“It Makes Them Streetwise”

What Parents and Children Tell Themselves and Each Other About Young People’s Activities Online

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Abstract

Parents and children both construct narratives around what young people do online and why, and how they respond to these circumstances. As one mother says:

You can’t hide them from things like Facebook, and it makes them streetwise. They have friends that are not allowed to use it, but their mums pick them up from school and drop them off and they are not learning any life skills.

This project investigates parents’ and children’s understandings of young people’s online activities in terms of the costs, benefits, advantages and concerns. The aim of the project is to interrogate domestic negotiations around online activities for high school-aged children, including the negotiations within the household and the impact of peer activity both upon those negotiations and upon the young person’s internet use. Parents have traditionally constructed digital technology as an educational resource and the skills involved in mastering its potential as indicative of career-oriented capabilities. Children have constructed the same technologies as games machines and tools for engineering sociability. But there is some evidence that each appreciates the perspective of the other and works to accommodate it while trying to encourage the adoption of an and-also model, rather than one that prefers either-or. This paper draws upon early findings from 2013 data and uses the voices of participants to illustrate the nuances of the negotiations around meaning and importance attributed both to the technology and to its uses.

Keywords: parents; peers; risk; family life; mobile access; social network sites

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, social network sites and mobile cultures have opened up new communicative spaces and repertoires (Goggin, 2006), which are particularly attractive to young people, especially older school children (Donald & Spry, 2007). While there has been an increasing volume of research into social network site (SNS) use, such as Facebook (e.g. boyd, 2007); there have been few ethnographies that locate children’s online risk-taking, or skills-enhancing, behaviour within the dual contextual dynamics of the household and family life, and their peer group. Acknowledging a number of studies of teens and risk in a variety of contexts (e.g. Lupton, 1999; Prinstein & Cillessen, 2003; Marwick & boyd, 2011), few of these engage the perspectives and address the relative influence of both peers and parents. With regard to risk, parents are particularly implicated since policymakers, law enforcers and the media target parents to tell them that their children face dangers in the online environment, especially from cyber predators, some of whom have been caught purporting to be children themselves (Durber, 2006). Parents may feel compelled
to ‘police’ their children’s online activities but such actions raise anew issues of trust, autonomy, privacy and surveillance within the family unit, as well as impacting upon the relationships of children within their peer groups. This paper addresses the perspective of both parents and children, but deals in slightly more depth with the parental perspective.

Methodological Approach

The conceptual framework within which this research is conducted is that of the ‘social construction’ of meaning (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Social constructionism argues that what we say and believe about society, together and separately, not only reflects our experience but helps to create our society as we experience it. According to this conceptual approach, we are jointly engaged in the process of constructing our experience of ‘the social’ through our interactions with each other, with objects in the world, and through the discourses we use to discuss these. Tools used in this project, such as discourse analysis (DA) (Fairclough, 2009), allow us to ‘undo the social’ (Game, 1991) so that we may more readily analyse the ways in which what we say and do help us construct our experience and perform identity (White & Wyn, 2008).

This paper uses interviews with two teenagers from different families (a girl, 13, ‘Bec’, and a boy, 14, ‘Clint’) and the parent most involved with overseeing their internet access. In both cases, the child’s mother volunteered this as her role and this was confirmed by the child’s other parent (in Bec’s case) and by the child (in Clint’s case). The families were recruited through schools, following relevant ethics processes, and both live in peri-urban locations on the outskirts of metropolitan Perth. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews took place in the child’s mother’s home and lasted an average of 45 minutes each. Teen and parent were each interviewed separately, but on the same research visit. The two families are not known to each other and these interviews are part of a larger cohort of 18 interviews conducted in January 2013, with a further 40 or so to be completed in 2014. This paper accordingly constitutes something of a pilot study of preliminary data collected in the first stages of the ‘parents and peers’ project.

The research has encountered a range of recruitment issues, and the major selection criteria for these participants was reduced to a child with a strong engagement with the internet via, for example, games, fan fiction, and/or a social network site, plus a parent who is also willing to be interviewed. Our hope remains to access one or more groups of children and groups of parents to add depth to discussions around peers and parents managing group activities. The richness of the data gathered in individual interviews, however, means that this paper focuses upon the contribution of four participants: Bec and her mother, and Clint and his mother. Parental ages were not collected but Bec’s mother appears to be in her 30s, while Clint’s seems to be in her 40s. Both are partnered. Clint’s household enjoys a middle-class lifestyle although there is currently some financial stress around renting while looking for a home to buy. Bec’s household appears to be lower/middle-class and both parents work. Participants’ names and some identifying aspects of these interviews have been changed to protect privacy.

A paper based on a small sample has both benefits and disadvantages. Benefits include the in-depth consideration of a small number of cases which allows a reader greater opportunity to consider the detail of the research findings in the context of the richness and depth of his/her own experience. Small (2009) identifies as a predicament the challenge faced by qualitative researchers to keep “at bay the critiques expected from quantitative researchers while also addressing the thirst for in-depth studies that somehow or other ‘speak’ to empirical conditions in other cases (not observed)” (p. 10, original emphasis). In the case of this paper, there is no intention to “speak to empirical conditions in other cases”, but to instead uncover details about both the communication and metacommunication between parents and their children as these relate to wider relationship issues as represented through children’s new media use.

Apart from impossibility of generalising from them, other disadvantages of a small N study include the unrepresentative nature of a small sample, and the distorting effect of minority perspectives. As Denscombe (2010) notes:
An outlier will have less of a distorting impact on a large sample than it will on a small sample, because the extent of its deviation from the rest will get subdivided more and more as the sample size gets bigger. (p. 248)

This is a particularly relevant concern given one specific dimension of Clint’s family’s experience. Clint has a diagnosis of Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD), and this has relevance in the context of some of his mother’s comments. CAPD can present as being similar to Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and the overlap arises because people with both diagnoses are less able to synthesise multiple sources of information and may appear to act impulsively in social contexts. A person with CAPD might say or do something after a discussion has moved onto other topics, and thus appear to act out of context. They might also find it harder to review and validate arguments for or against certain decisions based upon information in the communicative environment.

Data used for this paper are selected from full-text in-depth one-on-one interviews (Seidman, 2006). These data are coded to identify themes and concepts using grounded theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Riley, 1996), while the multiple perspectives of the two sets of parents and teenaged children help triangulate findings. Discourse is made accessible for analysis through ethnomethodological (Garfinkel, 1967) research techniques, which suggest that how people use language indicates the deeper structures of belief and understanding which underpin their daily lives. Paying attention to metacommunication, how people use language and the examples they offer, helps reveal detail about how interviewees intend their primary statements to be interpreted. In the case of this pilot project with four interviewees, DA approaches (Chouluraki & Fairclough, 1999) reveal assumptions and beliefs that impact upon constructions of online opportunities and threats, and the safe or risky ways in which individuals and families relate to new media. The relational metacommunication (Branco, 2005) exchanges discussed in this paper address the broad issues of family life and the hopes and fears that parents hold for their children.

Costs and Benefits of Online Activities

Family choices around enabling access to new media express their values and their perspective on life as is made clear in studies of, for example, media use in Amish households (Umble & Weaver-Zircher, 2008). Even in mainstream western societies, evaluating the social and emotional costs and benefits of young people’s internet access involves a complex set of measurements and extrapolations applied to a fluid and dynamic range of behaviours. Parents make their decisions in light of their assumptions of how their children will respond to the opportunities on offer. They soon learn that, as in other areas of their children’s lives, their child’s future behaviours concerning online activity do not necessarily progress in an expected, or linear, way. (The use of italics within a quote indicates the interviewer’s prompt question):

*Are there issues in the house about [Clint’s] use of the internet – for example costs, sleep, family time?* Generally it wouldn’t be a problem because there is a routine. I have heard of kids getting up in the middle of the night and turn[ing] their PlayStation on but our [kids] wouldn’t be allowed and we would hear them through the walls. The only thing would have been too much obsession with games when they were younger, not wanting to come down for meals but not so much now. They’ve grown out of that stage now … they would have done it 24/7 if they’d been allowed. (Clint’s mother)

The implication here is that Clint’s parents, possibly drawing upon conversations with their contemporaries, construct an anticipated trajectory of their child’s internet activities and then compare their actual experience with that which had been predicted. Clint’s mother’s statement indicates that she constructs online engagement as passing through a number of “stages” as her child matures. Even so, she sees a requirement for active parental intervention, as indicated in her comment about how she did not allow her children to play games (in this case using a PlayStation console with online capability) around the clock. Negotiating these boundaries and managing any associated conflict might be seen as one of the
costs of a parent allowing their child to access digital technology. Asked about the positives, however, parents often point to educational benefits:

**What do you think are the positive things about [Bec] using the internet?** It is good for educational reasons. [Bec] has gone through some good topics and research through internet, and her dad spends a lot of time with her. She had to do a project on high rise buildings, so researching that and geographical research. She’ll sit and watch geographical TV. She watches the usual rubbish that teenagers watch as well, but sometimes she watches educational programs, then will research things. Some things she questions, then we’ll say – ‘look it up’. (Bec’s mother)

Although there are clear value judgements around Bec’s different online activities (“the usual rubbish”), Bec’s mother is keen to indicate that her household uses Bec’s internet use as a means of creating valuable parent-child interaction (“her dad spends a lot of time with her [online]”) and harnesses everyday exchanges to prompt internet use as part of an integrated learning experience (“then we’ll say – ‘look it up’”). One extrapolation from these two sets of parental statements is that the costs of potential conflict around monitoring online use, and of allowing children the opportunity to consume rubbish, are balanced by the benefits of positive child-parent engagement and the development of valued skills in “research” and for “educational reasons”.

From the child’s point of view, adult agendas can be understood as much by what is not said, as about explicit statements about the costs of exposing children to internet-related risks. Asked about his internet use at school, Clint wastes no time in communicating that his priorities come first, which is to say his daily search for an interesting wallpaper image, which is not one of the school’s primary motivations for providing their students with laptop computers:

**What about during school days?** I use it all the time during school because they give us MacBooks … Every day on the MacBook I go into Google to get background pictures that I like. [Did …] they give you any lessons on using it safely when they gave you the MacBook …? They just gave them to us and told us a tiny bit about them, but didn’t really tell us about safety, but the school always puts notices about things like that online and on noticeboards. I just know about safety because they ban some websites. (Clint, 14)

Clint tacitly uses a deconstructive approach to move from an understanding of banned sites to the construction of online safety, which is indicated via the banning of some sites. His family had recently returned from a posting in the United States so Clint has had the opportunity to critically evaluate different classification regimes, as his mother explained: “There was also an issue of ‘Can I have such and such a game?’ Such and such a game was an 18 game and no you can’t have it.” She went on to explain: “He thought it was brilliant because his games over here were 15s and in [the USA] they were all 18. They need to look at the ratings here because some of the 15 games should be 18” (Clint’s mother). Interestingly, in this exchange Clint’s mother is establishing her willingness to evaluate game content in terms of her child’s relative maturity but also communicates that, while she makes these judgements, she does not necessarily impose them on her child. Given that Clint is still 14, it might not matter whether a game is classified as MA 15+ or R 18+, as his age is below that for which either game is classified. Even so, in her reference to “his games over here” Clint’s mother implies that her son is playing these games at 14, even though she believes they are better suited to adults than teenagers. Such an exchange makes visible the boundaries that parents are willing to police (hours of engagement, “24/7”) and those areas where they are prepared to cede ground, such as around classification. What is unclear from this exchange, and not explored in the interview, was whether Clint’s mother was aware of the particularly Australian debates around R 18+ computer gaming, given that until recently the highest classification permitted was MA 15+. Games which were licensed as R 18+ in other jurisdictions were sometimes licensed as MA 15+ for Australian use on condition that the game was modified to comply with the lower age limit (Attorney-General’s Department, 2010).
The Practicalities of Internet Use

It has been established that children and parents differ in terms of their perspectives about risk online. Parents are fearful of the impact of stranger danger (paedophiles), pornography and too much time spent online; children’s fears more frequently relate to identity theft, cyberbullying and spam (Green, 2010). In many ways, teens’ concerns about their internet use focus on practical issues and everyday experiences. As Bec says, when asked whether she used the internet much:

No, because I have to pay for it because I have a credit thing on my phone so I pay for the internet but I really only use it when I’m on the bus or by myself at school – I might just quickly check Facebook.

Prompted to discuss her internet activity further, Bec’s idea of “not much” is clearly a relative judgement. The implication is that Bec’s use is “not much” when compared with the period of time she would like to spend on the internet:

You [say you] are mostly into Facebook. When do you do that and how much time would you spend? If it is a school day I will wake up and before I get out of bed, and before I am awake and ready to get ready, I will probably check Facebook and Instagram, then I will get ready and go to school, then I’ll come home and check it and have my phone beside me and check it every half hour, then go on it before I go to bed … my bedtime is 9.30 and then I usually go on my phone for half an hour if I can’t sleep, but if I’m tired I’ll go to sleep. I’m not one to stay up doing stuff all night. If I don’t have something important to do that day, I’ll just sleep in if I’ve stayed up late. (Bec, 13)

It would seem that multiple episodic internet use does not count as ‘much use’ and that Bec would need to be online regularly for a protracted length of time before she saw herself as using the internet very much. Her phone’s pricing policy makes her keep tabs on the time she spends online. While Bec constructs her internet use as responsible in terms of time and money, she also reveals that she engages with the internet “every half hour” or so outside school hours. Bec’s mother, possibly anticipating that Bec would make a comment such as this, is keen to make an opportunity to talk about balance within the family activities. She says that Bec is “thirteen and a half” and

… tries to push the boundaries about staying up, but she knows that in school time there is a limit and they [Bec and her younger brother] don’t have the phones or tablets on in bed. We spend a lot of time together as a family and I am not unhappy about the amount of time they spend online. (Bec’s mother)

Without further prompting, she re-emphasises this point: “We had a family break over Christmas for two weeks, and we go camping at the weekend, so we spend a lot of time together as a family” (Bec’s mother).

During his interview Clint comments that “at the moment we don’t have internet but we use internet on our phones and on a memory stick. I have a contract on my phone and every time I top it up it gives me free internet”. Clearly, Clint’s idea about what the internet should be differs from his current experience of being online in a domestic setting. Asked whether there is anything that bothers him when he is on the internet, Clint offers a prosaic answer, paralleling Bec’s everyday concerns about cost:

It’s very slow. If you are used to a phone with a certain type of internet on it, it would be a lot slower than a satellite phone. If your internet is on a smart phone it will be satellite so it will be a lot faster. Sometime we will get proper internet in the house but we are just using that at the moment. We used to have a router but have only been in this house for a couple of months. (Clint, 14)

Clint’s mother is poised to address the quality of internet access available:
Next week we are getting the internet in ... I was holding off because I was hoping to have been somewhere more permanent. Because it is a rental I didn’t want to go to all the hassle.

We were hoping to buy but things have changed. (Clint’s mother)

Although they have concerns around issues of cost and speed in their contemporary internet access, both Bec and Clint locate their initiation as internet users in positive domestic and social contexts, rather than as part of an educational setting. “[To Bec] Do you remember how you learnt how to use it? Who showed you or sat beside you? Probably my Dad because he is more computer smart, he is the one that sets everything up. I don’t really remember, it just sort of happened” (Bec, 13). Clint says:

Originally we had a PS1, then my dad got a PS2 and my brother took it, then I got a PS2. Then we got PS3. ... It was a family thing – me and my brother on PlayStations. People have also shown me websites – my brother showed me Tuberty. Everybody else was using Facebook so I used Twitter and Facebook as well. Other people are doing it and you just blend in. (Clint, 14)

Clint’s older brother Martin (15) and his father are credited as being primary influencers rather than his peer group, although “everybody else” is also acknowledged.

**Judging Appropriate Behaviour**

Parents and teens both engage in a continual conversation around what is and is not appropriate behaviour online, and what is and is not acceptable within the context of domestic internet access. This communication is visible in what is said and in the ways in which it is said, as illustrated in Clint’s mother’s discussion about the classification ratings for Clint’s games. In making such judgements, all parties are aware that these constitute statements about the self and relationships with family members and friends. People use metacommunication, the context within which language use occurs, to comment upon the situation or circumstance and share their judgements, values and preferences as to conduct. Children also adopt these metacommunicative strategies, and in doing so reassure their parents as to their trustworthiness online. Bec has been established, at 13 (the official minimum age for membership), as an active user of Facebook. She says:

A lot of people my age make statuses about grown up parties they are going to, and I don’t understand why people my age would go out drinking and smoking but people post statuses about that on Facebook and then other people will do that because they think it is cool to do that. I would never do that and I don’t understand why. I don’t understand – they have a legal age for a reason. I guess because it is illegal they think it is cool to do it. (Bec, 13)

Bec’s mother is also concerned about Facebook and what constitutes age-appropriate behaviour while being somewhat hazy around actual age limits for Facebook. Talking about Bec’s access to Facebook her mother says:

You can’t hide them from things like Facebook, and it makes them streetwise. They have friends that are not allowed to use it, but their mums pick them up from school and drop them off and they are not learning any life skills ... We’ve only let them have it this past year and she had to wait for a year after I got it but I know some of them have had it for years but I don’t think it is appropriate. I think they lowered the age limit a year or so ago. But if you don’t let them be in with it ... But I keep an eye on what they are saying. They have to be my friend on Facebook so I know what is going on. Unless they are sneaky and have other accounts but I hope they are not like that ... I always say what happens in these walls stays in these walls – you don’t air your dirty washing out. I think for Facebook the age limit should be a bit higher. (Bec’s mother)
The comment about Facebook making teens “streetwise” indicates that Bec’s mother judges the site to be a useful locale in which Bec can explore social boundaries around such behaviours as underage drinking and smoking without being exposed to the behaviours themselves. Bec’s statements also indicate that she uses Facebook to inform her opinions on these issues. Other than that, Bec’s mother’s fear seems to be as much around what Bec might say (airing “dirty washing”) as around material she might come into contact with. At the same time, she says both that “the age limit should be a bit higher” and that Bec has had access “this past year and she had to wait for a year”. These statements, given that Bec is thirteen and a half, indicate that Bec may well have had underage access to Facebook, whether or not her mother feels the age limit should be higher. The notion of waiting “for a year” indicates that many of Bec’s peers might have had SNS profiles at a younger age, and that Bec’s mother took this fact into account when allowing Bec’s access. Indeed, research with a representative population of Australian 9-16 year olds indicates that 29% of 9-10 year olds, and 59% of 11-12 year olds, have a SNS profile (Green, Brady, Ólafsson, Hartley & Lumby, 2011).

Like many teenagers, Clint has explored his parents’ boundaries around access to (in)appropriate content. He does not mention this in his interview, but his mother does: “He got an iPod for his birthday 2 or 3 years ago … He did go onto inappropriate sites and got the iPod taken off him so he knows what he should and shouldn’t be doing” (Clint’s mother). Asked about whether he has “any understandings or rules about your internet use that your parents would like you to follow”, Clint chooses to focus on everyday restrictions: “I think they would rather me sleep early. Sometimes if I can’t sleep I just stay up on my phone but that doesn’t help.” This contrasts somewhat with Clint’s mother’s previous comment about there being “a routine” around bed times and indicates that this is more of an issue for Clint than his mother might acknowledge.

Parental Concerns Around Online Risk

The “streetwise” statement made by Bec’s mother indicates her confidence that Facebook experience can prepare Bec for some of the challenges awaiting her in the wider world. Similarly, Clint’s mother constructs the internet as offering a locale in which her son can explore social dimensions to communication: “Everything is not black and white. They [children with a diagnosis of a communicative disorder] can be very naive and just don’t get it. They are very vulnerable. It depends on the way they have been brought up.” This reference to vulnerability relates to Clint’s diagnosis of CAPD. This condition has social consequences, as Clint explains in his interview: “I have friends that I socialise with at school – we talk on Twitter and Facebook – but I don’t really see them outside school. I’m a socially awkward person outside” (Clint, 14).

In her interview, Clint’s mother goes on to argue that “vulnerable” young people should be exposed to situations which stimulate the development of skills in evaluating different social situations: “You can see the different ones – ones that have been wrapped up and haven’t been allowed to do things or haven’t been pushed. They will stand back and do nothing for themselves. In a way you have to steer them” (Clint’s mother). Her family also used Bec’s mother’s strategy of monitoring SNS activities through being a ‘friend’ online. Clint’s mother says:

I think it is important just to keep an eye on them. Martin [Clint’s brother] is 15 and my husband is still on his Facebook page so he knows what is going on. You can sort of police it but not come down with an iron bar.

One significant concern is around whether Clint might fail to judge accurately the motivation of someone who might ‘friend’ him online. This is indicated in the next sentence of Clint’s mother’s interview: “If Clint thought somebody was his friend he would probably go and meet them, but he is only 14 and may be a bit more vulnerable than other kids his age.”

A different risk was raised by Bec’s mother before she also moved into a comment about “stranger danger”:

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Our concern has always been the cyber bullying. We’ve always talked to them about bullying and how you are not to hide it but must tell us, no matter how small or how big they think it is, it is best to at least talk about it. A problem shared is a problem halved, don’t bottle it up, and don’t get into any battles on Facebook. Just get off it or block that person. There is no point getting into slanging matches. If they don’t have the [privacy] protection it is open to anybody and you don’t know who is out there, on Facebook or anything. (I also have) concerns about strangers … Are you confident she would be able to handle things if she came across predators or harassment? Yes. We’ve always brought them up like that, even [protecting them] from stranger danger. In Wales you wouldn’t let them play out like they do here. In Wales you wouldn’t let them play in the front garden. (Bec’s mother)

Bec’s mother uses this commentary to communicate two perceptions she believes to be important. First, she explains her strategy of talking things through with her children as a means of helping protect them from harm and expresses her confidence that this equips them to handle such challenges. Second, her statement conveys her belief that she has an informed understanding of, and possibly a judgement around, issues of managing stranger danger. She compares the practices she sees in Wales, United Kingdom, which was where she was brought up, with those she sees in Australia, echoing Clint’s mother’s statements around her experience of classification regimes in the USA.

Bec has internalised her mother’s primary fears for her. Asked about what “your mum’s and dad’s concerns are about you using the internet?”, Bec says, “They would worry that I might be bullied, or that I would post something inappropriate”. She adds:

If things like Facebook didn’t exist I think people would get along a lot nicer because now they are cyber bullying. Someone will post something and people will bully them for that post because they think the post isn’t cool or something like that. (Bec, 13)

Conclusion

This paper reports upon a pilot study with a small sample which investigates the metacommunication that occurs when parents and their teenage children talk to each other about online activities. It addresses children’s and parents’ constructions of costs, benefits, advantages and concerns incurred by teenagers’ internet activities. In discussing these issues, different understandings are constructed and shared about the appropriate role of the internet in the life of a teenager. Such constructions draw upon a range of influences and experiences. In the examples cited here, early teens’ primary influences seem to be their parents, their siblings, their peers and what they learn from their own experience. Parents seem to compare their child’s actions with other children in the family, and with those of peer group members. They seem more aware of, and have opinions on, such matters as age limits and classification categories and also draw upon relevant experience of these issues from other areas and contexts, including time spent overseas.

Both the families considered in this paper have adopted a strategy of open communication with their children and this might reflect the particular dynamics which informed their joint choices to engage with the research project. These participants felt comfortable talking about the issues canvassed because they are already an important topic of conversation in their respective households. As Clint’s mother says:

I always think that communication is a really big thing. If you have an open communication and sit down and talk so that if there is something wrong they are going to talk to you. If you don’t have that, you are not going to get them to talk. He may not want to talk to me but he could talk to his dad. It is not just a case of come and sit down, we are going to have a chat. It doesn’t work like that. Keep communication open, if it closes it is very hard to get back on track.
This everyday parental perspective accords with findings from a range of studies that indicate parents’ engagement to be positively correlated with their children’s beneficial internet use (Australian Communications & Media Authority, 2007). In Australia, a representative sample of 400 9-16 year olds, and the parent most involved with their child’s internet use, indicates that 75% of Australian children “pay attention to parental mediation, this being above the [internationally comparative] 25 nation average (64%)” (Green et al., 2011, p. 10). While internet access is an important cultural experience for contemporary young Australians, discussions around “notions of who lets who use what, of moral judgements of the other’s activities, of the expression of needs and desires, of justifications and conflict, of separateness and mutuality” (Livingstone, 1992, p. 113) also constitute the building blocks for a shared family life.

References


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