



## Social values: in the words of the youth\*

*Valores sociais: com a palavra a juventude*

*Valores sociales: con la palabra la juventud*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To identify the different positions of young students in relation to expressions about contemporary social values. **Methods:** A descriptive study using a quantitative approach, we used a spreadsheet to assign the positions of 229 students between 15 and 19 years, participants in 29 focus groups conducted in ten schools in four dissimilar regions in the city of Santo André (SP), Brazil. Young people positioned themselves regarding the agreement - doubt or disagreement - over a set of value-laden expressions sorted and discussed in groups. These positions were analyzed according to their frequencies. **Results:** First, we identified a certain degree of uniformity of viewpoints, as a consequence of generational experience of assimilation of values disseminated in society; on the other hand, heterogeneity was evidenced that exposed inherent contradictions of the different social contexts surrounding these youths. **Conclusion:** We identified values that differed among youths pertaining to different social groups while encountering others that did not. There was more heterogeneity than homogeneity in opinions about the evaluative expressions used. **Keywords:** Social values; Adolescent; Students; Social inequity

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** Identificar os diferentes posicionamentos de jovens estudantes em relação às expressões sobre valores sociais contemporâneos. **Métodos:** Estudo descritivo de abordagem quantitativa, utilizou-se uma planilha para assinalar os posicionamentos de 229 estudantes de 15 a 19 anos, participantes de 29 grupos focais realizados em dez escolas de quatro regiões desiguais do município de Santo André, (SP). Os jovens posicionaram-se quanto à concordância – dúvida ou desacordo – sobre um conjunto de expressões valorativas sorteadas e discutidas nos grupos. Estas posições foram analisadas de acordo com suas frequências. **Resultados:** Por um lado, indicam certo grau de uniformidade de pontos de vista, como consequência da experiência geracional de assimilação dos valores disseminados na sociedade; evidenciam, por outro lado, heterogeneidades que expõem contradições inerentes aos diferentes contextos sociais que cercam esses jovens. **Conclusão:** Identificou-se valores que diferem entre jovens pertencentes a distintos grupos sociais enquanto que outros não. Houve mais heterogeneidade do que homogeneidade nas opiniões sobre expressões valorativas utilizadas. **Descritores:** Valores sociais; Adolescente; Estudantes; Iniquidade social

### RESUMEN

**Objetivo:** Identificar los diferentes posicionamientos de jóvenes estudiantes en relación a las expresiones sobre valores sociales contemporâneos. **Métodos:** Estudio descriptivo de abordaje cuantitativo, en el que se utilizó um formulário para señalar los posicionamientos de 229 estudiantes de 15 a 19 años, participantes de 29 grupos focales realizados en diez escuelas de cuatro regiones desiguales del municipio de Santo André, (SP). Los jóvenes se posicionaron en cuanto a la concordancia – duda o desacuerdo – sobre un conjunto de expresiones valorativas sorteadas y discutidas en los grupos. Estas posiciones fueron analizadas de acuerdo con sus frecuencias. **Resultados:** Por un lado, indican cierto grado de uniformidad de puntos de vista, como consecuencia de la experiencia generacional de asimilación de los valores diseminados en la sociedad; evidencian, por otro lado, heterogeneidades que exponen contradicciones inherentes a los diferentes contextos sociales que rodean a esos jóvenes. **Conclusión:** Se identificó valores que difieren entre jóvenes pertenecientes a distintos grupos sociales en cuanto que otros no. Hubo más heterogeneidad que homogeneidad en las opiniones sobre expresiones valorativas utilizadas. **Descriptorios:** Valores sociales; Adolescente; Estudiantes; Inequidad social

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## INTRODUCTION

The discussion of youth has been increasingly gaining more visibility. In Brazil, this is due to the magnitude of this population – there are 40 million young adults who are between the ages of 18 and 29 years (21.1% of the population of the country) - and the problems arising from the precarious living conditions of most of them - affect 30% of the young people living in households with per capita income of up to half the minimum wage<sup>(1)</sup>. A study conducted with 15-24 year-old Brazilian youngsters showed that the major concerns reported were violence, lack of access and precarious working conditions, poor access and quality of education, poverty, the unequal distribution of income, and social inequalities<sup>(2)</sup>.

However, despite characteristics and common questions that arise in this age group, it cannot be considered as a homogenous group. That is, although there is a generational component that can define the specifics and conditions of youth, it is not equally shared; the different conditions and opportunities available are defined by the socioeconomic situation to which the young adult is submitted. For this reason *it became usual to utilize the expression youths*, emphasizing that *there is a plurality of situations that confer diversity to the demands and needs of the young ones*<sup>(3;p.31)</sup>. The plurality obeys the differences in classes that make it inappropriate to conceive the youth category as being universal, for there are various socialization processes of youth from different social classes<sup>(4)</sup>.

In agreement with this theoretical conception, the present study considers value as a historically constructed concept in the dialectical relation to the mode of production of social life. Value in Marx<sup>(5)</sup> is defined as being supported on its economic base and it refers to the work incorporated into goods, in a way that things and objects are valued by what they appear to be and represent. As consciousness has only access to reality through representations, it conforms to the apparent valuation system becoming the fundamental mechanism to guide choices, desires, aspirations and actions. Values are not natural or universal, but they are heterogeneous and differ in different social classes, although *in a given society there are common elements (dominant values, dominant forms of consciousness, etc) that are used to reproduce the society*<sup>(6)</sup>.

In this study, it was considered that the ongoing transformations imprinted by the mechanism of capital largely affect the valuation system of youth. It was assumed that young people from different social groups are affected differently by the system of contemporary values. The aim of this study was to identify the different attitudes of young students with regard to statements on social values.

## METHODS

This descriptive and quantitative study\* followed the ethical precepts established by Resolution No. 196/1996 of the Ministry of Health and it was approved (Processes 538/2006/CEP-EEUSP and 27/2007/CEP-SSSA) by two Research Ethics Committees affiliated with the National Research Ethics Council.

The schools were chosen in order to represent the social reality of the region in which the youngsters studied and they participated voluntarily and randomly in the study. The term of free and informed consent was signed by the parents or guardians as the youngsters were not yet 18 years of age.

A spreadsheet was used to collect the data on which the opinions about the valuational statements of the young participants were noted on the appropriate space during an educational game<sup>(7)</sup>. The game followed the norms of the focus group and showed to be, as described in another study<sup>(8)</sup>, a powerful instrument for data collection for youngsters. It was used to promote the discussion and reflection among the youngsters using a set of 73 valuational statements regarding achievement/success, safety, confidence and future; drugs and other forms of well-being and pleasure. Each youngster draw a statement and read it aloud so that all the others could place a sticker on a point on a continuous line that had at one end “I totally agree” and at the other end “I entirely disagree”, and space for intermediate opinions. The youngsters could change their opinion throughout the discussions. The group had a moderator, who conducted the discussions, according to the interests and objectives of the research, and facilitated the participation of the youngsters. An observer, who was responsible for filling out the spreadsheet, documented changes in their opinions and took notes of other relevant issues for analysis.

Twenty-nine spreadsheets were filled out, corresponding to 29 groups consisting of 229 high-school youngsters with ages between 15 and 19 years from 10 schools in different regions of the municipality of Santo André, SP, (Brazil). The city was divided into four regions called Central (C), Almost Central (AC), Almost Outskirt (AO) and Outskirt (O). The more centrally located in the city, the more the youngsters and their families had access to wealth and citizenship, although the relationship center-outskirt is not that symmetrical. These regions composed the Map of

\* Broader subproject research – “Youngsters, values and drug use: public policies from a Public Health perspective”, in which the aim was to examine the social values of young people from different social groups in the municipality of Santo André-SP, and it received support from FAPESP 06 51671-9. The qualitative portion of the data will be presented in another paper.

Youngsters from Santo Andre and the regions were identified based on the socioeconomic and demographic data\*\* of the youngsters with ages between 15 and 24 years who lived in the city<sup>(9)</sup>.

Of the 29 groups, 11 groups discussed the values about achievement/success, nine about safety, confidence and future, and nine about drugs and other forms of well-being and pleasure. Not all statements were discussed in all groups. The variables "I totally agree" and "I agree" noted on the spreadsheet were grouped up for analysis using the indicator "agreement", and the variables "I disagree" and "I entirely disagree" composed the indicator "disagreement".

For the purpose of analysis, the classification of the groups was made according to the central theme of valuational statements drawn, stating the different opinions and pointing out the differences among the groups studied.

## RESULTS

### Opinion of the youngsters with regard to the values concerning achievement/success

This set of values used statements concerning human fulfillment through education and political participation, and personal success regardless of means. Eleven groups were formed consisting of 84 youngsters.

The value of education as the basis for a better future was discussed by 26 youngsters from four social

groups. Among these, all (100%) of those in Groups C and AC agreed that education ensures future. In Group AO, 87.5% value education, although a number of participants were in doubt (12.5%). Whereas in Group O, 90% of young people first expressed that education ensures future, but after discussion and group reflection this percentage decreased (76.1%). This was the only social group (O) that expressed disagreement (14.2%) and 9.5% of the youngsters remained in doubt.

In addition to discussing the values related to human achievement, the statement associated with politics/participation/political engagement (*politics is a waste of time*) was drawn and discussed among the youngsters from all social groups. Only in Group O was there agreement of 50% of the youngsters and the other 50% remained in doubt; no one in this group disagreed with the statement. However, the youngsters from Groups C, AC and AO disagreed with the statement.

To discuss the values associated with success, the statement proposed was "*the one who achieves in life is corrupt or cheats on others*" and it was discussed by the youngsters from all social groups. The statement "*everybody steals one time or another*" was discussed among the youngsters from groups AC, AO, and O. All the groups unanimously disagreed with the first statement. With regard to the second statement, 60% of the youngsters from group AC first agreed, but after discussion and reflection only 20% still agreed and 80% disagreed that "everybody steals one time or another". Among the youngsters from Groups AO, 25% disagreed and 75% expressed doubt. As for Group O, most youngsters (75%) agreed with the statement.

### Opinion of the youngsters with regard to the values concerning safety, confidence and future

The set of values was discussed by 72 youngsters, participants of nine groups, based on the themes *violence and family*.

To discuss issues related to violence, the phrases used were "*the parents have no right to beat their children*", "*sometimes you have to be violent to sort things out*", "*violence is the only way to gain respect*", "*violent films encourage violence and video games stimulate violence*".

With regard to the use of statement "*the parents have no right to beat their children*", most youngsters from the groups in regions AC and AO agreed with the statement (71.4% and 73.6%, respectively). Whereas among the youngsters from Group O, 36.3% disagreed; 36.3% remained in doubt and a smaller percentage, 27.1%, agreed with the statement.

The youngsters were against the use of violence as a mean to succeed in life (*sometimes you have to be violent to sort things out and violence is the only way to gain respect*), 80% being

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\*\* Group C had the highest concentration of single, white young adults with no children, the predominance of private households with basic sanitation, low density of residents per bedroom (1.1 to 2), fewer weekly hours of work and income of more than five minimum wages. Despite the predominance of the Catholic religion, there were a higher percentage of spiritualists in relation to other groups. Similarly, the adolescent was predominantly the child of the one responsible for the household. Most youngsters with ages between 15 and 18 years attended private high schools or college preparatory courses. As for those with ages between 19 and 24 years, they were enrolled in higher education and had more years of education. Groups AO and AC showed means that mostly ranged between Groups C and O. The Group AO, in turn, had the highest concentration of workers with an income of three minimum wages, with an average of 41-60 hours of work/week, and young adults who reported more than 60 hours per week of work. In this group there were a greater percentage of improvised domiciles. In most variables, Group O showed extreme opposite means to those from C - high percentages of young married adults with children, household heads, with delay in schooling, working over 41 hours per week, with wages up to one minimum wage, living in homes that were lent to them or they were squatters, with a density of more than three residents per bedroom, relying on alternative water supply, sewage and garbage and low rates of asset ownership. It is noteworthy that most young people in this group live in the outskirts areas of the city, surrounded by headsprings.

in disagreement with the statements with no differences among the social groups.

Most youngsters do not believe that violent films or games encourage violence (*violent films encourage violence and video games stimulate violence*), 66% in Group AC and 55% in Group AO. However, after discussion, disagreement dropped to 44.4% and 36.3% in Group O. Almost one third of the youngsters showed doubt with regard to the statement.

To discuss values related to safety, confidence and future, the statement "*I have my parents as an example*" was used to address the issue related to family. Differences were found in the opinions of the youngsters from social Group C and Group O. While 100% of the youngsters from Group C agreed with the statement, in the Group O, 54.5% agreed, and 45.5% disagreed with the statement.

### Opinion of the youngsters with regard to the values concerning drugs and other forms of well-being and pleasure

For this set of values, nine groups, totaling 73 youngsters, participated and discussed sex, licit and illicit drugs, friends, and fashion.

To discuss these values, by means of the theme related to sex, statements such as "*sex is first in terms of pleasure and using a condom is out of question*" were used.

With regard to the first statement, 88.9% of the youngsters from Group AO and 68.7% from Group O were in doubt concerning the value of sex as a form of pleasure, whereas 60% of the youngsters from Group AC agreed with the statement.

The use of condoms was supported by youngsters from Groups AC and AO; and at the end of the discussion 100% of them agreed with the statement.

To understand the values associated with the use of drugs as a source of pleasure, the statements discussed were "*using drugs is pleasurable, smoking is good, marijuana should be legalized, marijuana is good, only junkies use crack, and it might be pleasurable to lose control*".

The valuational statement "using drugs is pleasurable" was drawn in two groups from regions AO and O. Among the youngsters from Group AO, 40% agreed and 60% remained in doubt. As for those in Group O, 30% remained in doubt and 70% disagreed. That is, in region AO, the youngsters expressed greater doubt as to the pleasure afforded by drugs, tending to agree, and in region O the highest percentage disagreed and suspected that pleasure may be afforded by drugs.

To discuss licit drugs, the statement "smoking is good" was drawn in two groups from the region AC and one group from region AO. Among the youngsters from region AC, in one group, disagreement was 100% and in the other group 50% of the youngsters remained in doubt and 50%

disagreed. Among the youngsters from the only group from AO, 70% remained in doubt and 30% disagreed. That is, in region AC, there was a greater tendency for disagreement and in region AO, the youngsters mostly remained in doubt about the benefits of smoking. However, agreement was not found in neither of the groups.

The statement "marijuana should be legalized" was drawn in two groups from the region AO and in one group from the region O. In one of the groups from AO, 80% of the youngsters disagreed and 20% were in doubt; in the other group from this region 50% were in doubt, 30% agreed, and 20% disagreed. In the group of youngsters from region O, 90% of them agreed with the affirmation and 10% remained in doubt.

The statement "marijuana is good" was drawn by groups from the regions AC, AO and O. In the region AC, the youngsters from two groups shared different opinions. In one group 100% agreed and in the other group only 20% disagreed and 80% remained in doubt. In the group from region AO, 80% of the youngsters remained in doubt and 20% totally disagreed. In the group from region O, 90% of them agreed and 10% remained in doubt.

The statement "only junkies use crack" was drawn for two regions (AO, O). In AO, there were two groups – in one group, 20% were in doubt and 80% disagreed; in the other group, 20% agreed, 40% were in doubt, and 40% disagreed. As for those from region O, 50% agreed and 50% disagreed. The groups from region AO tended to disagree; and the groups from region O were absolutely divided between agreement and disagreement.

With regard to pleasure associated with the use of drugs, the statement "*it might be pleasurable to lose control*" was discussed among the youngsters from regions C, AO and O. The youngsters from Group C were the ones who mostly agreed (71%) and 29% remained in doubt. As for those in Group AO, 31.5% agreed, 37.5% disagreed, and 31.2% remained in doubt. In Group O, 80% of the youngsters remained in doubt and 20% disagreed.

With regard to pleasure obtained from friends, the phrase drawn was "*there is nothing more pleasurable than being with friends*". The youngsters from Groups C and AC reported that the pleasure of being with friends comes in first place, with agreement of 100% and 94%, respectively. As for those in Group AO, 100% disagreed. Among the youngsters from region O, 60% of them remained in doubt, 30% disagreed with the statement and only 10% agreed.

With regard to the sources of pleasure, the statement "*wearing fashionable clothes makes one feel good*" was discussed. Among the youngsters from Group C, 57.2% agreed and 42.8% remained in doubt. In the group from region AO, 88.9% disagreed and 11.1% agreed. As for Group O, all youngsters (100%) were in disagreement with the statement.

## DISCUSSION

A disbelief in education as being a guarantee for future achievement may be found among the youngsters from the outskirts regions, which may be based on the real difficulty that young poor people face to reach more advanced levels of the education and the obstacles they face to get a position in the labor market. Although there has been a steady reduction of illiteracy among the youngsters, less than 15% make it to college. This condition is directly proportional to income and higher education has been unattainable for young adults from poor families<sup>(1)</sup>. Furthermore, education is no guarantee to obtain a position in the labor market, especially in the formal market, and if we take into consideration *the positions of the less privileged strata of society, precisely those who have had late access to the highest rungs of the education system ladder*<sup>(10)</sup>.

The devaluation of politics of the youngsters from Group O may reveal a critical position of general dissatisfaction with the current political scenario (competition for corporate control, corruption, etc), but it also may express an alienated position, which places the youngsters in a position of disengagement, indifference and passivity regarding their participation in social politics, quite neglected in our contemporary times. Disengagement may be a consequence of the exaltation of individualism and of disbelief in the future<sup>(11)</sup>.

This difference in opinion may be related to the access conditions to better quality of education. A similar trend was found in a study on the Brazilian profile of youngsters that reports a directly proportional association between the level of political engagement and education<sup>(12)</sup>.

There was a significant percentage of young people who agreed with the statement "everybody steals one time or another", especially in Group O. On the one hand, this data indicates certain naturalness towards negative values, but it may also be related to the need for goods, a value that has increasingly been settling into society. Since the access to goods and products is unequal, stealing may be seen as natural, as a way to obtain the desired object and to correct social injustice. The significant changes in opinions after the discussions may denote the beginning of what seems to be a certain cultural assimilation that naturalizes theft, but through reflection the youngsters were able to exercise criticism and change their opinion.

Regarding the agreement percentage of 36.3% in Group O that parents have right to beat their children, the data may reveal that the choice for certain disciplinary actions for educating children, such as beating, is little criticized or just a natural experience for this group.

This interpretation is reinforced by a study<sup>(13)</sup> that found that dialogue was the most common practice in families of young people from different social groups

with greater access to goods when the youngsters presented recriminatory behaviors, which would represent the youngsters from Group C in the present study. Corporal punishment was mentioned more often by young people who have less access to goods, corresponding in this study to the youngsters from Groups AO and O.

Although violence is present in different social classes, there are indications that the more precarious material life conditions tend to limit the resources of the family to deal with conflict situations with their children<sup>(13-14)</sup>, as it has been shown by studies that take into account the resources families use to deal with conflicts. The latter study was conducted with parents who had higher education, some with graduate degrees, and an income of 11 to 20 minimum wages to verify how they dealt with sexual education of their young children, and found that the parents reported that they provided guidance through frank dialogue<sup>(15)</sup>. Another study<sup>(16)</sup> that conducted a research with a family who lived in precarious life conditions in the outskirts of Fortaleza (CE) found that the mother did not talk about sex because she feared that the conversation would induce her girls to initiate sexual activity.

However, with regard to corporal punishment, the result obtained was the interpretation of the youngsters' statements and not the family practices itself, which may also portray a distinct possibility of discursive elaboration on the youngsters one that allows them to filter the real relationship with their parents expressing opinions that are politically correct. Authors argue that among families who use physical punishment as a form of disciplinary act might keep the practice in secrecy as they fear social recrimination<sup>(14)</sup>.

As for the statement "I have parents as an example", the data showed that the youngsters from Group C tend to value family as the model of identification and this trend significantly decreased in Group O. We explain these results based on the conditions of social reproduction of the families. Probably the youngsters from Group C find the material conditions in their family for survival and refuge/protection<sup>(13)</sup> which makes them favor their intention to reproduce them, which does not occur with the youngsters from Group O.

The trend of devaluation of family is accentuated as we research families with less availability of symbolic and material resources<sup>(17)</sup>.

The results regarding the prioritization of sexual pleasure are consistent with a study conducted with youngsters<sup>(18)</sup> that found that sexual pleasure is not a primary value and questioned whether the emphasis on the theme by the media, academia, NGOs, and by government programs is not reflecting more social control from adults than the legitimate concerns of young people.

The unanimous defense of the use of condoms reveals that young people have been impacted by the dissemination of its use as a powerful mechanism for preventing AIDS, a result that was found in a study<sup>(19)</sup> with young people about contraception methods, which confirms that the proportion of condom use is higher among the young population.

The greatest distrust regarding pleasure afforded by the use of drugs may reveal that the youngsters from region O may know users or drug addicts in situations of distress, both as consumers and drug dealers, since the access to resources to deal with the problem comes from the conditions of social reproduction. The young people from the outskirts have been dragooned into the illicit drug trade, which offers identity, respectability, financial returns, and a “career plan” for a large portion of the socially excluded youth [...] <sup>(20)</sup>. However, this involvement brings severe consequences to this population. It has been found that [...] *among the young poor population there is greater pressure for involvement with groups of common criminals due to the facility of getting into debt with drug dealers, the police repression, and the difficulty in finding medical and psychological assistance when they face real problems with drug use and need help to control use*<sup>(21)</sup>.

Despite the disagreement regarding the beneficial effects of smoking, doubt was significant in the groups, especially in Group AO. The opinion of the young people can be the result of the regulatory policy of distribution and marketing of cigarettes in Brazil, which is different from the one directed to the production and distribution of alcoholic beverages, being one of the most aggressive strategies in the contemporary world that can only be compared to Canada in terms of protecting society from the aggressiveness of the industry. The consumption of cigarettes in Brazil reduced 43% between 1979 and 1998<sup>(20)</sup> (p. 308).

During the discussion of the statement “marijuana should be legalized” several youngsters from different social groups defended greater control of the drug trade by the state because, otherwise, people would solely depend on their own awareness and individual effort to avoid use.

Similarly, regarding the positive valuation of marijuana, the opinions were similar with high percentages of disagreement to the legalization of the drug, indicating a high degree of intolerance to the use of illicit drugs generally associated with situations of illegality and violence.

With regard to the significant disagreement of the youngsters from region O to the statement “only junkies use crack”, this position can be interpreted in the same way as the one related to pleasure arising from drugs, i.e., that the outcome from consuming and getting involved in drug dealing are more severe as the one drives into the precarious conditions of social reproduction<sup>(21-22)</sup>. Thus, we can infer that the youngsters from the outskirts region

have favored the statement for having more contact with crack users who are in problematic situations.

The idea of pleasure in losing control may also show that the different opinions reveal that distinct experiences of the social groups are directly related to their realities. For the young person with access to goods, losing control might mean a pleasurable experience, but for the young ones with less access this experience might be related to complicated situations.

The difference in value placed on the friendly relationship can be explained by the development of a trust bond among friends, which is more present among the groups who live in the more central areas<sup>(23)</sup>.

The pleasure of *wearing fashionable clothes* according to the opinion of the young people can be homogeneous because it is a widespread value since it is considered essential for the reproduction of capital. However, the results showed that wearing fashionable clothes is a real possibility for the youngsters from the central groups, but this is more remote possibility for the groups from the outskirts, expressing a contradiction that arises from social inequalities.

## CONCLUSION

Based on an interactive instrument it was possible to identify values that differ among the youngsters from different social groups and ones that do not. More heterogeneity was found in the opinions than homogeneity.

Education as a guarantee for a better future and being with friends, using drugs, losing control, being fashionable as the best sources for pleasure are not homogeneous values among the young people from different social groups. Agreement was more prevalent among those groups with greater access to goods.

Homogeneous disagreement was found regarding the benefits of cigarette consumption and homogeneous agreement was found related to the use of condoms and that the use of violence is a necessity.

On the one hand, the results indicated certain homogeneity of opinions as a consequence of generational experience, which assimilates dominant values, but on the other, heterogeneity that evidences contradictions of concrete social insertions of these youngsters.

An in-depth study on social values may contribute to better targeting public social policies expanding understanding of the social roots of youth problems and developing new educational tools for intervention. Therefore, it is believed that public social policies should encourage public discussion of values, highlighting these contradictions, based on a critical understanding that results in the development of a new culture and new sociability.

Based on the specific methodology, the results can serve as a guide to compare similar situations, although it cannot be generalized to any reality.

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