

Effects of Thinness Promoting Message from TV Media on College Women's Appearance Distortion

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify effects of thinness promoting message from TV media on college women's appearance distortion. The subjects were 408 college women and survey was done from Aug 10 to 30, 2009. Most college women wanted their height to be taller and weight to be lighter than their actual height and weight, and preferred slimmer figures. Over half of college women enjoyed fashion related TV programs more than diet or plastic surgery related TV programs. College women were classified into 3 groups of TV heavy watcher, TV medium watcher, and TV light watcher according to TV watching time. TV heavy watchers wanted their figures to be slimmer and weight to be lighter than other groups, and were affected by thinness promoting message from TV media more. TV heavy watchers of thinness promoting message related programs showed a tendency of distorting their body more and tried to agree with those TV programs more. Especially, college women agreed with plastic surgery related TV programs more than fashion or diet related TV programs. TV media producers should keep in mind those side-effects and try to show more universal and diverse figures to TV watchers.

Key words : TV media, thinness promoting message(TPM), appearance distortion.

I. Preface

The speeds of birth of culture, trends, information delivery and change are becoming faster as the world changes. It is the mass media that most affects such fast trends of culture guidance. Mass media has close connections with our lives so much as for the modern society to be called the era of mass media. Mass media performs the role of socialization tool which enables one to fast and accurately acquire phenomena not directly experienced.

We face thin figured performers in mass media on a daily basis. Thin female entertainers actually

appear prominently in dramas, movies, other entertainment programs and commercials viewed by mass media in Korea. They are depicted as very popular in the programs or from the other performers appearing together. Through Thinness Promoting Message (TMP) presented by such mass media, uniform standard of beauty is disseminating and behavioral patterns obsessed with managing bodies to meet it are displayed. A research on mass media immersion and physical image and self-esteem by Nam et al. (2009) showed the trend where teenagers accepted elaborately manipulated images in mass media as realistic physical images and pursued them as their ideals as mass media delivered the typical ideal appea-

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rances specifically and visually. Among various mass media, TV presents the standards of social comparison in various aspects in daily lives and influences the viewers' ideas, values, attitudes and behaviors as stronger and more universal cultural tool than other mass media (1996). Such influences are directly displayed through problems in nutrition. According to a research by Health Insurance Review and Assessment Service (2010), the number of gastritis patients is increasing as severe diets damage the protective functions or defensive barriers of stomach. It is shown that the number of female patients on diet are 1.6 times greater than the number of male patients smoking and drinking heavily and females in 20's are twice as many as males of the same age group. Human beings pursue more improved lives in quality than the lives of others as they compare their lives with others' lives. Our bodies are viewed more as media to express ourselves beyond the bodies for production and acts.

Kang (2006) in her research on femininity expressed in mass media said that we consistently groom our appearances as the modern social atmosphere emphasizes appearances and images. The trend is that "body make overs" derived from the reliance on plastic surgeries, diets and drugs, not physical attraction derived from healthy efforts including work outs, are increasing than the past to groom the bodies for the self expression (2006).

Prior researches (Hong & Na, 1999; Kim & Lee, 2001; Hwang & Kim, 2006) on the analysis of the effects of TV media on appearances show that TV media involvement level affects realistic-idealistic body image misalignment, middle school and high school students high in ostentatious desire are high in the level of following the clothing of TV media celebrities than that of their peers and teenagers imitating entertainers much have high interest in trends and clothing and use clothing as ostentatious tool.

Such thinness promoting messages are delivered to men by uniform messages of mass media such as "stud" or "handsome" but the effects are greater in women than men. That is, women viewers accept other women's slender figure seen through mass

media as more realistic than men do. Such prior researches were conducted around clothing and did not include variables closely related to appearances such as diets or plastic surgeries.

Therefore, this study is to investigate the effects of overall appearance related programs in TV media on the appearance distortion of female college students. The potential of the programs inducing the viewers distorted behaviors is to be investigated by including fashion, diet and plastic surgery in the characteristics of media.

II. Literature Review

1. Social Comparison Theory

As one is forced an image or forcefully compared to it by the influences of mass media, self emotion wanting to conform to the image has greater effects in the modern society. Social comparison occurs relatively easily in visual components including clothing as visual effects are great. Evaluations on a body is impossible to compare objectively as they possess characteristics relying on social contexts such as ideal aesthetics and trends which are defined as the cultural and social internal evaluations of the era. Giddens (2001) in a prior research stated that body is affected socially and Son (2005) in a prior research considered body to occupy a contradictory position as it existed and were absent at the same time objectified to norms and values of a group. Appearances were believed by some social class to not only decide individual superiority and inferiority but also successes and failures of lives and gave birth to a newly-coined word, Lookism as it propagated the social trends of excessive obsession to appearances oriented towards others (Ahn, 2006). It is shown to be primarily because the modern social conditions we live in emphasizes appearances and images. Additionally, the trend is that "beauty behaviors" regarding such appearances are becoming more obsessive and strong (Kang, 2005).

It is claimed that people have desires to objectively evaluate their own efforts, attitudes, appearances or behaviors and the evaluations on them-

selves are formed by comparing themselves with others in the absence of objective standards. This theory can be effectively used in explaining physical attraction, self-esteem and appearance maintenance behaviors (Lee, 2000). Lee (2000) showed that the basis of social evaluation was set by others and physical attraction affected various responses such as self-concept, hiring intent, interpersonal attraction, job evaluation and impression formation. In the result of the research on contrast effects in social comparison process of physical attraction, attractive stimuli were shown to have negative effects on subjects' physical attraction evaluations than unattractive stimuli (Cash, et al., 1983).

Meanwhile, the results of the research on social comparison process in appearance evaluations show that people improve self-esteem and achieve social merits by observing the appearance standards within conformity groups through social comparison and combining them with appearance maintenance behaviors such as diets and using them as tools to improve physical attraction and the social comparison processes in appearance evaluations occur through mass media or conformity groups (Bloch & Richins, 1992). People compare themselves with similar people to themselves in order to maintain their self-concept and achieve stronger will when the comparison is satisfactory and are likely to change their attitude when unsatisfactory. That is, conformity is strong towards colleagues or peer groups perceived as similar people to themselves.

Oprah Winfrey, known for feminism values and dignified life attitude fainting during her hometown visit in 2006, Luisel Ramos who did not consume food to maintain ideal figure in fashion shows falling and dying during a fashion show and the death of early teenage aspiring model in Brazil from anorexia are the results of appearance obsessed behaviors. This is a problem not only in other countries but also same for Korean women and many women said that they had had disadvantage due to their appearances (Yoo, 2005).

Modern aesthetic sense regarding physical att-

raction is related to thinness and thinness is considered as beautiful, healthy and mature and it is supported by aesthetics, psychology, medical science and mass media. Especially, mass media is further emphasizing the trends towards thinness in the modern society by frequently presenting thin images through performers. People who already feel much dissatisfaction with their bodies by repeatedly comparing and evaluating thin figured celebrities in media and themselves due to such sociocultural influences and people who value appearance aspects of evaluations of themselves are affected more by the media than others (Bae, 2006). Song (1998) in her social comparison theory conducted the research through social comparison theory from the viewpoint that levels of physical images or self-esteem would not be identical but vary as people compare with others and the results showed that physical images and self-esteem affected clothing behaviors and physical images and self-esteem were correlated. Comparison with colleagues or similar people to themselves within conformity groups were viewed as the basis for the evaluations of themselves.

2. Mass Media and Physical Image

Results of most of prior researches on effects between mass media and physical images show that media messages related to physical images emphasizing thin figure affect women's physical image satisfaction level and self satisfaction level. Typical attractive and thin images in mass media have immediate negative effects on female psychological conditions and physical satisfaction level (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995) and the more TV programs with thin figured characters female receivers watch, the stronger they show desire to have thin figure (Harrison & Cantor, 1997). Excessive efforts on diets are being made recently in Korea with social mood of preferring thin figure (Son, 2007). The results of the research from London University Health Pathology Team in England on diet behaviors with 18,512 college students in 22 countries as subjects showed that 77% of female Korean college students were trying to lose weight and it was

the highest rate of the researched countries (Ko, 2006).

Son (2001) stated that mass media acted as a type of watch authority on bodies and defined mass media to play the role of standardizing bodies uniformly. In this research, he claimed that mass media not only produced thin physical images continuously but also took the pivotal role of granting them social values and significances, inserted symbolized physical images between media receivers and social structures and created discussions. In a research by Ko & Chun (1992) focusing on power and violent effects of appearances in societies, they claim that women are distinguished from men in the sense that women define who they are within relationship with others and women decide their bodies as commercial values and consider external beauty as currency which can be used in interpersonal relationships. This is considered to be displayed because physical attractions and attitudes towards one's body have great effects on self-concept. This research determined lookism of societies as oppression as appearances themselves are analyzed to define femininity and furthermore greatly affect the formation of self-identity.

Ego of human being is categorized into physical, social and spiritual ego and among these, perception of the physical ego is expressed as physical images (Lee, 2000).

Physical images are fundamental core of self-concept and appear also in adults as evaluational components of self-concept. Physical variables such as weight and height act importantly in physical images and sometimes differentiated by gender, age, or cultural contexts (Kim et al., 2000). Physical images play a central role in the formation and expression of concept of oneself and are concentrated concepts of bodies acquired in the processes of individuals forming identity by various experiences through societies (Sung, 1997). Physical images are shown to be formed by subjective depiction of physical appearances and physical experiences, constantly change by responding to new stimuli from the environment and be closely related to self-esteem (Cash et al., 1986).

In a research by Han (2000) which points out appearances as mentioning women's problems in modern societies, politics of diets by women in our societies are investigated. It is claimed that diets are performed exhaustively in the name of self maintenance and self satisfaction and reproduce gender inequality. In a research by Shin (Shin, 1997) on the effects of mass media on women's diets, she claims that mass media internalizes ideal female body and is direct and indirect cause of promoting diets. In a research by Jung (1997) on correlation between discussions about body and media, he views media as controlling society by presenting and propagating discussions. Discussions on diets are analyzed to be the power that rules daily lives and ideas rather than the power that dominates over people.

Results of most of prior researches on effects between mass media and physical images show that media messages related to physical images emphasizing thin figure affect women's physical image satisfaction level and self satisfaction level. Typical attractive and thin images in mass media have immediate negative effects on female psychological conditions and physical satisfaction level (Heinberg & Thompson, 1995) and the more TV programs with thin figured characters female receivers watch, the stronger they show desire to have thin figure (Harrison & Cantor, 1997).

3. Mass Media Exposure and Appearance Distortion

Jung (1997) who claimed that prior researches in Korea were mostly about mass media and physical images and physical dissatisfaction and discussions on bodies were put forward and propagated by media in the center viewed diet discussions as power that ruled daily lives and ideas. In a research by Baek (1998) on types and reporting methods of diet discussions in newspaper articles, it is stated that diet discussions are formed in the level of health and beauty and their forms of expression are detailed and dispersed in expertise.

Kang (2005) claims that the role of mass media is almost equivalent to that of public education

in the post-80's new generations that grew up under heavy influences from visual media and the balance between beauty displayed externally and beauty of internal character is destroyed due to the commercial aspect of mass media and obsession for beauty and lookism are prevalent through mass media. Therefore, thinness promoting messages are viewed as causing physical dissatisfaction by internalization of perception of idealized physical shape and standardization of thin bodies and obsessively presenting efforts to control weight.

According to the TV monitoring results report from Korean Womenlink, ratio of female performers with thin figure is 42.3% compared to 14.8% for male performers and females in charge of celebrity entertainment programs with mostly entertainers, drama, educational programs and even news all appeared with thin figures (Bae, 2006).

Percy & Lautman (1994) analyzed the sizes of models in fashion magazines from 1940's to 1980's and the result showed that the body sizes of the models gradually decreased and the trend was becoming clear that thin bodies were preferred more and more. The result of the study on the models in magazines and advertisements of the past 30 years also showed that women in mass media were becoming thinner. Magazine subscriptions and TV viewing are related to food consumption disorder scores and physical dissatisfaction for women and dissatisfaction towards the figures is displayed when one has fat body type or physical size becomes bigger. These results show that thinness promoting messages presented by mass media including TV raise ideal standard of thinness and women are dissatisfied with their physical images or negatively evaluate the bodies as they agree with it.

III. Research Method

1. Research Problem

Research problems for this study are set as following.

First, physical characteristics of female college students are investigated.

Second, levels of TV mass media exposure of female college students are investigated and female college students are categorized according to them.

Third, age, physical characteristics, appearance distortion level and TV media program agreement characteristic of the female college students categorized according to the TV media exposure level are investigated.

2. Research Subjects

Subjects of this study are 500 female college students in Chunbuk region universities. Questionnaires were distributed from August 1, 2009 to August 23, 2009 and 420 questionnaires were retrieved. 408 questionnaires from the retrieved responds were statistically analyzed excluding ones responded insincerely. College students between the ages of 18 and 23 were majority with 82.4%.

3. Measurement Tools

Total 5 Questions were on the ages and physical characteristics of the study subjects. Physical characteristics were about actual height and weight and ideal height and weight and they were filled out in free description format. Total 3 questions were to measure the exposure levels to appearance related TV media and written in 5 point scale on the degree of watching fashion, diet and plastic surgery related programs. Researches by Yoon & Lee (2002) and Bae (2006) were referenced for questions measuring levels of distorting appearances influenced by thinness promoting messages. Total 12 questions were written in 5 point scale asking the level of distorting their appearances after watching fashion, diet and plastic surgery related TV media programs. Additionally, 3 questions on the agreement

<Table 1> Age of Subjects

Age	Frequency(person)	Percentage(%)
18-20	168	41.2
21-23	168	41.2
Over 24	72	17.6
Total	408	100.0

level to the contents of fashion, diet and plastic surgery related programs were written in 5 point scale.

4. Analysis Method

SPSS PC (Ver 12.0) is used for the analysis.

First, frequencies, percentages, averages and standard deviations were calculated and BMI (Body Mass Index) were calculated using heights and weights to investigate age distribution and physical characteristics. BMI is an obesity measurement method measuring the amount of fat using height and weight and the actual values and the ideal values were calculated, compared and analyzed. Second, *t*-test was conducted to investigate the differences between the actual height, weight and BMI and the ideal height, weight and BMI. Third, one-way ANOVA was conducted and Duncan's multiple range test was conducted as post-hoc tests to investigate differences in the levels of appearance distortion and agreement in female college student groups categorized by levels of appearance related TV media program watching.

IV. Research Result and Discussion

1. Physical Characteristics of Research Subjects

The test results of the differences between the actual height and weight and the ideal height and weight of the research subjects were shown in the <Table 2>. The average actual height of the female college students was 161.95cm but their idea of the ideal height was 166.50cm and they hoped to be taller than their actual height. The average weight of the female college students was 52.22kg but their idea of the ideal weight was 48.91kg and it was shown that they

wanted lighter weights. This shows that female college students want to be taller and thinner than their actual height. The result of the comparison of the actual and the ideal values of BMI showed that female college students wanted to look thinner. That is, the ideal height of female college students is taller than the actual heights and the ideal weight is lighter than the actual weight, especially below 50kg. According to the average height data of people born between 83 and 87 from 2007 Korean Physical Measurement Survey (Korean Physical Measurement Survey, 2004), the average height of Koreans as of 2007 was 161.9cm which was close to the result of this study.

2. Viewing Appearance Related TV Media Programs

Analysis of fashion, diet and plastic surgery related TV media program viewing degree is shown in <Table 3>. 51.5% of the female college students sometimes watched fashion related TV programs and 6.8% of the female college students responded that they had consistently watched programs. However, the female college students sometimes watching diet or plastic surgery related programs were 46.1% and 43.6% respectively which were lower than the ratio of the female college students sometimes watching fashion related programs. Ratios of consistently watching diet or plastic surgery related programs were also lower than the ratio of consistently watching fashion related programs and the ratio of not watching at all was higher. That is, it can be seen that the ratio of watching fashion related programs was higher than the ratios of watching diet or plastic surgery related programs among the appearance

<Table 2> Differences between Actual Values and Ideal Values of Physical Variables (n=408)

Classification Variables	Actual (Standard Deviation)	Ideal (Standard Deviation)	<i>t</i>
Height(cm)	161.95 (5.18)	166.50 (2.98)	-19.04***
Weight(kg)	55.22 (5.31)	48.91 (2.78)	14.21***
BMI	19.91 (1.82)	17.65 (1.09)	25.89***

*** $p < 0.001$.

<Table 3> Degree of Watching Appearance Related Mass Media Programs (n=408)

Degree of Watching		Statistical Values	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Fashion	1. Do not watch at all.		91	22.3
	2. Watch sometimes.		210	51.5
	3. Watch frequently.		79	19.4
	4. I have a program watching consistently.		25	6.1
	5. I always check the schedule of the program watching consistently and also watch reruns.		3	0.7
Diet	1. Do not watch at all.		184	45.1
	2. Watch sometimes.		188	46.1
	3. Watch frequently.		30	7.4
	4. I have a program watching consistently.		6	1.5
	5. I always check the schedule of the program watching consistently and also watch reruns.		0	0.0
Plastic Surgery	1. Do not watch at all.		175	42.9
	2. Watch sometimes.		178	43.6
	3. Watch frequently.		39	9.6
	4. I have a program watching consistently.		13	3.2
	5. I always check the schedule of the program watching consistently and also watch reruns.		3	0.7

related mass media programs.

<Table 4> shows the result of the categorization of female college students by degree of appearance related TV media watching from high watching group with high degree of watching to indifferent low watching group.

The female college student group from (average - standard deviation=1.50) to (average+standard deviation=2.25) was categorized as the medium watching group with the average (1.88) and the standard deviation (0.38) of degree of appearance related TV media program watching

as the standard. The group watching more than (average+standard deviation) was categorized as the high watching group and the group watching less than (average - standard deviation) was categorized as the low watching group. The result was that the medium watching group accounted for 63.7% of the female college students, the high watching group 21.8% and the low watching group 14.5%.

3. Characteristics of Categorized Female College Student Groups

<Table 4> Categorization of Female College Students by Degree of Appearance Related TV Media Watching (n=408)

Statistical Values Classification	Degree of Watching Score Range	Frequency (Person)	Percentage (%)
High Watching Group	2.50-5.00	69	21.8
Medium Watching Group	1.50-2.25	280	63.7
Low Watching Group	1.00-1.25	59	14.5

<Table 5> Differences in Age and Physical Variables of Categorized Female College Student Groups (n=408)

Groups		Low Watching Group (Standard Deviation)	Medium Watching Group (Standard Deviation)	High Watching Group (Standard Deviation)	Total (Standard Deviation)	F
Age		21.20(2.09)	21.53(2.31)	21.00(1.98)	21.37(2.22)	2.13
Actual	Height	162.54(6.10)	162.00(5.04)	161.40(4.90)	161.95(5.18)	0.89
	Weight	53.45(6.25)	52.38(5.10)	50.96(5.06)	52.22(5.31)	4.26
	BMI	20.17(1.60)	19.97(1.86)	19.56(1.79)	19.91(1.82)	2.36
Ideal	Height	166.34(3.09)	166.45(2.30)	166.74(4.36)	166.50(2.98)	0.41
	Weight	49.54(2.94)A	49.04(2.84)A	48.08(2.23)B	48.90(2.77)	5.99**
	BMI	17.19(1.12)A	17.71(1.05)A	17.32(1.09)B	17.65(1.08)	6.37**

*** $p < 0.001$.

Note) Alphabets are results of Duncan's multiple range tests.

The results of the analysis of the differences in age and physical variables of female college student groups categorized by the level of appearance related TV media watching are shown in <Table 5>.

No significant difference existed in the ages, actual height and weight, BMI and idea of ideal height among female college groups categorized by the level of appearance related TV media watching but significant differences existed in the idea of ideal weight and BMI. That is, the idea of ideal weight and BMI were small in the group heavily watching appearance related TV media programs, thus preferring thin weight and thin figure. The female college student group heavily watching appearance related TV media was shown to be affected more by thinness promoting messages than the medium or the low watching groups and it was the same context as

the results of researches by Lee (2002) and Bae (2006).

The results of the analysis of the differences in the degree of distortion of one's own appearance after watching fashion, diet or plastic surgery related TV media programs in the categorized female college student groups are shown in <Table 6>. Significant differences in the degree of distortion of one's own appearance after watching appearance related TV media programs existed among the female college students categorized by the level of TV media watching. The degree of appearance distortion was higher in the group heavily watching appearance related TV media programs than the medium or the low watching groups. Especially, the degree of distorting fashion related appearances was highest, followed by plastic surgeries and diets in the order.

<Table 6> Degree of Appearance Distortion in Categorized Female College Student Groups

Groups	Low Watching Group	Medium Watching Group	High Watching Group	Total	F
Fashion	3.53(1.01)B	3.97(0.87)A	4.02(0.84)A	3.92(0.90)	6.83***
Diet	2.37(1.08)C	3.12(1.17)B	3.55(1.18)A	3.11(1.21)	18.38***
Plastic Surgery	2.98(1.11)C	3.57(0.98)B	3.89(0.86)A	3.56(1.01)	15.36***

*** $p < 0.001$.

Note) Alphabets are results of Duncan's multiple range tests.

〈Table 7〉 Level of Agreement with TV Media in Categorized Female College Student Groups

Appearance \ Groups	Low Watching Group	Medium Watching Group	High Watching Group	Total	F
Fashion	1.53(0.63)C	2.25(0.67)B	3.01(0.99)A	2.31(0.87)	72.82***
Diet	1.86(0.88)C	2.38(0.97)B	2.85(1.08)A	2.41(1.02)	18.37***
Plastic Surgery	2.75(1.36)B	3.77(1.13)A	3.82(1.13)A	3.36(1.22)	19.96***

*** $p < 0.001$.

Note) Alphabets are results of Duncan's multiple range tests.

The results of the analysis of the differences in the level of agreement with TV media in categorized female college student groups are shown in 〈Table 7〉. Significant differences in the degree of agreeing with appearance related TV media programs existed among the female college students categorized by the level of TV media watching. The degree of agreeing with TV media programs was higher in the group heavily watching appearance related TV media programs than the medium or the low watching groups. Especially, the level of agreeing with plastic surgery related TV programs was higher than the level of agreeing with fashion or diets. It is inferred that vicarious gratification is achieved by psychologically agreeing as it is easy for female college students to wear fashion clothing or go on diets easily to conform to appearance related TV programs but harder to have plastic surgery easily.

V. Conclusion and Suggestion

In this study, it is attempted to investigate the effect of the thinness promoting messages of TV media on appearance distortions of female college students and the potential of inducing distorted behaviors and supply basic data for TV media programming and policy directions. The results of this study are as follows.

First, the ideal height of female college students is taller than the actual heights and the ideal weight is lighter than the actual weight. The ideal value of BMI was also much lower than the actual value. Especially, over 165cm of height and weight below 50kg were desired.

Second, about over 50% of the female college students watched fashion related TV programs and among appearance related TV media programs, the ratio of watching fashion related programs were higher than the ratio of watching diet or plastic surgery related programs. The female college students were categorized into high watching group, medium watching group and low watching group by the average and standard deviation of the level of appearance related TV media program watching. The level of watching of the medium watching group included 63.7% of the female college students when limited from (average - standard deviation) to (average + standard deviation). The high watching group accounted for 21.8% and the low watching group accounted for 14.5%.

Third, the idea of ideal weight and BMI were small in the group heavily watching appearance related TV media programs, thus preferring thin weight and thin figure and they were affected more by thinness promoting messages. Additionally, the female college student group heavily watching appearance related TV media programs had the highest level of distorting appearances related to their own fashion and the level of agreement especially with plastic surgery related TV media programs was higher.

As seen above, the ratio of female college students watching appearance related TV media programs is on a higher side and the appearance related TV media programs give female college students who are highly interested in the appearances distorted idea on appearances or heavily affect them to agree with appearance related TV media programs. Therefore, experts programming appearance related TV media programs must make

an effort to appoint performers with various physiques so the female college students who are entering their physical and psychological growth and maturity stage do not pursue distorted physiques. In addition, efforts should be made by appointing chubby figure models or average figure performers in fashion shows or appearance related TV media programs to abolish lookism so the viewers do not pursue distorted appearances.

The limitations of this study are that the research subjects are female college students in Chumbuk region universities and that the measurement tools created by the same researchers are used. Additionally, as the scales for the levels of watching programs were by subjective judgments and not by objective measurements of actual viewing time. Objective researches through experiment treatment should be conducted in future studies. Additionally, interest levels in both men and women should be measured and broadened.

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