on virtual influencers is relatively new and limited (Arsenyan & Mirowska, 2021; Rodgers, 2021; Jhawar et al., 2023), especially regarding product placement. This limitation may hinder understanding of the impact of artificial intelligence technological advancements, especially in the application of marketing strategies such as product placement.

Consequently, this study aims to fill this research gap by investigating product placement in Instagram virtual influencer content and its influence on audience attitude formation, particularly in the context of luxury brands. This research is expected to provide broad insights into the potential of AI-based influencer marketing for luxury brands, especially in developing countries like Indonesia.

Product Placement

In the concept of product placement, the integration of the advantages of advertising and publicity creates unique benefits for sponsors, known as hybrid messages. In advertising, the

message and content format are more controlled due to the presence of the sponsor. However, publicity messages that do not identify the sponsor tend to have higher credibility in the eyes of the audience. From the advantages of both, a new format is created—hybrid messages that assist sponsors in influencing audiences without realizing the promotional efforts made by the sponsor (Balasubramanian, 1994).

From this concept, product placement can be defined as a marketing technique that strategically and paidly inserts specific products or brands to influence viewers through films or television programs (Balasubramanian, 1994). This practice is also referred to as embedded marketing, where specific products or brands are subtly included in a program (Liu et al., 2015). Product placement can be executed through various media formats, both conventional and digital (Eagle & Dahl, 2015). Essentially, product placement is a cost-effective marketing practice that creatively integrates brands into mass media content (Gamage et al., 2023).

Overall, product placement involves the intentional insertion of specific products or brands into media content, conveyed through implicit messages to influence the audience. This technique serves as a powerful strategy to engage viewers and promote products, primarily driven by an unobtrusive yet impactful approach in the media landscape.

Virtual Influencer

Social media has undergone rapid development. The increasing number of active users on social media platforms has given rise to a new phenomenon in the marketing world. The emergence of virtual influencers on social media is a recent phenomenon that has occurred in recent years. Virtual influencers are characters generated by computer-generated imagery (CGI) or artificial intelligence (AI) with forms and behaviors resembling real humans. These digital characters then cultivate public trust, enabling them to gather millions of followers on social media platforms (Jhawar et al., 2023). Virtual influencers can also be defined as digital characters engaged in interactive social media content with the aim of gaining consumer trust through the influence they exert (Mouritzen et al., 2023).

Digital agencies and brands typically control the decisions of virtual influencers, such as posts or brand collaborations (Sands et al., 2022). Characters generated by artificial intelligence algorithms then play a key role in shaping innovative digital marketing strategies (Xie-Carson et al., 2023). In summary, a virtual influencer is a digital character generated by artificial intelligence, with a form and behavior resembling a human.

Attitudes toward Influencer

Attitudes toward influencer refers to the consumer response influenced by their level of trust in the said influencer (Xiao et al., 2018). When someone has an interest in a particular celebrity, they tend to perceive their favorite celebrity as a reliable source. Positive attitudes and a sense of trust toward the celebrity then form, especially when the influencer delivers promotional messages (Min et al., 2019). Attitudes toward influencer, as noted by (Torres et al., 2019), reflects the cognitive response of consumers triggered by exposure to advertisements featuring a celebrity, both during and after the exposure.

Attitude toward influencer is closely related to the concept of parasocial relationships. In their study, (Tran et al., 2019) stated that after the formation of this parasocial relationship, consumers tend to show compliance and a responsive attitude to product recommendations promoted by their favorite influencer. Additionally, in a study conducted by (Belanche et al.,

2021), attitude toward influencer is described as the audience's evaluation of the influencer related to the promotional content displayed on their social media account. Based on these insight, the attitude toward the influencer becomes a comprehensive assessment triggered by the influencer's content on their social media account, which can be either positive or negative evaluations.

Attitudes toward Product Placement

Attitude toward advertising, or commonly known as attitude toward product placement, involves an individual's inclination to support or oppose stimuli from the exposure to a specific brand or product during a particular period (Kowalczyk & Royne, 2012). The study by (Balasubramanian et al., 2014) also states that product placement can be interpreted as an individual's evaluation of a segment within a film that includes the placement of a promoted brand.

The evaluation results of commercial brand content can yield positive or negative judgments, typically determined by the target audience of the media and the type of product or service (Ulker-Demirel & Yildiz, 2020). Additionally, research by (Kaur et al., 2021) indicates that attitude toward product placement refers to consumers' comprehensive views and beliefs regarding the practice of integrating and embedding products or brands into media content, based on several crucial considerations. This study portrays attitude toward product placement as a response and evaluation of content featuring product or brand placements, whether through digital or conventional media.

Attitudes toward the Brand

Brand attitude refers to the overall consumer evaluation of a specific brand (Ghorban, 2012). As noted by (Boerman et al., 2015), brand attitude reflects the audience's evaluation of the integrated product recognition process within a program conducted by a particular brand. Essentially, brand attitude pertains to the positive or negative evaluation made by consumers towards a brand, reflecting the personal recognition and emotional aspects of a company's advertising brand (Lee et al., 2017). Additionally, a previous study by (Tseng & Wang, 2023) describes brand attitude as consumers' tendency to provide favorable judgments on a product from a specific brand, supported by an influencer they trust.

From these insights, attitudes toward the brand is an individual's evaluative outcome regarding a brand as a whole, encompassing both positive and negative assessments perceived by the individual. Consumer attitudes may change with new experiences encountered by the consumer. Therefore, it is essential for companies to build audience attitudes to create positive evaluative outcomes.

According to a study conducted by (Trivedi & Sama, 2019), marketing with influencers, especially those with specific expertise, can influence audience perceptions. This has a more significant impact on attitudes towards brands compared to influencers who are visually appealing only. This perspective is further supported by a previous study (Ulker-Demirel & Yildiz, 2020), which suggests that positive views towards a brand can be formed through TV shows featuring positive portrayals by actors or actresses. Attributes such as reliability and professionalism are also crucial in influencing one's perception of an influencer, as explained in (Oh & Park, 2020). Overall, the audience's view or attitude towards an influencer will affect their perception of the brand.

An individual's positive or negative view of an influencer will also impact their perception of the product placements done by that influencer. A study by (Felix & Borges, 2014) states that if the audience has a positive view of the influencer, they will also respond positively to advertising. Audience attitudes toward product placements are also influenced by the ethics of advertising. Product placements by influencers are considered successful in influencing the audience when both the influencer and the product placement receive positive views (Paul & Bhakar, 2017). In the digital era, the popularity of digital influencers is increasing, and "digital native" consumers tend to be receptive to digital influencer content (Panggati et al., 2023). Therefore, content about a brand or product endorsed by influencers, especially digital influencers, can influence consumers to prefer digitally advertised products or brands.

In shaping positive evaluations from the audience for the advertised brand, the placement content must also receive positive assessments from the audience, as indicated by (Panggati et al., 2023). If the audience gives a negative assessment of the overall content, the impact is likely to be negative on the placement assessment and attitudes toward the involved brand. Furthermore, (Uribe et al., 2022) show that advertising in digital media, implicitly or explicitly, can influence audience attitudes, which then affect their perception of the advertised brand. The use of advertising media can enhance consumer experience and engagement, creating better advertising effectiveness in terms of memory, attitudes, and subsequent behavior.

Therefore, the following hypotheses have been proposed:

- H1. Attitudes toward the influencer has a positive effect on attitudes toward the brand.
- H2. Attitudes toward the influencer has a positive effect on attitude towards product placement.
- H3. Attitudes toward product placement has a positive effect on attitudes toward the brand.

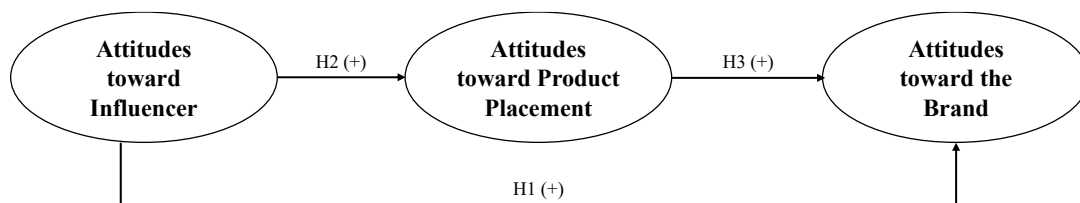


Figure 1 Research Model

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research design utilized in this study is a quasi-experimental design using a post-test without a control group. Measurements were taken after the treatment was administered. In experimental research, manipulation tests need to be conducted to ensure that participants are exposed to the given treatment (Malhotra, 2020). This study consists of two manipulation test questions: whether they can recall the name of the virtual influencer and whether they notice the presence of the brand in Instagram content.

The research data were collected on October 16, 2023, through a field experiment activity involving students from Tarumanagara University as participants. Participants were instructed to fill out an online survey provided using Google Forms during the data collection process. The researcher collected a total of 308 responses using convenience sampling method. Thirty-five responses were excluded for not passing the manipulation test, leaving a total of 273 participants. The sample was predominantly female (80%) with an average age of

19 years old. Most of them have been using Instagram for approximately 7 to 8 years (37%) with a frequency of usage of 1 to 2 hours per day (52%) to stay updated (211 participants).

Participants received treatment by being exposed to social media content on Instagram (@allysagladys), featuring product placement from the Gucci brand. The virtual influencer and its content were generated by the researcher using Leonardo AI, an artificial intelligence application for creating visual content. The researcher chose this brand due to its recognition and popularity in Indonesia, considering that our participants are Indonesian students from Tarumanagara University in Jakarta. Each participant was given five minutes to observe the content. Upon completion, they were instructed to fill out a post-test questionnaire and were prohibited from being exposed to the content again.



Figure 2. Gucci Product Placement
Source: Instagram Account (@allysagladys)

Data collection took place on the university campus through student participation and questionnaire completion. The experiment began with an explanation of the research objectives and procedures to the participants, as well as the provision of consent forms to participate in the experiment. Participants were given time to process the treatment in the form of posts on the Instagram account of virtual influencer @allysagladys using devices provided by the researcher. Subsequently, participants were asked to fill out post-test questions regarding their attitudes and final evaluations after viewing the treatment about the Gucci brand displayed. Participants were given approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Upon completion, the researcher expressed gratitude and provided incentives in the form of keychains and money as an appreciation for participating in the study.

In this study, attitudes towards influencers have four dimensions (attractiveness, trustworthiness, expertise, and congruence), each measured by four to five indicators. The measurement is based on previous research by Dwivedi et al. (2015); Calvo Porral et al. (2023). Furthermore, attitudes towards product placement and brand are each measured using four indicators (Gupta & Gould, 1997; Karrh et al., 2001); Van Reijmersdal et al., 2017;

Uribe et al., 2022). Each indicator variable is measured using a 5-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree).

The overall audience attitudes are then evaluated by observing the audience's assessment of influencers, product placements, and brands measured after receiving the treatment (post-test). The collected data are analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) technique with SmartPLS 4 to test the hypotheses derived.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The audience's attitudes, encompassing attitudes towards influencers, product placement, and brands, have undergone validity and reliability testing with CR values exceeding 0.70 and AVE values surpassing 0.5 (see Table 1) (Hair et al., 2019). Indicator loadings below 0.708 can still be considered as they fall within the range between 0.40 and 0.708. Table 2 demonstrates that the HTMT criterion has been fulfilled, with HTMT ratios below the recommended threshold value of 0.90 [45]. It can be concluded that the discriminant validity of the constructs used in this study is confirmed according to both criteria.

Table 1. Construct Validity and Reliability.

<i>Constructs and Items</i>	<i>FL</i>	<i>CR</i>	<i>AVE</i>
<i>Attitudes toward Influencer</i>		0.874	0.637
Attractiveness			
Allysa is attractive	0.839		
Allysa is beautiful	0.853		
Allysa is stylish	0.855	0.916	0.687
Allysa is elegant	0.872		
Allysa is sexy	0.705		
Trustworthiness			
Allysa is honest	0.877		
Allysa is responsible	0.884		
Allysa is trustworthy	0.897	0.944	0.767
Allysa is reliable	0.866		
Allysa is sincere	0.853		
Expertise			
Allysa is knowledgeable about fashion	0.900		
Allysa is experienced in the field of fashion	0.887	0.949	0.815
Allysa understands fashion	0.914		
Allysa is skilled in the field of fashion	0.910		
Congruence			
Allysa aligns with the Gucci brand image	0.886		
Allysa enhances the appeal of Gucci products	0.871	0.941	0.800
Gucci brand suits Allysa well	0.921		
Allysa wears the Gucci brand correctly	0.899		
<i>Attitudes toward Product Placement</i>		0.951	0.569
I don't mind if Allysa receives money from sponsors	0.799		
I don't mind seeing branded products on Allysa's Instagram	0.807		
I don't mind Allysa featuring branded products on Instagram as long as it looks realistic	0.741		
I would seek new information about a brand after seeing it on Allysa's Instagram	0.662		
<i>Attitudes toward the Brand</i>		0.840	0.828
I consider the Gucci brand worn by Allysa as a good brand	0.895		
In my opinion, the Gucci brand worn by Allysa looks appealing	0.934		
I support Allysa wearing the Gucci brand	0.918		
I like the Gucci brand worn by Allysa	0.894		
Notes: FL: Factor Loading; CR: Composite Reliability; AVE: Average Variance Extracted.			

Table 2. Discriminant Validity

	<i>Attitude toward influencer</i>	<i>Attitude toward the brand</i>	<i>Attitude toward product placement</i>
Attitude toward influencer			
Attitude toward the brand	0.867		
Attitude toward product placement	0.857	0.786	

Notes: Values represent Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Table 3. Hypotheses Testing Results

	<i>Hypotheses</i>	<i>Path Coefficients</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p-value</i>	<i>Result</i>
H1	Attitude toward influencer → Attitude toward the brand	0.585	11.455	0.000	Supported
H2	Attitude toward influencer → Attitude toward product placement	0.665	18.081	0.000	Supported
H3	Attitude toward product placement → Attitude toward the brand	0.264	4.603	0.000	Supported

Our research findings reveal significant insights into the impact of product placement on audience attitude formation, particularly concerning attitudes toward influencers, product placements, and brands. This study focuses on the utilization of a virtual influencer, @allysagladys, in digital marketing and its influence on audience attitude formation, especially in the case of products from the Gucci brand. It was discovered that the effect of product placement is not limited to human influencers but extends to virtual influencers.

Consistent with prior research (Trivedi & Sama, 2019; Oh & Park, 2020; Ulker-Demirel & Yildiz, 2020), this study finds that the positive perception of influencers by the audience can influence their attitudes toward brands (see Table 2). The results of hypothesis testing indicate a significant relationship between attitudes toward influencers and attitudes toward brands (β : 0.585; p-value: 0.000; f^2 : 0.501). This reflects those individual evaluations of influencers, based on attractiveness, trust, expertise, and alignment with the promoted brand (Gucci), will impact their perceptions of the brand. Preferences for a particular influencer can influence positive attitudes toward the brand they endorse. Conversely, disliking an influencer can lead to negative attitudes toward the associated brand.

Furthermore, the findings of this research align with previous studies stating that positive perceptions of influencers not only influence attitudes toward brands but also toward product placements (Felix & Borges, 2014; Paul & Bhakar, 2017). These findings are supported by the results of hypothesis testing, indicating a significant relationship between attitudes toward influencers and attitudes toward product placements (β : 0.665; p-value: 0.000; f^2 : 0.795). These results are consistent with earlier studies (Panggati et al., 2023), emphasizing that a positive response to influencer posts featuring product placements from a specific brand will occur if the audience likes the influencer. Conversely, product placements will not gain support from individuals who dislike the associated influencer.

In comparison with previous research, this study confirms consistent findings. For instance, prior research indicates that audiences can form positive views of a brand if they like an entire film, including segments with product placements (Balasubramanian et al., 2014). Our findings demonstrate a significant relationship between attitudes toward product placements and attitudes toward brands (β : 0.264; p-value: 0.000; f^2 : 0.102). This reflects that individual evaluations of exposure to product placements from a specific brand in content will influence their attitudes toward the brand. Positive responses to a brand will emerge when product

placements elicit positive reactions from the audience. Conversely, if the audience dislikes the exposure, the brand placed will not receive positive attitudes from them. These findings are in line with prior research stating that advertisements, especially in digital media, can influence audience attitudes, subsequently affecting their perceptions of the advertised brand (Uribe et al., 2022).

The research findings indicate that audience attitudes towards influencers can influence their attitudes towards brands and product placements. This supports the development of attitude and product placement theories, highlighting the importance of individual perceptions associated with brands in shaping positive attitudes towards them. The study also extends understanding of how virtual influencers, such as Allysya Gladys, can impact audience attitudes towards brands. Furthermore, from a practical perspective, the research underscores the importance of optimizing product placement strategies by selecting the right influencers to maximize their impact on audience brand perceptions. This also opens up new opportunities for marketers to develop new AI-based marketing strategies through digital platforms.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In conclusion, this study highlights the effectiveness of product placement in shaping audience attitudes, particularly in the context of digital marketing using virtual influencers. It is known that successfully integrating entertainment and advertising through product placement can effectively shape audience attitudes, although the impact depends on the content of the product placement uploaded by virtual influencers.

Digital marketing is considered an initial strategy for brands to promote products. Influencer content on social media plays a crucial role in shaping customer attitudes. Technological advances have transformed the marketing landscape, with the emergence of virtual influencers serving as evidence of successful digital transformation. This encourages companies to strengthen digital marketing strategies, especially through product placement with virtual influencers, to shape positive perceptions and attitudes among the audience.

Despite Gucci being widely known, the brand still faces challenges in shaping and maintaining the dynamic attitudes of consumers. This research illustrates the influence of product placement by virtual influencers on shaping audience attitudes, including attitudes towards influencers, product placement, and brands. These findings emphasize the importance of shaping positive audience attitudes. Forming a positive attitude among the audience provides advantages for the brand, ensuring that the brand receives positive perceptions from consumers and captures their interest in the respective brand.

This study aims to gain in-depth insights into the effectiveness of product placement through virtual influencers on luxury fashion brands in shaping audience attitudes. Participants involved in this study were students from Tarumanagara University, Jakarta. The research utilized a post-test experimental design, with the treatment being virtual influencer content on Instagram. From the conducted research, it is evident that product placements connecting entertainment and advertising effectively shape audience attitudes; however, the impact depends on the content of the product placements uploaded by virtual influencers.

Digital marketing is an initial strategy for brands to promote products. Influencer content on social media can shape customer attitudes. Technological advancements have transformed marketing activities, and the emergence of virtual influencers showcases the success of

digital transformation. This encourages companies to strengthen digital marketing, particularly through virtual influencer product placements, to shape positive views and attitudes among the audience.

Gucci, despite its widespread recognition, still faces challenges in forming and maintaining consumer attitudes that tend to be dynamic. This research illustrates the influence of product placements by virtual influencers on shaping audience attitudes—attitudes towards influencers, attitudes towards product placements, and attitudes towards the brand. It highlights the importance of forming audience attitudes within companies or brands. With the formation of positive audience attitudes, it ensures that the brand receives favorable perceptions from consumers and captures their interest in the associated brand.

The implications of this research for marketing practitioners are that Instagram content by virtual influencers featuring product placements can shape audience attitudes. To shape and maintain positive audience attitudes, brands need to collaborate with both human and virtual influencers while considering the positive and negative impacts of both. This practice can be carried out by actively engaging in promotional activities on Instagram involving influencers, especially virtual influencers like Allysya Gladys, to showcase product placement content. Theoretically, this research also contributes to expanding understanding of how product placement and influencer use in digital marketing can mutually influence each other. It also adds a new dimension and enriches the literature on digital marketing practices through virtual influencers.

Further research is suggested to enrich other unexplored variables, as well as to expand the sample and population coverage. For the creation of more optimal virtual influencer content, it is also recommended to explore alternative artificial intelligence with more comprehensive creation capabilities and features. It is expected that subsequent research can refine and expand upon these findings.

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