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## Bullying Behaviour Factors among School Students: Qualitative Evidence from Malaysia

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### Abstract

Bullying behaviour is a social issue that particularly concerns school students. Bullying activities in schools are disciplinary problems that involve the problematic personality and behaviour of students that can affect the school environment. Thus, the objective of the study was to explore the factors of Malaysian school students involved in bullying behaviour. The study was conducted qualitatively using a case study research design. An in-depth interview with seven (7) informants was conducted using the snowball sampling technique. Semi-structured question was used during interview session. Data was obtained in the analysis by using thematic analysis. The results of the study found that the factors of students involved in bullying behaviour are personal gratification, family factors and home environment, prior experience of being bullied and peer influence. A holistic intervention, therefore, needs to be designed to ensure that students continue to excel both academically and personally to attain well-being for a more promising future.

**Keywords:** Bullying Behaviour, School Student, Family Factors, Personal Gratification, Peer Influence.

### Introduction

Students are a nation's future hope. They require high self-esteem and positive identity development, knowledge and skills to lead the country by bearing the responsibility in national leadership in line with the needs of the people. Schools are seen as institutions that serve as a launching pad in the cultivation of such values and principles that can form positive self-identity as well as to attain knowledge to achieve that goal. However, the effort to educate this younger generation is very challenging and complicated. In the Ninth Shift of the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 states that cooperation and partnership from various stakeholders such as the government, community, parents, schools and educators and the private sector is expected to ensure the direction of this young generation in accordance to the needs and aspirations of the country (Malaysia Education Ministry, 2013).

This is because disciplinary problems such as bullying often occur among them with a worrying trend that could to some extent hamper and mar the hopes and aspirations of national education.

Students involved in bullying can be at risk of developing behavioural problems, physical health problems as well as suicidal ideation (Sabramani et al., 2021). Studies related to bullying behaviour in schools emerged since the late 1970s. Olweus (1993) has conducted a series of studies on bullying behaviour among school students in Scandinavia, Northern Europe. Later on, studies on bullying behavior in schools began to be conducted proactively. Aggressive behaviour in childhood and adolescence have been a major focus of empirical studies over the past few decades. According to Olweus (1994), bullying behaviour is a set of aggressive behaviours that are a form of abuse against others either individually or in groups. This bullying behaviour involves three main characteristics namely involving repeated incidents (done repeatedly), harm due to the existence of power imbalance between individuals (committed by more powerful individuals to weaker individuals) and victims with difficulty to defend themselves (Smith & Sharp, 1994).

Bullying, which is a subset of aggressive behaviour has been identified as a problem that not only impacts physical health but also affects the emotional and mental health of victims of bullying as well as the bullies (Sabramani et al., 2019; Shahrazad et al., 2019). Junainor et al (2016) also stated that the effects of bullying can result in isolation from socialisation that can affect the well-being and development of students in school. Well-being (welfare) is an important aspect that determines the happiness and mental health of individuals, especially students (Arif & Sa'odah, 2019). Mental health problems among individuals aged 16 years and above have increased to 29.2% where in an estimated 4.2 million people, one in three Malaysians have mental health problems (National Health Mobility Survey Malaysia, 2011). A compromised well-being of an individual's life will affect the development and their viability as future generations, especially among the present school students.

### **Review of Literature**

According to Beran (2006), among the acts that are often associated with bullying behaviour are touching, pushing, hitting, calling nicknames for embarrassment as well as sticking the tongue out and other unpleasant actions towards the victim. Rahim et al (2020) stated that bullying can be classified into direct bullying and indirect bullying which include various types of bullying, namely physical, verbal, social, sexual and cyber bullying. According to Shahrazat et al (2019), bullying consists of several categories addressed by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (2016) namely physical bullying such as pinching, kicking, pushing and hitting or damaging property, while verbal bullying includes taunting, name calling, insults, threats or racially-charged statements. The third category is social bullying that aims to tarnish a person's social reputation by spreading defamatory information about the individual and making negative facial or physical gestures. The last category of bullying is cyber bullying committed openly or discretely using digital technologies such as smartphones, social media software, websites, texts, instant messaging and other online platforms. However, this study will focus on physical, verbal and social bullying classified as traditional bullying. This is because the increase in cases of traditional bullying among students in schools is at an alarming trend. This is in line with the study conducted by Oetega-Ruiz et al (2012) who

showed that the percentage of victims of traditional bullying either directly or indirectly is higher than the percentage of victims of cyber bullying.

However, in recent times, many bullying studies have focused on cyber bullying behaviour (Hamiza et al., 2021) due to the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution 4.0 (4IR), where currently, technology is the main medium in various daily activities. However, the effects of physical bullying and cyber bullying are different and most of the effects of cyber bullying are emotional distress to the victim of bullying whereas physical bullying bears more disturbing physical and emotional effects on the victim (Oetega-Ruiz et al., 2012). As such, this study intends to explore the factors of students engaging in traditional bullying behaviour in schools by using qualitative methods as opposed to bullying studies conducted using quantitative methods by previous researchers (Azizi, 2015; Rizki et al., 2014; Junainor et al., 2016; Nathan, 2020). The effects experienced by victims of bullying among school students are social exclusion, lack of social support as well as increased negative emotions in the self such as anger, frustration, anxiety and depression (Beeri & Lev-Wiesel, 2011; Garnefski & Kraaij, 2014). However, according to Abidin et al (2007), misconduct of school students is also associated with the role of the school. As such, it calls for a holistic action from all parties as per the Ninth Shift of the MEB so that incidences of bullying may be halted as it can continue to negatively impact the bullies and the victims since school is a place for students to socialise and integrate positively with necessary support via a conducive environment.

Besides that, most of the problems faced by adolescents including bullying behaviour are the result of issues that arise during the child's developmental period (Caspi et al., 1995). According to Nazar (1993), deviant behaviour among adolescents is also caused by conflict and psychological stress. Study conducted by Suhaimi et al (2021) on relation between psychological stress, anger and bullying behaviour among university student also showed that the level of psychological stress of students has significant relationship with the level of anger and bullying behavior among university students. Besides, adolescents who engage in these deviant behaviours also experience conflict in their own families where they are unable to see a family unit as a healthy environmental system bearing the opportunity for happiness. Lack of communication and love in the family also leads to the formation of a teenager's deviant personality. Additionally, parental factors were also found to engender children's behavioural problems in the instance of failing to display decorum and good behaviour in front of children as well as negligence in upholding religious teachings (Sokol-Katz et al., 1997). This is a major contributor to the emergence of various behavioural issues among adolescents, especially involving cases of bullying. Human behaviour and experience are a reflection of the emotional symptoms that occur. In other words, what the teenager is exhibiting is representative of the feelings he or she is experiencing internally. This issue of bullying not only occurs in schools but also in institutions of higher learning (Suhaimi et al., 2021) and in the workplace (Daniella et al., 2021; Zarina et al., 2021; Syakirah et al. 2021) and most of the research was conducted using quantitative method. However, this study only focuses on bullying in schools and its conducted using qualitative approach. Therefore, there is a need for studies related to bullying in schools to explore what factors lead to bullying behaviour.

### **Methodology**

This employs the qualitative method by using case study as the research design. Qualitative research is able to produce information-rich and complex data because they need to be interpreted according to the understanding of the theory (literature review) incorporated by the researcher at the beginning of the research. Qualitative research focuses on a clear and in-depth understanding of an issue at study and is not based on calculations or measurements (Siti Uzairiah, 2017).

In this study, the selection of informants was done by using the snowball sampling technique. The data collection technique used was in-depth face-to-face interviews with seven Malaysian school students involved in bullying behaviour. Prior to recruitment, history of bullying behaviour was ensured from informant. Those who have not involved in bullying as perpetrators were excluded from this study. The study used a semi-structured question guide as the research protocol for data collection. The questions posed are tied to the research question - what factors that influence the informants involved in bullying behaviour. The researcher also referred to the literature review in constructing semi-structured questions and additional questions (prompt question). All questions were constructed as a question guide to the researcher when conducting face-to-face interviews. The researcher also asked spontaneous questions that arose from the answers given by the informants to obtain a more in-depth and varied data when one-on-one interviews were held.

At the initial stage of the data collection process, the researcher has set the sample number to be between 10 to 20 informants, but after interviewing the sixth informant, the researcher was satisfied with the information obtained from the interviews conducted because it has covered all the required dimensions. Subsequently, the researcher conducted the sixth interview to confirm that no new themes or findings resulted from the interviews conducted. The number of study samples is considered to have reached the saturation point of the data and was believed to have met the objectives of the study with a total of seven informants of students involved in bullying behaviour in school. The recorded voice data were translated in the form of verbatim transcripts and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis techniques. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) there are five main processes that need to be done by the researcher when conducting thematic analysis. First is for the researcher to familiarise with the data where the researcher peruses all the data repeatedly to get a comprehensive understanding of the information obtained from interviews conducted. Next, the researcher comes up with the initial code by looking at the keywords, phrases, clauses and sentences that indicate the views and concepts that respond to the research questions. Next, the researcher finds a theme where the process of managing the data begins by collecting similar code to form a theme and placing it in a table manually. Initial themes emerge based on the similarity of the codes that had been identified. In the fourth step, the researcher begins to review the theme to ensure it reflects the conceptual ideas of each theme. At this stage, part of the theme is removed, isolated and renamed in greater precision. The last step is when the researcher defines and renames the theme as the findings of the study. The summary of the methodology used for this research is as follows:

Table 1: Summary of Methodology

Research Methodology	Qualitative
Research Design	Case Study
Sampling Technique	Snowball Sampling
Number of Informants	Seven (7) informants
Data Collection Procedure	In-depth Interview
Data Instrument	Semi-Structured Questions
Data Analysis	Thematic Analysis

## Findings and Discussion

### *Informants' Demography*

Table 2.0 shows the demographics of the seven informants involved in this study which involves students of Precinct 9 (1) Putrajaya Secondary School. Informants were between 14 and 17 years old. All informants are males, Malay by race and Muslim by religion. Parental employment consists of employees of public and private sectors and self-employed.

Table 2: Informants' Demography

Informant	Age (Year)	Gender	Father's Occupation	Mother's Occupation
Informant 1	15	Male	Public Service	Housewife
Informant 2	16	Male	Public Service	Housewife
Informant 3	17	Male	Self-Employed	Public Service
Informant 4	15	Male	Private	Public Service
Informant 5	17	Male	Self-Employed	Public Service
Informant 6	14	Male	Private Sector	Housewife
Informant 7	17	Male	Public Service	Private Sector

The results of the study found that there are four salient factors that influence the informants in bullying behaviour, namely personal gratification, family and home environment factors, past experience of bullying and peer influence. Each of the factors is discussed in the succeeding sections.

### *Personal Gratification*

The study identified personal gratification as a factor of the informants' engagement in bullying behaviour in school. It is found that the majority of informants stated that there is a feeling of fun when bullying and it brings personal satisfaction as stated by the first and fifth

informants. For the fourth informant, the act of bullying is considered as a joke activity that can entertain themselves and others as stated by the informant himself as follows:

*[Translation Note: Since the register of the excerpts contains informal and colloquial registers of the Malay language, certain codes, phrases and suffixes are untranslatable into English to be consistent with the register. Some of these terms are retained and the translations are done to approximate the register in the best way so as to not lose the essence of the informants' voice and to mitigate translation bias]*

*"It's fun when I taunt, because when I do that, people laugh and are entertained, so it's fine la...best kan...I like to taunt since last time..if you ask why, it's because I feel excited when I do that, others are entertained, okay what?"*

*"Kalau macam menganjing (mengejek) tu seronok per.. sebab bila saya menganjing (mengejek) tu mesti ada orang yang gelak dan terhibur..kira okay lah tu.. best kan..memang saya suka menganjing (mengejek) dari dulu lagi..kalau tanya sebab apa? Sebab saya rasa seronok bila buat macam tu.. ada jer orang lain yang terhibur..okay aper?"*

(Informant 1)

*"Bullying is satisfaction for me...when I bully others, just teasing is enough, I would feel the excitement."*

*"Buli ni pada saya kepuasan.. bila saya dapat buli orang lain, saya rasa puas, cukup lah dengan ejek orang pun saya dah rasa seronok.."*

(Informant 4)

*"Why do I like to bully? The answer is simple jer, because when I bully people at school, I feel happy...dunno it's exciting to bully people, what more those who are afraid of us."*

*"Kenapa saya suka membuli? Jawapannya simple jer, sebab bila saya dapat buli orang kat sekolah, saya rasa happy... ntah memang seronok buli orang ni.. lebih-lebih lagi orang yang takut dengan kita.."*

(Informant 5)

The informant sees bullying behaviour as an act that brings pleasure and satisfaction to himself. This finding is in line with Yew (2019) which stated that among the reasons adolescents get involved with bullying cases is because they consider it as a personal pleasure. In fact, the informant also stated that the bullying behaviour was considered as a humorous activity that could entertain him and others, especially when done towards to a weak friend. Consistently, Razimi et. al (2020) mentioned about the excitement bullies feel when the victim is not fighting back. The bully will continue to repeat the act to the point of feeling disturbed and uncomfortable on part of the victim. In fact, Yew (2019) explained that the purpose of bullying is to demonstrate

that they (bullies) are stronger and more powerful than the victim of bullying. This power assertion can be related to one of the personality components introduced by Sigmund Freud's (Yung et al., 2019), where according to him, the personality components within an individual comprise of three namely id, ego and super ego. The id personality component is related to the propensity of the self to satisfy urges and desires manifested by actions or reactions that can be beyond control or outside cultural permissibility for personal satisfaction. This is relevant to the first theme that states personal gratification is the factor of becoming a bully.

### **Family and Home Environment Factors**

The thematic analysis also yielded troubled family background and non-conducive home environment of the majority of the informants as factors of bullying behaviour in schools. The first informant said his parents often punish him for his mistakes made at home which ultimately had caused him to rebel and behave aggressively at school. Similarly, the second informant admitted that he came from a troubled family which left him feeling depressed and would diffuse it by bullying his schoolmates instead. As with the seventh informant who said his school was used as a place for his to vent his anger on a friend by bullying. According to the informant also, this happened due to the disharmonious home environment and with the overwhelming pressure he faced, which he then would externalise through aggressive actions towards his friends at school in the form bullying. The following are excerpts from the informants' interviews on the matter.

*"When at home, always get scolded, stress..dunno how to vent out, so at school, I like rebel against my mom and dad, that's when I bully others.."*

*"Bila kat rumah asyik kena marah jer, stress.. tak tahu nak lepas kat mana perasaan tu.. jadi bila kat sekolah tu saya macam memberontak sikit dengan mak ayah saya.. tu yang saya buli orang lain.."*

(Informant 1)

*"I come from a problematic family, I am nagged daily by mom..dad always wants to attack me jer...even though at times, I didn't even do any wrong...so I am frustrated..so when at school, I become an evil sprite..I just want to bully all of them.."*

*"Saya datang dari family yang problem sikit, kiranya kat rumah tu hari-hari kene bebel dengan mak.. ayah pulak asyik nak attack saya jer.. walaupun kadang-kadang tu bukan salah saya pun..jadi saya bengang.. tu yang bila kat sekolah.. saya jadi hantu (nakal) sikit.. semua orang saya rasa nak buli.. "*

(Informant 2)

*"Because at home, many things I can't do, this can't, that can't...there's always something that's not right, always get scolded, mom and dad problem pulak, always fighting, so at school I vent out...I release at my friends whom I dislike, just to bother them, I bully."*

*"Sebab kat rumah banyak benda yang saya tak boleh buat.. ini tak boleh, itu tak boleh.. ada jer yang tak betul.. asyik kena marah.. makayah saya pulak problem, asyik gaduh.."*



*jadi kat sekolah lah tempat saya nak lepaskan geram.. saya lepaskan kat kawan-kawan yang saya tak suka.. saya saja cari pasal supaya saya boleh buli diaorang”*  
(Informant 7)

Overall, this study found that some of the informants had problematic family backgrounds that prompted them to engage in aggressive behaviours such as bullying at school. The stress faced at home due to family conflict and rift caused the informants to act aggressively by releasing pressure to the victims at school. This finding is consistent with Razimi (2020) who stated that stress that stems from the home environment has contributed to the action of a student to release the pressure felt onto other students through bullying behaviour at school. According to Zakiyah (2004), the home environment greatly influences the development and well-being of children. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the environment at home is always conducive to help the positive behavioural development of adolescents and teenagers.

Besides that, it shows that the collaboration between family, especially parents as well as schools is indispensable in the formation and improvement of a positive identity development of students on top of their scholastic progress (Malaysia Education Ministry, 2013). The support of parents rendered via the Parents-Teacher Association (PIBG) has to be fortified (Hassan et al., 2016). Parents' and teachers' involvement is crucial to discuss students' issues especially bullying cases. This ensures intervention becomes more feasible that teachers are able monitor and receive feedbacks from bullying victims.

#### ***Prior Experience of Being Bullied***

The results of the study also found that some informants had prior experience of being bullied. According to the second informant, the negative experience he had gone through as a victim of bullying had prompted him to retaliate akin to an act of revenge on others with the need that everyone should feel the experience he had gone through. Likewise, to the sixth informant, the effect of being bullied by a senior male at his former school has made the informant want to protect himself when moving to a new school by behaving aggressively by bullying other less dominant friends. It is for her same reason to avoid being bullied as in the past. The excerpts below illustrate this factor.

*“Because I experienced it before, being bullied, made fun of, teased, stepped on the head and all that la, so now I want others to feel what I felt before.”*

*“Sebab saya pernah rasa dulu.. kene buli.. kena bahan.. kena ejek.. kene pijak kepala semua tu lah, jadi sekarang saya nak orang lain pun rasa apa yang pernah saya rasa dulu.”*

(Informant 2)

*“Before I was always bullied..that’s why I am this way...at home my brother always bullies me, I would always lose because he’s the elder brother kan... even in my old school, my seniors always bullied me, so when I shifted schools, I didn’t want others to bully me, that’s why I bully others.”*

*“Dulu saya memang selalu kena buli.. tu sebab saya jadi macam ni.. kat rumah abang selalu buli saya.. saya selalu kalah dengan dia sebab dia abang kan.. even masa saya sekolah lama pun, saya pernah kena buli dengan senior.. jadi bila pindah sekolah ni, saya tak nak orang lain buli saya lagi.. tu sebab saya buli orang”*

(Informant 6)

Furthermore, according to the seventh informant, the experience of once being bullied has made him avoid being a victim of bullying again by acting as a bully for self-protection. This was stated by the informant as follows:

*“I don’t want others to step on my head, enough with what I felt before, so before others bully me, it’s better that I show my fangs..I need to defend myself from being victimised again, that’s why I bully others first, let them be afraid of me and they won’t dare to bully me.”*

*“Saya tak nak orang lain pijak kepala saya lagi, cukup lah apa yang saya rasa dulu..jadi sebelum orang buli saya lagi.. lebih baik saya tunjuk taring saya.. saya kena pertahankan diri saya dari menjadi mangsa lagi.. tu sebab saya buli orang dulu.. biar orang takut dengan saya dan tak berani nak buli saya..”*

(Informant 7)

Some informants acknowledged that past experiences as victims of bullying had influenced them to act as a defence mechanism so as to not continue being victims of bullying but by deciding to become bullies themselves in school. According to Azlina (2010), experience in bullying is related to social support and depression for the reason that bullying victims lack social support, thus causing them to experience emotional stress and subsequently act as a bully as if seeking revenge. This is because the pressure of being bullied in the past consequently bears an impact on their mental health that is manifested in self-isolation. Gradually, without emotional support and early intervention, the victim retaliates and becomes the bully to avoid reoccurrence. This parallels with Yen et al (2014)’s study on mental health impact of victims of bullying with a significant correlation between bullying victims and depression. Prolonged depression provides the impetus to victims to engage bullying.

### **Peer Influence**

Peer influence is another factor found in this study that motivates students towards bullying behaviour at school. According to the second informant, at the initial stage, he admitted that he was just accompanying his friend to bully but over time was influenced to become the bully himself. Similarly, the third informant engaged in bullying merely to fulfil the request of his good friend but ended up getting caught up in bullying behaviour. Below are the informants’ excerpts:

*“At first I followed my friend...appears like it’s fun to bully people. Eventually, I started to bully others...”*

*“Mula-mula saya ikut kawan jer.. tengok macam best pulak dia buli orang..lama-lama saya pulak yang buli orang..”*

(Informant 2)

*“My good friend called me to bully people, he said it was for ‘fun-fun’, so for friendship’s sake I just follow only lah...”*

*“Dulu kawan baik saya yang ajak saya join kenakan (buli) orang.. dia kata untuk fun-fun ja.. so demi kawan saya follow jer lah..”*

(Informant 3)

The informant admitted to being influenced by a friend's call to engage in bullying behaviour. According to Razimi (2020), teenagers are easily influenced by friends because of high trust in them and as a way to maintain solidarity despite the full awareness of its transgressions. This is consistent with Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory which states that the aggressive nature shown by a person is not innate. Rather, it is the nurture of acquired behaviour caused by the gullibility of adolescent students who are easily influenced by the behaviour of people around them, especially their peers. According to Azizi et al (2012), this is due to friends or peers being the closest individuals to adolescents compared to their own families and parents. This aggressive behaviour that usually occurs is an emulation of observations and experiences of what is happening in the adolescent's immediate environment.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

In conclusion, the researcher found that the main factor that drive bullying behaviour among school students is personal gratification. The majority of informants described bullying behaviour a joke that acted as source of pleasure. In addition, the study found that family factors and non-conducive home environment also contributed to bullying behaviour among informants. Most of the informants come from troubled families and have a humble background in terms of economic status. Besides that, the informants also stated that the experience factor of being a victim of bullying also influenced them to emulate bullying behaviour. The retaliation of bullying by means of aggression is directed towards less dominant friends. It is also a coping and defence mechanism to avoid the reoccurrence of being bullied. Some informants stated that bullying is a motivation to avenge from the effects experienced of being a victim of bullying. Apart from that, the study also found that peer influence contributed to the informants' involvement in bullying behaviour as friends are the closest individuals to teenagers, thus bearing more influential strength towards deviant behaviours.

Based on the results of this study, the researcher recommends that students who are involved in bullying behaviour problems in schools to undertake a holistic intervention by first identifying the causes of their involvement in this problem. Next, each issue and problem faced by each student should be explored and understood in detail because each individual's needs and problematic behavioural factors differ and in turn require specific and nuanced intervention. Among the proposed intervention programmes that can be done are individual or group counselling sessions, identity development programmes, personality and spiritual development. Strengthening and fortifying the role of the PIBG is crucial to ensure the issue of bullying in schools is taken seriously with urgent intervention by both schools and parents.

On top of students, teachers have to be exposed to the practical knowledge and facts pertaining to the phenomenon of bullying in schools. Many teachers do not possess the understanding of bullying issues in schools and therefore are not equipped in the necessary course of actions to handle this issue effectively. As with Buch's (2012), it was found among the 12 teachers in a secondary school in the United States, many were not able to categorise and make distinction whether or not bullying is a negative behaviour. Their lack of understanding resulted in their inability to exercise the appropriate intervention measures and instead resorted to handling the issue within their limited capacity and understanding. It is thus recommended that teachers are given the necessary educational support through courses or programmes with a focus on the standard 'know-how' when dealing with bullying cases in schools. Furthermore, related agency such as Ministry of Malaysian Education might consider on legal solving method by forming standard operating procedures (SOP) or specific modules as intervention to combat this bullying issues at school. This suggestion is in line with Azman et al (2021), where forming of SOPs and specific module on bullying intervention are in sync with syariah principles.

It is hoped that these findings will provide the significance and rationale to the Ministry of Education Malaysia, Federal Territory of Putrajaya Education Department, schools administration and teachers, especially school counselling teachers in planning and implementing programmes to prevent and resolve bullying behaviour involving school students. It is also hoped that this study can be used by school disciplinary boards as a guideline and basis for the formation of school policies and rules to address and curb bullying behaviour. Furthermore, it is recommended that relevant parties and stakeholders such as parents, local communities and youth organisations plan community service programmes specifically for students facing bullying problems so that they receive assistance and be given appropriate support. This is vital to ensure their contribution to the national development is realised. The programme should be purposeful to foster individuals who are able to observe common etiquette and responsible decorum, thus forming a solid personality in line with the Malaysian cultural society that places an emphasis on courtesy and mindfulness.

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