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# Challenges of academic publishing: A case study of Punjab, Pakistan

**Abstract**

During last two decades immense pressure has been created for academic staff in universities to publish often and in volume, resulting in a debilitating *culture of speed* in academia. This paper critically examines how academics from developing countries like Pakistan, who are relatively disadvantage in global market for knowledge, navigate this publish or perish regime. Against this backdrop we have designed detailed qualitative case study of Pakistan to appraise the consequences and implications of this system for academic life. The data was gathered through in-depth interviews and informal discussions with university teachers, and was interpreted using the conceptual lens of Bronfenbrenner Ecological System Theory. The findings of this study highlights that the increasing pressure to publish along with multiple academic, institutional, and professional constraints faced by faculty members during the process of publication negatively affect their overall sense of wellbeing and quality of work.

**Key Words:**  Case Study; Higher Education; Publication, Research Culture

**Introduction**

The importance of research and publication in higher education cannot be overemphasized. It plays an important role in driving government policies, corporate strategies, and social change. Universities are knowledge intensive organizations, with the potential to serve as a major driving force for research excellence. Therefore, in knowledge-based economies, higher education institutions (HEIs) are the basic pillar of any research and innovation system (Tantanee et al., 2019). However, in increasingly globalized world HEIs are struggling hard to gain international visibility and global competitiveness. Universities are often ranked and rewarded on grounds of their faculty's publication rates in recognized journals. This trend of internationalization and corporatization of education and the race to get the rank of world class university has also created immense pressure for university teachers to publish often and in volume (Smith, 2007), resulting in a debilitating "culture of speed" (Berg & Seeber, 2016) in academia.

Due to above mentioned emerging trends in higher education publication has become a *sine qua none* for academics globally due mainly to the fact that often promotions, selections, and other material benefits are associated with publication (De Rond & Miller, 2005; Mittal et al., 2008; Chou & Chan, 2016). However, there is much controversy surrounding the notion that frequency of publication should be used as a key performance indicator to measure academic success of institutions as well as teaching faculty. Critics have already started raising voices of dissent against this so called publish or perish system (Caplow & McGee, 1958) of performance evaluation, which affects the wellbeing of university teachers and damages the intellectual culture of universities.

Although the pressure to publish is by no means exclusive to universities in developed nations, the data regarding its consequences for academics in developing countries is especially limited-consisting more of anecdote than research (Smith, 1990; Miller et al., 2011). The existing literature relevant to our case (Pakistan) includes mostly sporadic opinion articles in press research reports funded by multilateral or bilateral donors (Haque et al., 2018) and some articles written by faculty members (Zaidi, 2002; Hoodbhoy, 2006, 2009; Akhter et al., 2011; Qureshi & Jawaid, 2011; Naveed & Suleri, 2015; Haque & Orden, 2018);

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these often trivialize the mounting pressure on faculty members to publish or perish and the resulting coping mechanisms. The exiting system of promotion and selections in universities, which links promotion/selection with publications, has had serious ramifications and there are many reservations (Hyland, 2015; Chou & Chan, 2016) about the reliability of this quantitative performance measurement system.

Against this backdrop, the paper appraises the challenges faced by university teachers in Pakistan with the objective of providing an evaluation of the existing university research and publication system in Pakistan, from the perspective of university teachers.

**The Context of Higher Education in Pakistan**

The role of Education in achieving more equitable globalization (Qiang, 2003) has been widely recognized both in academic and policy circles. The internationalization of education is now the top political agenda of most nations, however, the situation in Pakistan is not very ideal for this. The higher education sector in Pakistan is relatively young. At the time of independence in 1947, there was only one University in Pakistan and less than 1000 university students. Currently, there are 209 degree awarding institutions in Pakistan; 126 are in the public sector and 83 in the private sector (hec.gov.pk). Out of the 209, eleven percent of Pakistani universities are Federally Chartered Universities; the rest are charter by provincial governments. While there has been a significant increase in the number of universities, there remains a struggle to increase quality of these institutions. According to Quacquarelli Symonds (QS, 2020) World Universities Rankings, only seven Pakistani universities have managed to secure their place among the top 1000 world universities. To improve the standards of higher education and promote educational research in the country, the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (HEC) was established in 2002. HEC is a federally constituted independent government institution that is responsible for funding, overseeing, regulating, and accrediting the higher education sector in Pakistan. HEC is taking serious steps towards the internationalization of HEIs (Quershi et al., 2014). In its vision 2025 statement, HEC set forth the target to reform the university research system. To encourage research and publication, HEC introduced various publication incentives- promotions and selections for senior academic position were especially linked with publication. Consequently, the number of international research publications from Pakistan increased from 600 research papers in 2003 to 4300 research papers in 2008. Currently there are over 45,000 faculty members and 1.4 million students in Pakistani universities. Although Pakistan's share in the world's research publications is just 0.04% compared with India's 20%, the growth rate is higher (Javed et al., 2020)

The quality of research produced, however, is of major concern. The university research system in Pakistan is facing a unique challenge; on one hand the current university system demands research publications as a requirement for promotion to high faculty positions, on the other hand newly established universities and the vast majority of junior faculty employed in these universities lack the required skills that are generally cultivated over the years through the process of mentoring and collaboration with senior faculty members. According to the HEC, only 21 percent of full-time faculty members in Pakistani universities held a PhD in 2015. Prior to the establishment of HEC, teaching was prioritized over research. The Internationalization of HEIs, emphasis on research publications, and linking of publication with faculty promotion/selection criterion has created new challenges.

There is an underlying assumption in our research that individual university teachers are nested within a broader research culture. Thus, while investigating these challenges we have used the Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological system theory (EST) as our explanatory framework. EST explains how inherent characteristics of an individual and their environment interact to shape the life experiences of an individual. The next section of paper provides an overview of the EST.

**Ecological System Theory (EST)**

Urie Bronfenbrenner conceptualized the EST. According to Rosa and Tudge (2013)

Urie Bronfenbrenner's theory of human development underwent considerable changes from he time it was first proposed in the 1970s until Bronfenbrenner's death in 2005. It is therefore unfortunate that too many scholars treat the theory as though it deals solely with the influence of context on children's or adolescents' development and take no account of what came to be the central aspect of the theory, namely proximal processes, and how person characteristics, context, and historical time mutually influence those processes (p.243)

Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that the dynamic relations among various personal and environmental factors shape individual development within a social system. The central postulate of EST is that individual progress within a social system is shaped by a pattern of interactions within the layered social system. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) ecological systems are "*nested arrangement of structure each contained within the next*". (p. 22)
Figures

*Figure 1.* Nested Model of Ecological Systems Originally Proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979)
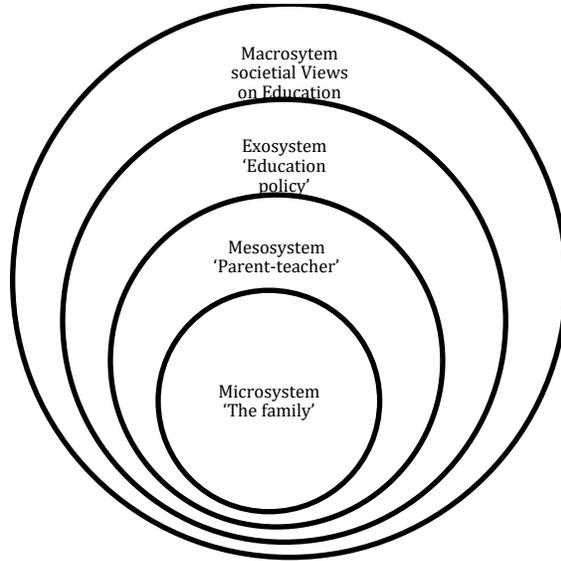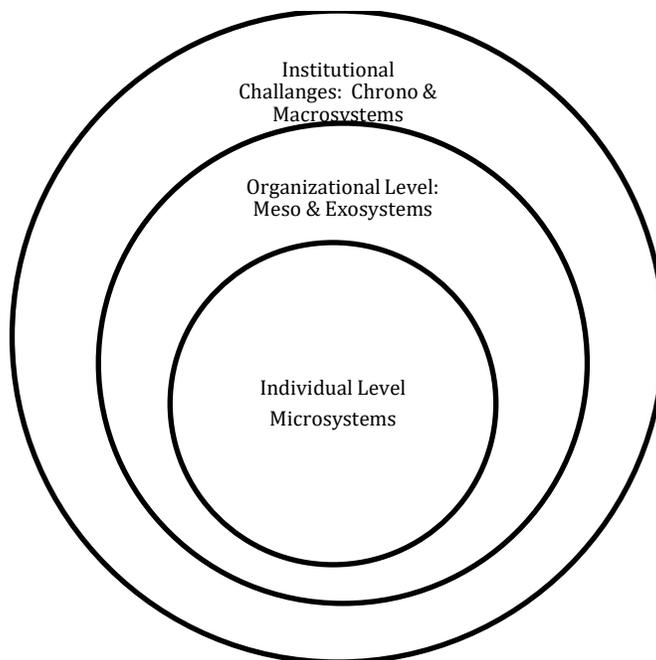


Source: Bronfenbrenner (1979)

Individual perceptions, experiences, and challenges are broadly shaped within his or her given ecosystem, which in turns affect the chances of personal and professional development.

EST permits us to incorporate multiple analytical levels such as the individual, organizational, and societal level. Positioning university teachers within the research ecosystem of higher education (see figure 2) helps to explore a reciprocal relationship between university teachers and research ecosystems in universities. University teachers are simultaneously affected by and shape the research culture. EST provides us with a useful analytical tool to shed light on the experiences and coping strategies of university teachers within highly competitive and demanding research ecosystems. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979) progress within system is "lasting change in the way an individual perceives and deals with the environment"(p.3).
Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for Research Ecosystem in Pakistan

*Source: Authors own elaboration adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological System Theory*

In this paper we borrowed from Bronfenbrenner (1993) five systems: the micro, meso, exo, macro and choronosystem. We use these systems, to fully understand the perceptions, challenges, and coping strategies opted by university teachers within research echo system. These systems are structures nested around an individual in a concentric circle as shown in figure 1. For instance, the overall evolution of university research system in Pakistan is a chronosystem, as lived experiences of our respondents emanated from the interaction with this system. The Chronosystem refers to change or consistency over time in an individual and his/her surrounding environment, both in personal and professional life. The process of globalization and internationalization of higher education in Pakistan is the case in point. By macrosystem we mean the socio-cultural context; that include values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours in which life of the individuals is deeply embedded. According to Bronfenbrenner (1993) macro systems include culture, sub-culture or other extended structures (p.25) that determine individual behaviour. The exosystem refers to the larger social system within which a person functions, but does not interact with, such as, in this case, HEC policies and regulation. The mesosystem is comprised of the relationship between two different settings such as, in our case, the relationship between university teachers and their institutions. The microsystem is the immediate domain of individual activity. This system refers to the direct interaction of the individual with his/her immediate environment. In this paper, microsystem that create pressure on individual university teacher consist of their personal and professional relations.

This paper focuses challenges faced by university teachers within research ecosystem, as they correspond closely to the five systems laid down in Bronfenbrenner ecological system theory. These challenges are studied at three different analytical levels: the personal, organizational and societal level.

**Research methodology**

To make sense of the lived experiences of university teachers, we used a case study design that is embedded in an interpretive paradigm. Use of a case study design enabled us to look deeply into the similarities and differences within cases (Yin, 2009). The study was conducted in Punjab, Pakistan because it is the most populous province and is on top with 51 chartered universities and degree awarding institutions. The respondents were purposely selected on the criterion of public-private ownership, qualification, gender, experience and seniority. Universities in Pakistan can be divided into three main categories: public, private, and women universities. Three universities A, B, and C are purposefully selected, one from each category respectively. Six respondents were purposely selected from University A, two from university B and two from university C. In order to get an in-depth understanding of the research

culture prevalent in universities, it was important to gain a deeper insight into the context of respondent's social world through active interaction with our respondent. Thus, the data was collected through a series of in-depth interviews with university teachers. Ten in-depth interviews were conducted between April 2019 and July 2020. Data collection was conducted till we reached theoretical saturation point (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First seven interviews were conducted in offices of our respondents while rest were conducted on Zoom due to lockdown. Since the authors of this paper are also university teachers and a part of the same research ecosystem, we had the advantage of being insiders (Padgett, 2008). This shared identity has facilitated in building mutual trust and confidence. Self-reflexivity (Berger, 2015) is used as a strategy for quality control. The role of a researcher's personality and the question about reflexivity are part of a broader debate about ontological, epistemological, and axiological components of knowledge creation (D'Cruz et al., 2007; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2002)

The interviews were guided by one main question: how do university teachers perceive publication based promotion criterion and its role in promoting research culture in universities?
Subsequent sub-questions were also explored to achieve our desired research goal

- What are the major challenges faced by university teachers during research and publication process?
- How do university teachers perceive publication based promotion criterion and its role in promoting research culture in universities?
- What is the impact of HEC publication criterion on the quality of scholarly research publication?

The interviews were recorded and each interview lasted for approximately 45-60 minutes. However the data collection was not limited semi-structured in-depth interviews with university teachers; informal discussions were also conducted to supplement the data. Both the research site and respondents were purposively selected to meet the research goals and generate useful data (Creswell 2003). Our selected research design demands step-by-step analysis of narrative data (Yin, 2009). Data generated through in-depth interviews was transcribed after which it was coded to organize, structure, and arrange narrative data into categories and themes. Coding was done in two steps: initial, and focused coding. Based on our analytical framework, we tried to interpret and report our findings at three distinct analytical levels: *institutional, organizational and individual.*

**Major findings and discussion:**

Research takes place within a multilayered research ecosystem. Therefore, it is important to appreciate how our respondents understand, perceive, and respond to challenges that they encounter in their research ecosystem. Perceptions play a very important role in shaping the behaviour and practices of a person everywhere in life, especially at the workplace. Based on data collected through in-depth interviews with the university teachers, we identified the major academic challenges faced by our respondents at three analytical levels of research ecosystem namely institutional, organizational, and individual level (See Figure 2). As argued by Neal and Neal (2013) these various levels are not necessarily nested rather they reflect overlapping arrangement of structures, each connected to others either directly or indirectly though social interaction of their participants.

**Perceptions about Institutional Challenges**

The teaching profession has gone through numerous changes and faces many challenges both in developed and developing countries. According to Wise (2005) a profession is an occupation that is regulated by means of a specialized training, a shared body of knowledge, and a collegial discipline. In this regard, teaching, research, and community service are the main pillars of the academic profession. For this paper we exclusively focused on the research system in higher education. In the age of global interconnectedness impetus for change in the higher education research system has come from diverse internal and external sources. Globalization of higher education has created pressure on universities to strive for global visibility through various initiatives. Internationalization and privatization are emerging trends in higher education and has been cited as major driver of change in research culture. According to Qiang (2003, p. 248),

> Higher education has now become a real part of the globalization process i.e. the cross-border matching of supply and demand. Consequently, higher education can no longer be viewed in a strictly national context.

Over the last two decades higher education sector in Pakistan has gone through significant changes. Traditionally higher education in Pakistan was state sponsored (till 1970s). Later on pubic-private partnership emerged as the new trend in higher education. In order to reform the nation's higher education

systems, HEC introduced different strategies to bring their universities at par with global standards. To gain international visibility, universities have been encouraged to shift towards a more research-oriented environment. These policies, that prioritize research over teaching through various incentives, have ultimately changed academic culture and norms in an unprecedented way. During in-depth interviews and informal discussions, our respondents also reported many professional challenges that they faced due to this shift.

Lack of research funding (especially in social sciences), pressure for fast publication, lack of physical facilities, limited number of local journals, and poor infrastructure are among the major challenges faced by university teachers.

It was evident from the responses that getting research funding is a big challenge for university teachers, especially those in the social sciences. In this regard Kumari (2017) notes that as scientists from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects dominate the HEC, social sciences and public policy remain neglected.

Our respondent Dr. Ahmad an assistant professor from a public sector university (University A) commented on top down polices of HEC:

> I started publishing at the end of 2011. We had over 10 papers published and that added to our motivation as a team. Then HEC changed its criterion and they promoted local journals and accepted only Thomas routers publication. It was good but they did it mechanically, as they excluded SCOPUS which was not good decision, they excluded ECONLIT, ERIC and other very good data bases. It was done mechanically perhaps subject experts were not the part of this decision making. It was an administrative decision, it was haphazard decision and it was not very thoughtful one. At HEC people are doing good job administratively but they are not academicians. (Source: Interview)

Inadequacies of categorization of journal as W', 'X', 'Y' and 'Z' and frequent changes in journal recognition criteria has been criticized, as is reflected from the verbatim of Dr. Alyia, a senior female lecturer from University A:

> I was eligible with 15 papers in 2018 for the post of professor and I was not eligible in 2019 because my 10 papers were accepted. My five papers which were in ISI master list were not considered this time. And only Y category of local journals were acceptable and they rejected all Z category this time. (Source: Interview)

Frequent rejection from international journals and long waiting times in local journals is emotionally taxing for university teachers and create anxiety. There are few local journals and international journals do not cater localized issues. Although university teachers are encourage to disseminate their research at international level, most of the university teachers reported challenges and contextual asymmetries in global versus local publications. For example most of them agreed that lack of required English language skill is a major barrier to publish in international journals. External forces such as internationalization of education are generating stress on local institutional structures. Unintended consequences of internationalization of HEIs and associated challenges are widely cited in existing literature (Altbatch & Knight, 2007; Dixon 2007; Knight, 2013; Ivancheva, 2015; Hoey, 2016).

**Perceptions about Organizational Challenges**

Institutions lay down the rules of the game and organizations are the players in this game. Organizations are comprised of groups of interacting individuals who have a common goal or objective and common interests. Universities are an example of an organization. North (1990) contends that there is ongoing interaction between the rules (institutions) and the players (organizations). In this paper we remained focused on university teachers as actors in the organization and how they interact with the broader rules of the institution. University teachers as players make choices based on their perceptions about costs and benefits. Work culture, poor interpersonal relationship among staff, research publication and teaching work overload, managerial attitude, and work conditions are organizational challenges most frequently voiced by our respondents.

The most important challenge being faced by university teachers is work overload. Teachers have to perform multiple tasks as a part of their job requirement such as teaching, supervising research students, and numerous managerial tasks. Due to the influx of students in universities, there is escalating time pressure on teachers. Additional pressure of accredited publication for promotion is added on top of teaching workload. Existing literature also confirms that university teachers often face multiple stressors

(Barkhuizen & Rothmann, 2008), many of such stresses have been mentioned above. Drawing their framework and inspiration from the Slow Food Movement that started in Italy in 1986, Berg and Seeber, (2016; p.3) presented compelling argument to demonstrate how situation in academia is made even worse by "the rise in contractual positions, expanding class sizes, increased use of technologies, downloading of clerical tasks onto faculty, and the shift to managerialism". Pressure to publish along with teaching workload has a negative impact on the quality of both teaching and research. Dr. Malik, an assistant professor from University B (Private sector university) commented:

> In our university we follow HEC criteria for selection of our academic staff. But research is treated as private matter of teachers that they have to mange in their own private time. Administration just ensures classes and do not encourage research and publication. This is stressful as teachers are left with no time, after 9 to 5 job, for research that is the only source of their professional mobility. (Source: Interview)

HEC is trying its best to increase research output. The question arises, however, how much quality of research has improved. Unfortunately it seems that linking publication with promotion has started a race amongst academic staff, which badly affects both teaching and research.

One reason for such cutthroat competition that was stated by respondents is that there is a limited number of local HEC recognized journals in Pakistan. This scarcity of journals creates time pressure on university teachers to publish, and publish earlier than other colleagues to get timely promotion. It was reported by the respondents that publication in local journals is based on one's informal, personal, and professional networks rather then the quality of research work. Female university academics generally have different experiences of the promotion process, due to culturally defined gender roles. A patriarchal mind-set in society puts clear limits on a woman's ability to participate in these male dominated informal networks.

Although research is the second major responsibility of university teachers, due to material incentives attached with research and publication, publication has become a prime goal for many university teachers. This raises concerns about the quality of teaching (Egwunyenga, 2009). One of our respondents Dr Neelam, associate professor at university C (Federal University), has expressed her grievances and noted with concern:

> If we look at the promotion criteria promotion is linked with publication and in this process quality of teaching has become irrelevant. Promotion is no longer linked with quality of teaching. We have left quality of teaching somewhere far behind. Young teachers are giving more time to their own research and ignoring their teaching responsibilities. They just go to the class but do not deliver to their students. (Source: Interview data)

It is evident from the data generated through in depth interviews that HEC promotion policies have had an impact on the research culture of Pakistani Universities. However, the quality of research, its social relevance, and the local impact of international publications are debatable. There is a broadly held view in the research community that HEC criterion that do not go beyond their basic journal ranking have not only affected the quality of teaching but have also created an incentive to publish low quality research in order to complete the targeted number of papers required to get a promotion. Consequently research work with high scholastic value, that requires more hard work on the part of the researcher, is effectively marginalized. Those faculty members who are disposed to cut corners are exploiting the current system by research gaming strategies. These practices are corrupting the emerging research culture in Pakistan and penalizing genuine researchers who generate high-impact and commercial research. According the perceptions of our research participants the research culture in Pakistani universities is still in its infancy and has yet to develop to undertake quality research and make a real impact (Haque & Orden, 2018). An important aspect of a good research culture is that it supports all the individuals involved in a research process. Enhancing the research culture demands a facilitating and collaborative environment. However, as Barratt-Pugh and Krestelica, (2019) also noted, cultural change requires more than policy.

**Individual Level Challenges and Coping Strategies:**

As argued by the Telling (2019,132), '*while the problems may be structural, any workable response will be at the level of individual (self) management*'. The ability of an individual to handle any challenge in life largely hinges on his or her capability to devise coping strategies. Miller et al., (2011) notes that there is

great pressure on university teachers to publish for promotion. This has created a rift between faculty members, and collegial relations have been damaged. One of our respondents Dr. Shama, an associate professor, commented on the promotion criteria for university teachers and identified a number of issues as publication pressure spillover:

> Rather then promoting conducive research environment, research collaboration and discussion forums, that might have generated quality research and publication, but you know what actually happened? We are standing against each other. Due to fear of intellectual theft I do not want to share my research ideas with others. I want to publish so I can get promotion before others in my department. That was not the sprit of providing research incentives. (Source: Interview)

There are various coping strategies opted by university teachers to deal with this publication pressure. Some of them have started working in groups and support each other to complete the targeted number of publications.
However, not everyone is in a position to cope with the situation. As stated by Dr. Fauzia:

> There was a time when people got promotions while publishing journals which were not HEC recognized but Now the things are becoming difficult. We are 5 PhDs in our department and only I was able to complete the papers the rest are unable to cope with the situation. They do write but could not find places to publish, due to few vantage points or due to lesser no of these channels they are not able to cope. Its not that people are coping, people are unable to cope with the situation. It is creating stress. (Source: Interview data)

The pressure to publish and the lack of required research skills has led to citation communities and cartels; a rising number of plagiarism cases; and fake journals and websites (Osama et. al., 2009).

**Concluding Remarks**

We are living in an era where publish or perish is widely accepted axiom and where professional standing is often measured in terms of academic publication. However cynicism prevails about the notion that frequency of publication should be used as a key performance indicator to measure academic success of institutions as well as teaching faculty. Critics have already started raising voices of dissent against this so called publish or perish system (Caplow & McGee, 1958) of performance evaluation, which affects the wellbeing of university teachers and damages the intellectual culture of universities. Through application of Bronfenbrenner ecological system theory (1979), this paper also attempts to highlight the tensions and strains faced by university teachers while dissemination of their research by numbers of weighted publications to achieve institutional goals. There is a general consensus among our research participants that the promotion and publication based inappropriate and unrealistic performance measurement system have generated pressure for university teachers to publish and publish fast. Consequently, Faculty members are working under stressful condition that has led them to a significant confusion of goals and purposes. They are increasingly focused on publication, much to the detriment of other important academic activities. This criteria has also shifted the focus of social science research in developing countries form addressing existing challenges to career advancement as the ultimate end of the research process. Quality of research has been compromised for an increase in research output and focus of research has shifted away from local priorities to get space in *global market for knowledge* (Hyland, 2015).

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