Disentangling the Effects of Instructor Credibility Cues in Bolstering Learners’ Engagement with Health Short Videos

Mengli Yu  
_Nankai University_, mengliyu@nankai.edu.cn

Na Jiang  
_City University of Hong Kong_, najiang3-c@my.cityu.edu.hk

Eric Lim  
_UNSW Sydney_, e.t.lim@unsw.edu.au

Chee-Wee Tan  
_Copenhagen Business School_, ct.digi@cbs.dk

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DISENTANGLING THE EFFECTS OF INSTRUCTOR CREDIBILITY CUES IN BOLSTERING LEARNERS’ ENGAGEMENT WITH HEALTH SHORT VIDEOS

Research in Progress

Mengli Yu, Nankai University, Beijing, China, mengliyu@nankai.edu.cn
Na Jiang, University of Science and Technology of China-City University of Hong Kong Joint Program, Hefei, China, naijiang3-c@my.cityu.edu.hk
Eric T. K. Lim, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, e.t.lim@unsw.edu.au
Chee-Wee Tan, Copenhagen Business School, Copenhagen, Denmark, ct.digi@cbs.dk

Abstract

With the rapid development of mobile short-video platforms, viewers have greater access to a diversity of health short videos. Due to relatively homogenized content in these health short videos, instructor credibility is becoming a key determinant of learners’ engagement with health short videos. Yet, there is a dearth of research that has sought to elucidate the role of instructor credibility in driving learners’ engagement. Building on social presence theory, we classified the source of instructor credibility into four constituent components, namely physical, contextual, psychological, and behavioral features. Additionally, we advance a research model to disentangle the effects of these four instructor credibility cues on learners’ engagement. The research model will be validated by employing deep learning algorithms to operationalize our focal variables based on data of health short videos harvested from a popular mobile short-video platform in China.

Keywords: Health Short Videos, Instructor Credibility Cues, Engagement, Deep Learning

1 Introduction

Mobile short-video platforms in the likes of Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts have been gaining in popularity since their inception. TikTok, a leading short-video platform, is the world’s most downloaded mobile application in 2020, with more than one billion monthly active users documented in September 2021 (Jessica, 2021). Likewise, according to the 48th Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development (CNNIC, 2021), the number of users on mobile short-video platforms has ballooned to 888 million in China by June 2021. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, health short videos have attracted a massive number of viewers through daily sharing of health experiences or knowledge (Southwick et al., 2021). At the same time, a growing number of health professionals and organizations have turned to short-video platforms to engage with and educate the public (Song et al., 2021). As a consequence, mobile short-video platforms are becoming the de facto source of health information for individuals (Song et al., 2021).

Past studies have attested to the critical role of credibility in affecting one’s intention to adopt short-video platforms (Song et al., 2021). Indeed, Kareklas et al. (2015) alleged that the credibility of information conveyed through electronic word-of-mouth and health-related public service announcements positively affects viewers’ reactions. Apart from health content, scholars have also revealed that the appearance of instructors in health educational short videos (henceforth referred to as “health short videos”) could impact learners’ receptivity toward such videos as well (Wang et al., 2020). In this regard, we advance that instructor credibility cues could influence viewers’ perceived credibility, which in turn dictates learners’ engagement with health short videos (Pishghadam et al., 2021). Particularly, we posit that instructors’ features constitute focal elements shaping learners’
evaluations about instructors and the quality of health short videos, which in turn drive their attitudes towards and engagement with such videos (Xu and Zhou, 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

Past studies have alluded to instructors’ features such as dressing (Lightstone et al., 2011), facial expressions (Bhatti et al., 2021), gender (Cotner et al., 2011), and bodily gestures (Weinberg et al., 2015) as signals of their credibility (Rezvani and Miri, 2021; Pishghadam et al., 2021). This is because the appearance of instructors not only evokes learners’ confidence in instructors’ ability to communicate with audiences, but it also reduces the physiological distance between them, thereby enhancing the persuasiveness of the instruction (Borup et al., 2014; Oyarzun et al., 2018; Ramlatchan and Watson, 2020). Despite the burgeoning amount of research into instructors’ presence, there is neither a comprehensive framework that seeks to systematically theorize the focal features of instructors that could impact their credibility nor is there work that contextualizes these features to health short videos. To this end, we draw on Social Presence Theory (SPT) to postulate intimacy and immediacy as core dimensions of instructor credibility cues by bridging instructors’ physical proximity and psychological distance with learners, which in turn increases their reliability (Oyarzun et al., 2018). Particularly, intimacy denotes physical proximity that often accompanies one’s physical appearance (Argyle and Dean 1965). For example, female instructors usually have higher physical proximity than males (Claus et al., 2012). Conversely, immediacy refers to the psychological distance between instructors and learners that can be bridged through psychological or behavioral responses (Wiener and Mehrabian 1968). For example, an instructor who transmits happiness and positivity, will decrease the psychological distance between the audience and himself/herself. Next, synthesizing extant literature, we further derive four constituent sub-dimensions of intimacy and immediacy, namely physical (e.g., gender) and contextual (e.g., dress) cues relating to intimacy as well as psychological (e.g., facial expressions) and behavioral (e.g., gestures) cues relating to immediacy. Indeed, while piecemeal, there is an abundance of empirical evidence that testifies to the abovementioned four constituent sub-dimensions of instructors’ credibility cues in shaping learners’ engagement (Borup et al., 2014; Semlak and Pearson, 2008). For example, Semlak and Pearson (2008) discovered that older instructors are always seen as more credible than their younger counterparts because age is generally associated with professional experience. Additionally, Belding (2011) pointed out that wearing glasses could project intelligence and bolster learners’ feelings of instructor credibility. In the same vein, psychological features like instructors’ emotional expressions have been found to be critical in bridging the psychological distance with learners (Lehman, 2006). Last but not least, behavioral features refer to instructors’ body movement. As noted by Weinberg et al. (2015), gestures can aid in instructions by persuading learners of the instruction’s key points. By identifying focal instructor credibility cues, we strive to offer an answer to the following research question: how can instructor credibility cues in health short videos influence learners’ engagement behaviors on mobile short-video platforms?

In answering the preceding research question, this study endeavors to unravel how instructor credibility cues, established through granular aspects of appearance, affect learners’ engagement with health short videos in the context of short-video platforms. Specifically, we strive to: (1) not only derive a typology of instructor credibility cues comprising physical, contextual, psychological, and behavioral features that influence learners’ perceived credibility toward health short videos, (2) but also hypothesize and validate the effects of these features on learners’ engagement. To validate our hypotheses, data on health short videos will be collected from a leading mobile short video platform in China. Next, we will leverage on the Baidu API in Python to operationalize the abovementioned instructor credibility cues based on deep learning algorithms and empirically validate their impact on learners’ engagement with these videos. By systematically delineating instructor credibility cues into its constituent components, this study strives to reveal how features embedded in health short videos could dictate viewers’ perceived credibility of instructors in these videos and their subsequent engagement. In this sense, findings from this study could contribute to extant literature on instructor credibility in health short videos while simultaneously, yielding practical implications for the creators of health short videos and the platform providers on which such videos are hosted.
Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Formulation

Leveraging on social presence theory (Borup et al., 2014), we constructed a research model (see Figure 1) to articulate the role of instructor credibility cues in improving viewers’ engagement in the context of mobile short-video platforms. We then extract features from short videos and construct key variables using image recognition technology and deep learning algorithms. Afterwards, we explore the impacts of instructor credibility cues, namely physical cues, contextual cues, psychological cues, and behavioral cues, on viewers’ engagement with short videos.

![Figure 1. Research Model](image)

Short-video platforms: An overview

The short-video platform is an emerging paradigm that allows users to shoot, edit and share fragmentary videos lasting between 15 seconds to a few minutes (Li et al., 2021; Omar and Dequan, 2020). As a new way of expression and communication, short videos combine text, voice, dynamic pictures, and other information dissemination elements, gaining momentum among both academics and practitioners. The emergence of mobile short-video platforms has democratized content creation and allowed anyone to share their experience or knowledge (Li et al., 2021; Omar and Dequan, 2020). The short videos’ topics cover categories including health, technology, food, dress, and sports, just to name a few. The wide coverage of topics on short-video platforms echoed the ambition of Douyin (TikTok’s Chinese version) to build a 'video encyclopedia' (Zulli and Zulli, 2020). With a vast number of health professionals and organizations (e.g., the World Health Organization) providing public-health information during the COVID-19 pandemic on the short-video platforms (Song et al., 2021), the public has witnessed the potential of short videos for disseminating health information.

The existing research on short-video platforms is still at an early stage, which can generally be divided into two main research streams: mobile short-video platform development (Xu et al., 2019; Kaye et al., 2020) and communication effects of short videos (Feng et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020; Su et al., 2020). Studies belonging to the first stream have typically explored the development process and history of mobile short-video platforms. For instance, Zhang (2020) indicated that the short-video platforms had become an integrated platform from an online entertainment community, expanding areas in health, e-commerce, tourism, etc. Moreover, based on a powerful algorithm and artificial content
recommendation, viewing mobile short-video platforms has consumed viewers’ fragmented time by satisfying people with imagination and curiosity (Xu et al., 2019). Xu et al.’s (2019) study also paid attention to the popularity and the problems existing in the video content operation and liquidation ability. In addition, TikTok and Douyin (TikTok’s Chinese version) provide interesting case studies for researchers to investigate how an emerging Internet company adapts its products to better divergent expectations, cultures, and policy frameworks (Kaye et al., 2020). Apart from the first research stream regarding short-video platform development, the second research stream tried to explore the communication effects of short videos. For example, the work of Bian and Zhu (2020) examined the relationship between ritual and personal involvement on check-in travel intention, which refers to the intention to follow others’ travel experiences in short videos (Bian and Zhu, 2020). Besides, based on the essential meta information of short videos, researchers categorized different types of video content (e.g., video types, themes, emotions, and characters) and video forms (e.g., background music, language features, emphasized themes in the ending, length of a video, and subtitles) and explored their effects on viewers’ responses (Zhu et al., 2020).

User engagement with health short videos

User engagement refers to “a user’s state of mind that warrants heightened involvement and results in a personally meaningful benefit” (Di et al., 2016). In the context of social media, user engagement is typically manifested symbolically through actions such as liking, commenting, and sharing (Khan 2017). Ample research has revealed the significant role of users’ engagement on digital platforms (Di Gangi et al., 2016; Bene, 2021; Khan, 2017), such as e-government (Bene, 2021) and e-commerce platforms (Khan, 2017). Similarly, user engagement is a crucial indicator to reflect short videos’ quality and contribute to interactions on mobile short-video platforms. For example, Su et al. (2020) found that athletes adopt TikTok to foster existing fans relationships and appeal to new fans engagement. Prior research has tried to explore the antecedents of users’ engagement in the context of mobile short-video platforms, such as the instructor’s camera view (Wang, 2020) and users’ motivation (Omar and Dequan, 2020).

Notably, health short videos that aim to spread health knowledge or experience have become an essential part of the short video content ecosystem (Song et.al., 2021). In China, governmental organizations regard health short videos as the ground for disseminating health information and clarifying users’ concerns (Zhu et al., 2019). Compared to other categories, health short videos are more associated with citizens. Nevertheless, short-video platforms tend to disseminate quirky videos rather than serious professional content (Wang 2020). Scholars hence proposed that the perceived credibility of such platforms could be vital for users’ long-term usage (Song, 2021). However, limited studies have extensively explored the role of source credibility in determining user engagement on mobile short-video platforms. In light of research on source credibility (Bahry et al., 2020), we try to extend the meaning and measurement of health short videos’ credibility.

Source credibility

Source credibility refers to the positive characteristics of a piece of information (Ohanian, 1990; Rahmi et al., 2017; Eisend, 2006). There is an abundance of empirical evidence that attests to the role of source credibility of user-generated opinions (e.g., product reviews, electronic word-of-mouth communications, and social media posts) on users’ attitudes and behaviors in the domain of marketing and advertising (Bahry et al., 2020; Mangold and Faulds, 2009; Reuter, 2009). Typically, past studies have revealed three dimensions of source credibility: trustworthiness referring to a person’s perception of information reliability (Ohanian, 1990), expertise attributing to a person’s belief about professional knowledge (Wu and Wang, 2011), and attractiveness referring to physical attractiveness (Yoon and Kim, 2016). Compared to the information on traditional social media dominated by textual and imagery format, the source credibility of health short videos could be redefined. Arguably, the presentation of health short videos not only entails the educational health content but also includes how the actor behaves. We therefore postulate that the source credibility of short videos can be further
Instructor Credibility Cues of Health Short Videos

Instructor credibility cues based on the source credibility theory (Ohanian, 1990). In fact, the content credibility of short videos is parallel to the trustworthiness and expertise of source credibility, which has been extensively explored in previous studies (Cummins and Chambers, 2011). As indicated by Song et al. (2021), the trustworthiness and expertise of short videos could be regarded as the criteria for assessing the information credibility.

Except for the source credibility derived from content per se, scholars have begun to explore the role of introducers’ characteristics in attracting users’ attention. For example, the image size of the instructor is associated with users’ performance and satisfaction (Pi et al., 2017). As for instructor credibility, previous studies have constructed instructor credibility as the overall perceptual construct (Yoon and Kim, 2016). However, instructor credibility on short-video platforms could expand its sources, such as gender (Cotner et al., 2011), facial expressions (Bhatti et al., 2021), gestures (Weinberg et al., 2015), and dress (Lightstone et al., 2011). Apart from the general physical features, scholars called on instructor credibility in short videos to consider multi-dimensional features to present a more comprehensive image (Zhang, 2020). Particularly, due to the topics’ profession of health short videos, instructor credibility is more likely to contribute to the videos’ persuasion and incentivize users’ engagement.

Instructor credibility cues based on social presence theory

We try to identify instructor credibility cues in health short videos to reflect the extent of the instructor credibility per se. According to the social presence theory (Borup et al., 2014), instructor credibility stemmed from instructor presence, which could affect users’ perceptions as well as their engagement. Instructor social presence refers to how instructors establish themselves to present the health content (Oyarzun et al., 2018). Instructors’ presence encompasses two elements: intimacy and immediacy (Oyarzun et al., 2018). Specifically, intimacy refers to a sense of closing relationship that can be influenced by physical or appearance presence (Argyle and Dean 1965), and immediacy refers to psychological distance between instructors and users that can be influenced by psychological or behavioral presence (Wiener and Mehrabian 1968). For instance, Argyle and Dean (1965) investigated physical factors (e.g., eye-contact and physical proximity) that can impact a sense of intimacy in a communication medium. In the same vein, it is plausible that instructor social presence in health short videos is tied with physical presence. Compared to other digital content, health short videos require more professional knowledge and experience. At the same time, some instructors play the role of physicians in the health short videos that increase users’ acceptance to instructors’ images. Therefore, we further posit four dimensions, including physical cues, contextual cues, psychological cues, and behavioral cues, to construct instructor credibility cues. Specifically, physical cues and contextual cues connect to the intimacy dimension, while psychological cues and behavioral cues connect to the immediacy dimension.

Physical cues are common cues embedded in instructors’ appearances, enhancing intimacy with platform users (Borup et al., 2014). Physical cues describe actors’ physical attributes, which typically contain three parts: age, gender, and beauty. In the teaching context, older instructors are generally viewed as more credible than younger instructors (Semlak and Pearson, 2008). Similarly, older instructors are inclined to be viewed as more experienced in health short videos. For gender, researchers found that female doctors have a better presentation with their personal manner and technical skills than male doctors, signaling their credibility. (Adams et al., 2008; Shah and Ogden, 2006). While for the beauty, Campbell et al., (2005) indicated that instructor beauty would enhance their ratings from students. Similarly, Nahai (2018) pointed that more beautiful presence will decrease the physical distance between doctors and patients. Taken together, it is conceivable that instructor cues of age, female, and beauty can help gain better engagement from users by reinforcing instructors’ physical credibility. We therefore hypothesize:

Hypotheses 1: Instructors with the physical cues of (a) older, (b) female, and (c) higher beauty positively influence users’ engagement with health short videos.
Contextual cues describe instructors’ appearance in the short-video platforms. In general, people have a common impression of doctors in white dresses and wearing a mask. Hence, we postulate that the main contextual features lie in the instructors’ dress, mask, and glasses, which could be linked to physicians’ stereotypical images. In this vein, instructors’ contextual cues close to doctors’ images could increase the instructor’s credibility and encourage users to engage with the short videos. For the dress, Gallagher et al. (2008) discovered that doctors prefer to choose a white coat, which has been a signal enhancing a professional, authoritarian, and scientific appearance for instructors (Kersnik et al., 2005). Meanwhile, it is easier for patients to identify a doctor wearing a white coat (Kersnik et al., 2005). While for glasses, wearing glasses could validate one’s thoughts because the object is associated with intelligent concepts (Belding 2011; Briñol et al., 2017), and then will strengthen users’ positive attitudes towards instructor credibility. Finally, as a doctor, wearing a mask is a standard part of their daily routine. Therefore, instructors in short videos wearing a mask have the potential to build a professional image and thus enhance instructor credibility (Dobkin et al., 2015). To sum up, instructors’ contextual cues close to doctors’ images can enhance users’ safety perception and elicit positive evaluation towards instructors in terms of profession, further persuading users to engage with the short videos. Hence, we hypothesize:

**Hypotheses 2**: Instructors with the contextual cues of (a) closer to the white coat, (b) wearing glasses, and (c) wearing a mask positively influence users’ engagement with health short videos.

Instructors’ psychological cues tend to emphasize psychological presence through emotional expressions or sentiments to shorten the psychological distance between instructor and users (Lehman 2006). Emotional expressions refer to individuals’ feelings displayed in different ways when aroused (Xiao and Houser, 2005), which include anger, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise, etc (Hurley 2012). Instructors’ emotions allow users to attend to the situations that appeared in the video content and arrive at thoughtful knowledge (Lehman 2006). The more users become aware of instructors’ emotions, the more users are able to connect with instructors’ thought processes and clarify their perceptions (LeDoux, 1996). In turn, the increased connectivity between instructors’ emotions and users’ cognition would contribute to users’ perceived credibility. In addition, sentiments reflect instructors’ presence of positive sense. Arguably, instructors’ positive sentiments are a contagion affecting users’ perceptions (LaFrance et al., 2013). Therefore, users are infected with the instructors’ sentiments when watching short videos, have a propensity to believe instructions, and are then more likely to engage with mobile short-video platforms. Taken together, we believe that instructors’ psychological cues play a vital role in persuading users to engage with the short video. Hence, we hypothesize:

**Hypotheses 3**: Instructors with the psychological cues of (a) more emotional expressions and (b) more positive sentiments positively influence users’ engagement with health short videos.

We posit that instructors’ behavioral cues involved body movements fulfilling a communicational function in short videos (Weinberg et al., 2015). Prior empirical studies have investigated the effects of instructors’ gestures (Weinberg et al., 2015) and orientation (Ali and Leeds, 2009) on learners’ responses in the learning context. In light of the preceding studies, we postulate that instructors’ gestures and orientation comprise instructors’ behavioral cues. Instructors’ gestures refer to the movements of the arms and hands in short videos (McNeil, 2006). In general, gestures can be regarded as natural constituents of thinking and ground the descriptions of content instructions (Weinberg et al., 2015; Cook and Goldin-Meadow, 2006). Therefore, instructors’ gestures could conceptualize the instructions and would facilitate users’ grasping of the message. In addition, instructors’ orientation refers to the body’s spatial direction with the camera in short videos (Wang, 2020). Prior literature pointed out that instructors’ orientation can facilitate academic interactions and increase student involvement in online courses (Ali and Leeds, 2009). Specifically, the instructors’ orientation could make acquaintances and build friendships with users by constructing a sense of belonging to a virtual learning community. Because health short videos aim to spread health knowledge from the instructors’ perspective, we deem that front orientation (face-to-face) contributes to users’ increased perceived credibility. To sum up, it is reasonable that instructor behavioral cues can enhance the information
delivery and elicit trust in instructors, which further persuades users to engage with the short video. Hence, we hypothesize:

**Hypotheses 4**: Instructors with the behavioral cues of (a) more gestures and (b) closer to front orientation positively influence users’ engagement with health short videos.

**Methodology**

**Operationalization of Focal Variables**

Rather than relying on users’ subjective perceptions to measure four instructor credibility cues (i.e., physical, contextual, psychological, and behavioral cues) and users’ engagement, we will extract related variables using OpenCV and the Baidu API (https://intl.cloud.baidu.com/) with deep learning algorithms in Python (Xu and Zhou, 2020). Firstly, we regard a video stream as a series of images and extract one frame per second from a video with the OpenCV module (Xu and Zhou, 2020). Then we would employ the Baidu API to extract the basic image’s features through algorithms of image recognition, face recognition, and human body analysis. Secondly, we would analyze three indicators of likes, shares, and comments attached to each video.

**Physical Cues**: We estimated instructors’ physical cues by evaluating their age, gender, and beauty, calculated through the Baidu API and deep learning algorithms. Because the instructor could disappear in some frames, we will further select frames where the instructor appeared in the video and calculate the average level of frames to represent the instructor’s average age and beauty level for each video. Meanwhile, we will count the frequency of males or females in frames and use the highest frequency to represent the final estimation for gender.

**Contextual Cues**: The contextual cues describe instructors’ dress and wearing through three variables: the dresses, glasses, and masks. Through body recognition, we can confirm whether the instructor wears glasses and a mask. Thus, we can count the frequency of wearing glasses and masks in frames to code a dummy variable. We also extract the instructor’s dress color and confirm whether instructors’ dress is approaching white or not.

**Psychological Cues**: The psychological cues can be measured by emotion expressions and sentiment. Based on the face recognition algorithm, we can extract specific emotions from each frame, including angry, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, surprise, neutral, pouty, and grimace. We would calculate the categories of emotion expressions. At the same time, sentiment can be extracted as none, smile, and laugh per frame. We will calculate the percentage of three types of sentiment among all frames, respectively.

**Behavioral Cues**: In this study, we will divide behavioral cues into instructor gestures and orientation. Based on the human body analysis of the Baidu API, we will extract instructor gestures in frames. The gestures include 24 common gestures, such as OK, fist, hand heart, thumb-up, and number gestures. Then we would calculate the percentage of frames with gestures among all frames. We also extract the instructor’s orientation (i.e., front, back, left side, or right side) per frame by the Baidu API and calculate the percentage of different orientations.

**Users’ Engagement**: Because the number of short videos’ likes, shares, and comments is naturally affected by the recommendation mechanism of mobile short-video platforms, the absolute numerical value is not accurate to reflect users’ engagement. We posit that views can be divided by the number of engagement behaviors (i.e., likes, shares, and comments) to represent the dependent variables (Aichner and Jacob, 2015).

**Control variables**: We will control videos’ attributes affecting users’ engagement (Dedeoglu 2018), namely: content credibility cues (e.g., the specific video’s content, content similarity, delivery categories, and title’s words number), information quality (e.g., image quality, audio quality, and the subtitle’s position in this study), and communication style.
Validating the instructor credibility cues

After constructing instructor credibility cues, we would like to further utilize the discrete choice experiment (Ben-Akiva et al., 1997) to validate the relationship between instructor credibility cues and users’ perceived credibility. Specifically, we would summarize the credibility cues’ attributes based on the collected health short videos and extracted features. Then, we design the discrete choice questionnaires regarding all proposed credibility cues and randomly invite participants to make a sequence of choices. Under each credibility cue, participants are allowed to determine the perceived credibility of two attributes. Thus, we are able to evaluate the relationship between constructed instructor credibility cues and users’ perceived credibility.

Expected Contributions

This study aims to redefine instructor credibility in the context of short-video platforms and investigate the impacts of instructor credibility cues on users’ engagement. First, in spite of common sense that the source credibility of short videos affects users’ perception, there is a paucity of research that has discriminated against instructor credibility from source credibility and disentangled cues of instructor credibility. We try to extend the source credibility theory and systematically delineate instructor credibility cues into four types: physical, contextual, psychological, and behavioral cues that are founded on social presence theory. Second, based on the proposed instructor credibility cues’ framework and deep learning methods, we strive to explore what cues of short videos could influence users’ engagement. From the practical view, instructors who try to increase videos’ competitiveness can draw on the framework and adjust their presentation style. In addition, our conceptualization of key variables can assist the short-video platforms to optimize their algorithms and enhance the recommendation quality. Our findings have the potential to apply to other health contexts where visual cues are available, such as long videos and images.

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