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Social media and education: perspectives on digital inclusion in the university setting

Redes sociales y educación: perspectivas sobre la inclusión digital en el ámbito universitario

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ABSTRACT

Social networks have become pivotal in education, offering opportunities for inclusive learning experiences. This study seeks to understand the role of social networks in educational inclusion by analyzing students' usage, motivations, and perceived benefits. It focuses on identifying usage patterns, main activities, and perceptions regarding the impact of social networks on communication, interpersonal relationships, and access to educational information. A quantitative approach was employed, gathering data through a questionnaire from 355 university students of the specialty of secondary education in Lima during the 2023-2 semester. Statistics on social media usage, predominant activities, and perceived benefits associated with their use were analyzed. Findings revealed high social media usage, with WhatsApp (96,7 %) being the most used platform, followed by Facebook (63,6 %) and Instagram (40,5 %). Main activities were entertainment (66,4 %), family communication (60,9 %), and education (58,1 %). Students also valued improved interpersonal relationships (32,6 %) and access to information (68,7 %). Social networks play a crucial role in educational inclusion, providing opportunities for communication, collaboration, and information access. The need to balance their use and address challenges like digital dependency, prioritizing student well-being in the digital age, is emphasized.

Keywords: Social Networks; Educational Inclusion; University Students; Platform Usage; Perceived Benefits.

RESUMEN

Las redes sociales se han vuelto fundamentales en la educación, ofreciendo oportunidades para experiencias de aprendizaje inclusivas. Este estudio busca comprender el papel de las redes sociales en la inclusión educativa mediante el análisis del uso, las motivaciones y los beneficios percibidos por los estudiantes. Se enfoca en identificar patrones de uso, actividades principales y percepciones sobre el impacto de las redes sociales en la comunicación, relaciones interpersonales y acceso a la información educativa. Se empleó un enfoque cuantitativo, recopilando datos mediante un cuestionario a 355 estudiantes universitarios de la especialidad de educación secundaria en Lima durante el semestre 2023-2. Se analizaron estadísticas sobre el uso de plataformas sociales, actividades predominantes y beneficios percibidos asociados con su uso. Los hallazgos revelaron un alto uso de redes sociales, destacando WhatsApp (96,7 %) como la plataforma más utilizada, seguida de Facebook (63,6 %) e Instagram (40,5 %). Las actividades principales fueron entretenimiento (66,4 %), comunicación familiar (60,9 %) y educación (58,1 %). Los estudiantes también valoraron la mejora de relaciones interpersonales (32,6 %) y acceso a información (68,7 %). Las redes sociales desempeñan un papel crucial en la inclusión educativa, ofreciendo oportunidades de comunicación, colaboración y acceso a información. Se destaca la necesidad de equilibrar su uso y abordar desafíos como la dependencia digital,

priorizando el bienestar estudiantil en la era digital.

Palabras clave: Redes Sociales; Inclusión Educativa; Estudiantes Universitarios; Uso de Plataformas; Beneficios Percibidos.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media since 1995 has transformed the speed of communication, altering the parameters of information exchange among members of a society, creating high expectations in educational processes.⁽¹⁾ The transformation of educational characteristics as a result of the COVID-19 health crisis changed the interaction between students, affected by social confinement, increasing the dependency on technological devices, digital tools, and social networks as the only means of relationship among them, demonstrating a significant impact on student behaviors.⁽²⁾

Current education is so permeated by technology in the development of learning that the presence of global collaborative channels opens new avenues for the development of activities in their cognitive processes, as it also marks a dependency on the use of digital media. This process has been causing a noticeable alteration in students' personalities, with episodes of stress and anxiety becoming more frequent at younger ages.⁽³⁾ The rapid digitalization in education caused by COVID-19 worldwide was decisive in transforming educational processes, through the massification of digital resources constituting a novel form of communication and interrelation among members of the educational community, increasing the time spent on the internet, social networks, presenting behaviors of addiction and subordination by many of them.^(4,5)

In the current landscape of social media, understanding and promoting the inclusive factor have emerged as elements of vital importance. This new perspective transcends mere digital connectivity and focuses on creating virtual environments that are truly diverse and accessible to all people, regardless of their origin, gender, disability, or orientation. The inclusion that social media allows involves promoting equity in participation and representation. Platforms are undergoing a transformation towards features and policies designed to counteract harassment and discrimination, while also striving to provide accessible tools for users with disabilities.

In this sense, the successful implementation of inclusive strategies not only expands the participation of marginalized groups, fostering a more enriching discourse but also contributes to the building of more resilient and empathetic digital communities. In this context, the novelty lies in the evolution of social networks from mere spaces of interaction to platforms that recognize and value the uniqueness of each individual, cultivating a digital atmosphere where inclusion is the foundation for the flourishing of a connected global society.

The diversity of uses that social media offers for learning and teaching implies an increase in digital skills for sustainable development, fostering a process of educational inclusion, with quality and improved opportunities in handling large volumes of information.⁽⁶⁾ With the advancement of technology that has motivated the creation of digital tools, it is possible to carry out information exchange and communication procedures in a smooth and harmonious manner. These tools have evolved significantly, from initially sending texts to transmitting audio and video in real-time. In this sense, social networks are becoming more robust and solid, interacting with artificial intelligence systems, thereby allowing a comprehensive and global performance in the development of education.⁽⁷⁾

The increase in the employment of technological tools, especially social networks related to educational process of students, is considerably huge,⁽⁸⁾ despite socioeconomic factors tending to influence access to information and the use of social networks, which create scenarios of addiction and obsession with frequent use among university students.⁽⁹⁾ Education goes hand in hand with technology to develop in sustainable educational institutions with the purpose of training professionals capable of using critical and creative processes with the support of social networks.^(7,10)

On the other hand, it is necessary to point out that social networks significantly increase the channels of communication and socialization among students,⁽¹¹⁾ as long as there is control of information on their social networks,⁽⁹⁾ as their incidence in education is increasingly high, due to the multiple benefits they demarcate in the activities of students, due to the lack of their presence in educational activities,⁽¹²⁾ remembering that the lack of use of social networks produces anxiety and stress due to the loss of connection with their closest friendly environment and the anxiety to meet new people.⁽¹³⁾

It should be noted that the main purpose of social networks has been the exchange of information and access to communication among peers or members of a community, but excessive use has caused submission, becoming a distracting element within the academic formation of students, leading them to neglect many obligations and chores to continue excessive and addictive consumption, causing procrastination among users.⁽¹⁴⁾

It should be emphasized that the use of digital tools has allowed promoting the educational inclusion of students with and without special educational needs, facilitating access to multiple sources of information,

eliminating any barrier of segregation or rejection.⁽¹⁵⁾ The limited access to information and communication was one of the main gaps that needed to be addressed in favor of students with some type of special educational need, which is why the entry of social networks into the educational process has provided a determining factor within the academic and social development of students.⁽¹⁶⁾

The enormous subordination of students towards social networks must be addressed and measured for estimation, prevention, and intervention, as excessive permanence of people on these networks is linked to feelings of anxiety, depression, and stress,⁽¹⁷⁾ therefore, there must be a notable regulation or control in the use of social networks. From another perspective, it is maintained that during the daily activities of students, there is a direct relationship with the influence on self-esteem, relationship, and psychological profile of the users of these applications, especially students,⁽¹⁸⁾ because of this, tutors must be constantly vigilant when students use digital resources in their academic tasks. Likewise, the high values in the indicators that students have in the use of digital devices, especially with social networks, cause students to lose concentration and interest in academic activities, reducing the development of their abilities in relation to teaching and learning, in addition to creating permanent isolation with their family, friends, and society in general,⁽¹⁹⁾ revealing the permanent danger to which students are linked if they are not supervised by a tutor or parent.

This digital subordination in students is causing the presence of new diseases related to mental health, the vulnerability of private information; also, decreasing levels of personal security.^(20,21)

The new experiences that students go through as part of these digital communities generate new sensations, leading to the creation of false perspectives from a digital identity that often greatly differs from reality, which influences their academic and personal development.⁽²²⁾ It is necessary to consider that both in the classroom and at the students' homes, there should be a clear interest in verifying the appropriate use of social networks. Furthermore, it is shown that the personality and behavior of minors are directly impacted, generating episodes of violence and low self-esteem caused by rejection or actions of harassment resulting from the dependency on the use of social networks,⁽²³⁾ thus concluding the negative influence when making inappropriate use of digital aspects.

For example, visual impairment in students was one of the most limiting factors for access to information. This academic training process has been greatly improved by the presence of technology in the educational field, fostering independence in students with some type of Special Educational Needs (SEN).⁽²⁴⁾ The inclusion of students in need of specialized assistance was limited to almost no training due to the lack of opportunities for the development of their abilities. Thus, the use of technology has brought about a 360-degree change in the academic training of students with SEN,^(10,24) as special education centers need more inclusive tools for quality education for these students.⁽²⁵⁾ Therefore, the use of new digital tools in education has come to eliminate any difference in educational quality, fostering inclusion in the academic training of students.⁽²⁶⁾

The objective of this research is to understand the inclusive factor of social networks in education, enabling the exchange of information and fostering collaboration among students.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a quantitative approach because the results were statistically processed; similarly, to gather information, Google Forms was used during April and May 2023-2, due to the lack of direct contact with the students. Subsequently, a statistical analysis was performed to achieve a processing of systematized data.⁽²⁷⁾ The design was non-experimental and descriptive in nature because the variable was only observed without any manipulation during the data collection, which took place over a specific period.⁽²⁸⁾

The population consisted of first-cycle students from the secondary education program at a private university in Lima during the 2023-2 semester, becoming a census population; that is to say, the entirety of the population is equivalent to the sample, making it a non-probabilistic one, where students from the specialization in Language, Literature, and Communication constituted the largest percentage of the sample at 55,5 %, followed by 13,8 % of specialization in Philosophy, Tutoring, and Social Sciences students, a distribution is detailed in table 1.

Secondary Education Program	Quantity	Percentage
Specialization in History and Geography	26	7,3 %
Specialization in Biology and Chemistry	33	9,3 %
Specialization in Philosophy, Tutoring, and Social Sciences	49	13,8 %
Specialization in Language, Literature, and Communication	197	55,5 %
Specialization in English and Spanish	50	14,1 %
Total	355	100,0 %

Note: Data obtained from the University Office of Admission, Enrollment, and Academic Records (OAMRA).

Regarding the number of participants, 61,97 % of the sample are male students, and 38,03 % are female, as detailed in table 2.

Gender	Quantity	Percentage
Male	220	61,97 %
Female	135	38,03 %
Total	355	100,00 %

The sample consisted of students who have a direct relationship with the use of social networks as conditioning factors to interact with their peers, friends, and family, within which three factors were considered: knowledge about social networks, autonomy in their use, accessibility, and benefits.

Techniques and Instruments

The data collection questionnaire for the research entitled the inclusive factor of social networks in education was based on the instrument developed by Bonilla-del-Río & Sánchez,⁽²⁹⁾ adapted to the local reality and validated by the judgment of five experts in education and computer science. The survey was conveniently applied according to the sociocultural characteristics of the surveyed population.

RESULTS

The collection of information in research constitutes the transcendental moment for the creation of new knowledge,⁽³⁰⁾ with the questionnaire being a set of questions that can be used to collect data from a specific group of people about their opinions, behaviors, or attitudes towards something, and then organize and analyze it to see if there are patterns or similarities in the data.

Students are avid social media users, which are used as the primary means of communication and information exchange, constituting an enhancing factor for educational inclusion through their use. Although most students play the role of consumers, they massify the use of these applications for entertainment and leisure and lack metrics to evaluate the proper direction for teachers to use media for teaching.

The increase in opportunities in students' academic training due to the presence of technology has allowed for the enhancement of people's competencies through the use of social networks, providing advantages and support in the development of the educational context through the presence of reflective critical thinking. Since social networks facilitate the interaction of students with their peers through proper management of learning based on inclusive use, generating the enrichment of collaborative participation among students.

Recognizing that learning through informal means has surpassed formal education due to the abundance of unverified information on the web, the proper use of social networks specific for education must be adequately monitored. The communication functions provided by digital platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc., fulfill different purposes in formal and non-formal education, so universities should adopt social networks for control and monitoring with indicators for the advancement of education.

Due to the confinement time that students have gone through, the use of social networks has increased; within these, WhatsApp is the network with the highest use among students at 96,7 %, followed by Facebook (63,6 %), Instagram (40,5 %), TikTok (14,2 %), Messenger (39,5 %), and other networks (19,6 %), as seen in figure 1.

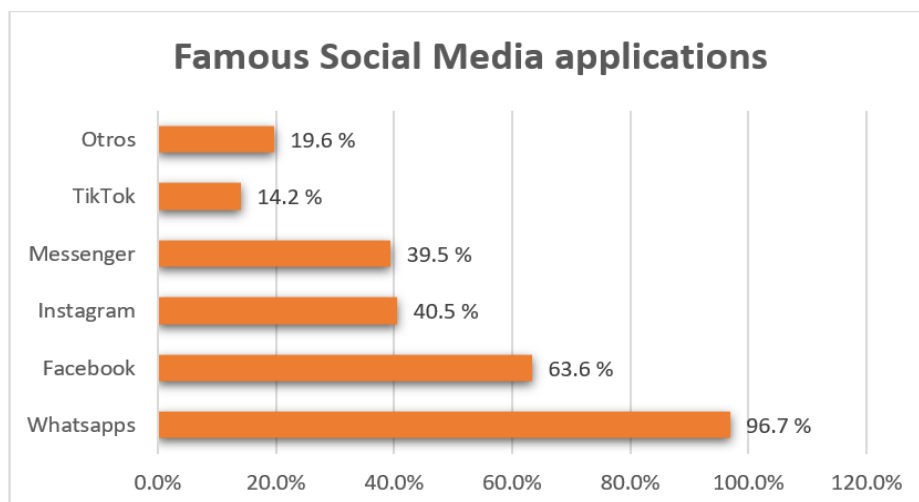


Figure 1. Most Used Social Networks by Students

From the results obtained on the use of social networks by students (Figure 2): Entertainment, at 66,4 %, is the primary activity for which social platforms are used, followed by the need to communicate with family (60,9 %), education (58,1 %), contacting friends, browsing the internet (26,6 %), meeting people (17,1 %), and uploading personal content (12,4 %).

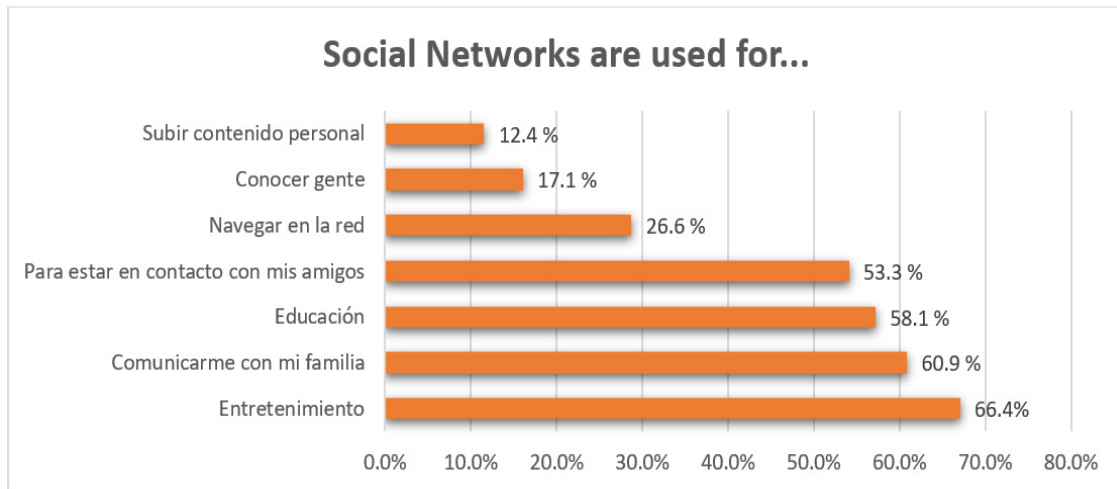


Figure 2. Main Uses of Social Networks

Entertainment and interaction are the main activities contributed by the use of social networks, allowing the promotion of communication and socialization among people, with notable and massive use among students. ⁽³¹⁾ The ease with which people can communicate has positioned WhatsApp as the preferred medium to be connected with one or many people at the same time. It is for this reason that universities should place special emphasis on the use of social networks as an inclusive factor in education.

Among the benefits that the use of social networks provides, students (Figure 3) highlight that being always informed is the main quality with 68,7 %, entertainment (43,4 %), improving the relationship of young people with their peers (32,6 %), expanding the circle of friends (29,6 %), improving the relationship of young people with their families (22,4 %), improving the relationship of students with teachers (10,3 %), and finally, only 7,1 % consider that the use of social networks does not offer any benefit.

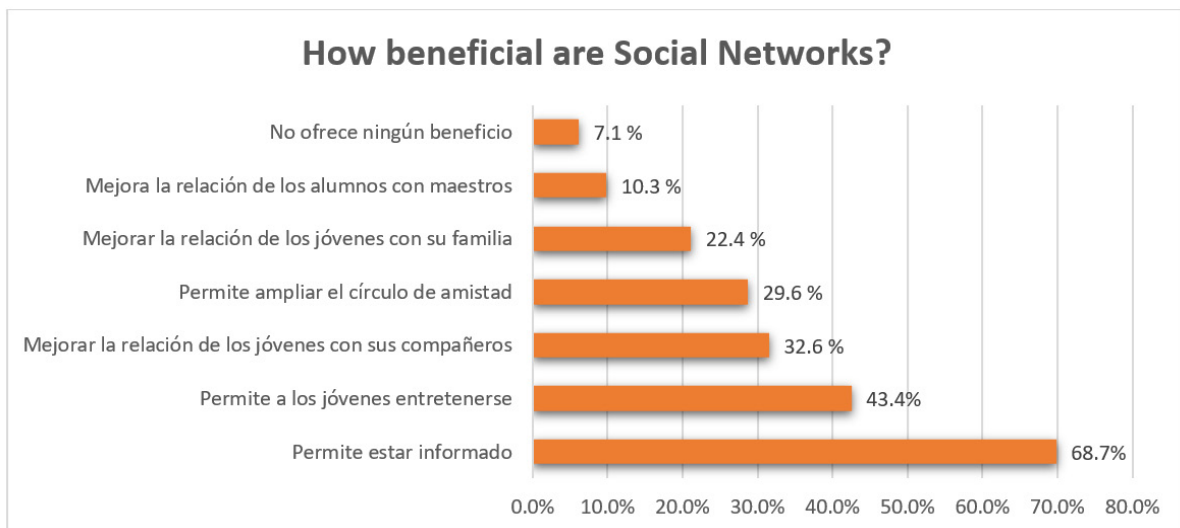


Figure 3. Benefits of Using Social Networks

Both students and teachers have been forced to adjust to unexpected pedagogical and contextual needs, turning to devices and virtual environments to carry out their educational activities. Such challenges have sometimes led to problems, such as distraction, cyber stress, and limitations in communication skills. However, the use of social networks in education provides novel opportunities for access to information. The methodological application of new technologies can assume a significant motivation for students, especially in cases of student absenteeism, and also for teachers tired of not reaching students or failing to develop the

intended knowledge.

When discussing social networks with students, they immediately associate them with Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, where messaging applications are the most used, with an increase in the time they spend daily on mass media.⁽³²⁾

The consumption of digital media has skyrocketed, making mobile phones the main source of access to educational activities, information, shopping, entertainment, and communication. The digital adoption due to confinement has led to a digital leap of more than 10 years within a few weeks,⁽³³⁾ increasing the number of users and hours spent on social media.

Social media demonstrate a significant inclusive factor in education by leveling conditions and eliminating any act of segregation or exclusion by students, promoting equality of opportunity through dynamic planning of educational resources. Social networks have become an extension of individuals due to the high online interrelation among network members. This motivates much simpler and more intuitive levels of accessibility, reaching high levels of communication and socialization, avoiding the presence of prejudices by the different realities that students go through.

The immediacy provided by social networks facilitates the process of inclusion in favor of education, allowing to broaden the spectrum of access to information, so teachers can send out schedules, etc. It is important that messages are sent using simple language and are easy to understand, as in groups of students, we may have some with special educational needs. These activities will allow for a democratization of education, which should reflect equality of conditions regardless of each student's condition, preventing those with motor or intellectual difficulties from being left behind in a formative process that allows them to integrate into society.

In 2020, approximately 4,66 billion people were connected to social networks, yet there is still 40 % of the planet's inhabitants without access to the digital world, indicating a digital divide that prevents people from having greater opportunities to the benefits that social network use provides.⁽³⁴⁾ This is why governments should make greater efforts to contribute to the general benefit of their populations' access to technologies and assistive tools, develop skills and digital literacy, allowing for a broader process of digital inclusion in favor of the development of educational processes.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in the conclusion align with the literature on the impact of social media on education, particularly in the context of exceptional circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The emergence of social media has significantly altered communication dynamics, creating high expectations for educational processes.^(1,2) This transformation became even more pronounced during the pandemic, as social confinement increased students' reliance on digital tools and social networks for interaction, leading to noticeable changes in their behaviors.^(1,2)

Furthermore, the integration of technology into education has become pervasive, with global collaborative channels offering new opportunities for cognitive development but also leading to a dependency on digital media.⁽⁶⁾ This dependency can contribute to alterations in students' personalities, including increased episodes of stress and anxiety.⁽³⁾ The massification of digital resources during the pandemic,^(4,5) has introduced novel forms of communication and interaction within educational communities, albeit with behaviors of addiction and subordination among some students.

The inclusive factor of social media in education, as emphasized by several authors,^(1,3,6) is of paramount importance. Social networks have evolved beyond mere connectivity to create truly diverse and accessible virtual environments, promoting equity in participation and representation. However, there is a need to address issues such as harassment and discrimination, as well as to provide accessible tools for users with disabilities.

While social media offer diverse opportunities for learning and teaching, there are challenges related to excessive use and addiction, particularly among secondary level students.⁽⁹⁾ The integration of social networks into education has led to benefits such as improved access to information and communication, but it also raises concerns about distraction and procrastination.⁽¹⁴⁾ Moreover, the dependency on social networks can have negative effects on students' mental health and personal security, necessitating regulation and supervision.⁽¹⁷⁾

The inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) has been facilitated by digital tools, eliminating barriers to access and promoting educational equality.^(15,24) However, it is essential to address the negative consequences of excessive social media use, such as decreased concentration, isolation from family and friends, and impacts on self-esteem and psychological well-being.^(18,19)

While social media offer numerous benefits for education, including increased connectivity and access to information, there are also challenges that need to be addressed, particularly regarding excessive use and its impact on students' well-being. Strategies for promoting responsible use of social networks and maximizing their potential for inclusive education are essential for navigating the digital landscape effectively.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the multifaceted impact of social media on education, particularly in the context of unprecedented circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings underscore the pivotal role of social networks in facilitating communication, collaboration, and access to information among students, highlighting their versatility as tools for enhancing educational experiences. Despite the numerous benefits offered by social media, including increased connectivity and opportunities for inclusive education, it is evident that challenges persist, such as excessive use, addiction, and potential negative effects on mental health. Therefore, it is imperative for educational institutions, policymakers, and stakeholders to develop strategies that promote responsible and balanced use of social media, while also addressing issues of digital dependency and ensuring the well-being of students in the digital age.

Moreover, the research underscores the importance of fostering digital literacy skills among students to empower them to navigate the online landscape effectively and critically evaluate the information they encounter. By equipping students with the necessary skills to discern between reliable and misleading content, educators can help mitigate the risks associated with excessive social media use and promote a more informed and discerning digital citizenship. Additionally, efforts should be made to promote inclusive practices within educational settings, ensuring that students of all backgrounds and abilities have equal access to the educational opportunities afforded by social media.

Moving forward, further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of social media use on educational outcomes and student well-being, as well as to identify effective interventions for mitigating the negative impacts of excessive use. By continuing to examine the complex interplay between social media and education, researchers can contribute to the development of evidence-based strategies that optimize the benefits of social media while minimizing potential harms. Ultimately, fostering a balanced and responsible approach to social media use within educational contexts is essential for ensuring that students are able to harness the full potential of these platforms for learning, collaboration, and personal development.

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