

Political Communication on Facebook: Comparing the República Portuguesa and La Moncloa pages

Priscila Minussi¹

ABSTRACT

The citizens' weakened confidence in politics has encouraged political actors to establish direct communication with them. As social media platforms grow in popularity, political institutions have been using them for more autonomy in public communication. This study analyses the use of Facebook, the most popular social media worldwide, by República Portuguesa, the government of Portugal, and La Moncloa, the government of Spain. First, a literature review on social media use by governments is presented. Then, the results of a manual categorization of a sample of posts published throughout January 2021 are presented. The posts were categorized according to DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison's (2018) typology of government social media communication, which consists of information provision, input seeking, online dialogue/offline interaction, and symbolic presentation. The article provides an understanding of the use of each governmental party's Facebook posts as a communication tool.

Keywords: Comparative political communication, Government communication, Facebook, La Moncloa, República Portuguesa.

¹ Master's student, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Porto, Portugal, email: priscilaminussi@gmail.com

1 INTRODUCTION

Surveys have shown the European citizen's growing scepticism towards politics: they express not only dissatisfaction with the democracies they live in (Alliance of Democracies, Rasmussen Global, & Dalia Research, 2018) but also little trust in political institutions (Ferrín-Pereira, 2012). Despite recognising the limitations and flaws of democracy, their expectations towards democratic institutions and their demands for accountability and greater political participation only increase (Coicaud, 2019).

The role and influence of the media in this apparently contradictory scenario should not be ignored. Media has failed to support an ethically and politically "authentic atmosphere of informed discussion" (Coicaud, 2019, p. 115) while it continues to influence public opinion, the political agenda, and modern political communication (Swanson, 2004). As social media use grows (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b), political institutions are attracted by the new media and the promise of more autonomy in political content creation and sharing. Through government social media communication, political actors are building a direct channel of communication with citizens and progressively resorting to professionalised political communication and marketing strategies (Negrine, et al., 2007).

1.1 Literature review

The benefits of social media for governments include greater efficiency, accountability, and citizen involvement and trust (Picazo-Vela, Gutiérrez-Martínez, & Luna-Reyes, 2012).

On one hand, studies show that the transformation of social media strategies can lead to an increase in citizen engagement in political activism (Sandoval-Almazán & Gil-Garcia, 2014) and that interactions on social media between government and citizens do affect citizens' perception of government transparency, efficiency, and corruption (Feeney & Welch, 2016; Valle-Cruz, Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2016).

On the other hand, social media has been broadly criticized not only by scholars and politicians but by society in general, especially since the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018.

Vaidhyanathan (2018), author of *Antisocial media: How Facebook disconnects us and undermines democracy*, is one of the main critics of social media. Vaidhyanathan (2018) argues that Facebook is engineered to promote content that conforms to and reinforces people's beliefs instead of content that differs from one's personal beliefs. In sum, the author explains that Facebook was not created to invigorate democratic discussion and attitudes among citizens, but to promote content that causes strong reactions on the users and to display personalised content that only reinforces one's own beliefs and opinions.

Besides, Vaidhyanathan (2018) points out Facebook's focus on self-promotion and self-presentation. Since the content published on profiles and pages is carefully selected by its owners and managers, the goal is not the promotion of complex discussion and accurate portrayal of reality.

In fact, it is used mostly for presenting and promoting public figures, groups and/or organizations. Thus, Facebook is not a platform in which a real connection and citizen empowerment thrive.

Although Vaidhyanathan (2018) believes that Facebook destabilizes more than enhances deliberative politics, its potential for connecting people and governments should not be underestimated. People worldwide spend many hours a day on social media (European Commission, 2020a, 2020b), increasing the chances of people reading and watching governmental content and news on social media rather than on traditional media, such as TV or radio.

1.2 Theoretical framework

There is a lack of comprehensive efforts to map and systematize research on government social media. Although there is literature review in the e-government field, it tends to fall short of focusing specifically on the changes that social media brings to the communication between government and citizens (Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). The most recent literature on social media in government has predominantly focused on Web 2.0 or Government 2.0 concepts (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2013).

DePaula, Dincelli e Harrison (2018) contributed to the research on government communication on social media through the creation of a typology. It consists of four categories: information provision, input seeking, online dialogue/offline interaction, and symbolic presentation. All four categories are divided into types of communication, which are thoroughly described in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of definition and coding rules for each type of communication

| | |
|---|--|
| Information provision | |
| | Public service announcements: Providing recommendations for safety, public health, and well-being (e.g., “check your heat for the winter”; “eat vegetables”; “don't smoke”). |
| | Operations & events: Content related to operations of the agencies, programs and/or policy, as well as event information. Must have date/ time or link to more information. |
| | Social sharing: Provision of content related to the mission of the department but not in regards to its operations or policies. Informative content that may be of interests to others (e.g., a news article about global warming from the Environmental Department). |
| Input seeking | |
| | Citizen information: Explicitly asking for feedback on a topic, participation in a survey or poll. Seeking input to help solve a crime, but where the response to input is not clear. |
| | Fundraising: Posts that refer to fundraising efforts or are asking for donations and contributions to a cause. Need not be directly related to the agency's mission. |
| Online dialogue/ Offline interaction | |
| | Online dialogue: Response by the department to a user comment on a department post. |
| | Offline discussion: Event to discuss particular policy issue, creating a forum for discussion, and/or invitation to the community to meet government officials. |
| | Offline collaboration: Asking individuals to become involved |

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| | in a government-related activity; help carry out or volunteer for a project, program of the government department. |
| Symbolic presentation | |
| | Favourable presentation: Seeks attribution of likability, competency or worthiness. Reporting of positive activity performed by the department, with positive imagery or self-referential language of gratitude (e.g. “we have the best”; “we accomplished so much this year”). |
| | Political positioning: Taking a clear stance on a political issue (e.g., “rights of women should be supported”; “marriage equality law should be passed”). |
| | Symbolic act: Expressing congratulations, gratitude, condolences. It includes the celebration of holidays or trivia questions; references to cultural symbols (e.g. 4th of July, football game). |
| | Branding & marketing: Elaborate presentation of features (e.g. in video production) of item or service, including a list of prices and/or qualities of an item with intention to attract individuals to acquire. |

Source: table adapted from DePaula, Dincelli e Harrison (2018, p. 102).

Information provision is a one-way communication strategy that provides accurate public information to people (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018). It is usually associated with transparency. Within this category, there are three types of communication: operations & events, public service announcements, and social sharing. Operations & events consist of factual content disclosed by the government about activities, such as policy changes, program details, and event announcements. Public service announcements are messages that aim at raising public awareness about an issue or to persuade citizens to act and improve the public well-being (Shoemaker, 1989, as cited in DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018, p. 99). Social sharing is a form of providing factual and valuable information related to the mission of the political institution but without reference to government actions (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018).

Input seeking is a form of requesting feedback from governments’ stakeholders and, potentially, the public at large (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018). This category reflects the interest on the part of the government in understanding its constituency, possibly leading to an improvement of public services. Briefly, the intention behind this category is to obtain information from citizens. Examples include asking people to answer a survey or to make donations. Within this category, there are two types of communication: citizen information and fundraising. The former represents the request for information from citizens and the latter represents the request for donations (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018).

Online dialogue/offline interaction is two-way communication between governments and citizens (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018). Such interaction has the potential of consolidating the relationship and collaboration between both actors. It is understood as a networking strategy of social media communication (Mergel, 2013, as cited in DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018, p. 100), in which citizens are enabled to get involved in the creation of public services through an online dialogue or offline interaction, such as offline meetings and activities of collaboration and discussion of public service. Overall, it enhances the level of participatory and direct democracy. Within this category, there are online dialogue, offline discussion, and offline collaboration. These

three types of communication respectively represent dialogue in digital platforms, references to external activities of engagement and discussion, and invitations for co-creating government services (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018).

Symbolic presentation consists of impression management, the construction of an identity through the conveyance of symbolic content (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018). Within this category, there is favourable presentation, political positioning, symbolic act, and branding & marketing.

Favourable presentation refers to the government's intent to create a specific image of the organisation and influence the citizen's perception of it (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018). Through this approach, governments seek the attributes of likability, competency, and worthiness: likability is promoted through messages that boast about one's qualities while competency is nurtured by self-promotion, and worthiness is "sought via exemplification of certain facts" (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018, p. 100). Favourable presentation is a type of impression management and public relations, a way of promoting the political institution (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018).

Political positioning refers to the expression of political positions of political identity. DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison (2018) distinguish favourable presentation from political positioning: the first reports positive activity performed by the institution with positive imagery or the self-referential language of gratitude while the latter is a clear stance on an issue.

Symbolic act consists of expressions of congratulations, gratitude, and condolences (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018). For instance, the celebration of holidays or cultural symbols. It is related to the exchange of cultural references and the use of images that are not explicitly or strictly political (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018).

Branding & marketing is the presentation of features of an item or service in a way that attracts people into acquiring it (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018). It requires a development of the organizational identity and branding, and persuasive rhetoric focused on beneficial claims and sales offers. "Although the use of branding and marketing by governments may be limited, these activities can serve many useful purposes, including attracting stakeholders to obtain a specific product or service, as well as promotion of a particular municipality itself" (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018, p. 101).

Similarly to Vaidhyathan's (2018) point of view, DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison (2018) argue that a great portion of the government's use of social media is for symbolic and presentational purposes. Social media are not tools for democratic transparency and citizen participation only, but mostly "tools for self-presentation, the exchange of symbolic gestures, and the marketing of products and services" (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018, p. 99).

2 METHODOLOGY

This study analyses the government communication on the República Portuguesa, the Portuguese national government, and La Moncloa, the Spanish national government, Facebook pages. Through an analysis of the text, visual, and audiovisual contents of the posts published between January 1st, 2021 and January 31st, 2021, the posts were manually categorized according to DePaula, Dincelli, and Harrison's (2018) framework. Since the Spanish government published 102 posts while the Portuguese government published only 51 throughout January 2021, I created a sample of 51 randomly selected posts from La Moncloa.

Expectedly, messages can present "information beyond the denotative value of the text" (Watzlawick et al., 1967, as cited in DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018, p. 102), which means that posts are prone to being double coded, to fit into two categories or types of communication. This applies especially when analysing Facebook, a platform that allows posting texts without character limits and attaching images, videos, and links. The plurality of messages expressed in a single post led to some posts being double coded. Yet, I attempted to apply the categories as mutually exclusive as possible to prevent too many double coded posts.

An example of double coding are posts categorized as symbolic acts, which usually are a form of meta-communication that references cultural values, and as favourable presentation, which reports positive activity performed by the government. Since symbolic messages are not neutral, they tend to present a favourable image of the government as well.

Overall, this research aims to understand the communication with citizens that both governments are trying to establish through Facebook. The case study was chosen as the research method since it allows an in-depth analysis of the objects of study (Pardal & Correia, 1995). The case study is a fruitful method for social sciences research (Coutinho, 2018) and, although it does not allow a generalization of the findings, it represents a potential starting point to future research, to thorough investigations.

Quantitative and qualitative analyses were carried out. Both analyses were complimentary and represented a productive exploration of various aspects of the objects of study: regarding the qualitative analysis, a sample of Facebook posts was categorized within the DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison's (2018) typology of government social media communication; and regarding the quantitative analysis, the results of the categorization of the posts sample were calculated and resumed in graphics.

The research questions are:

Q1: To what extent can the sample of the Facebook posts of the República Portuguesa and La Moncloa be categorized within DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison's (2018) framework?

Q2: Which is the dominant category on each Facebook page?

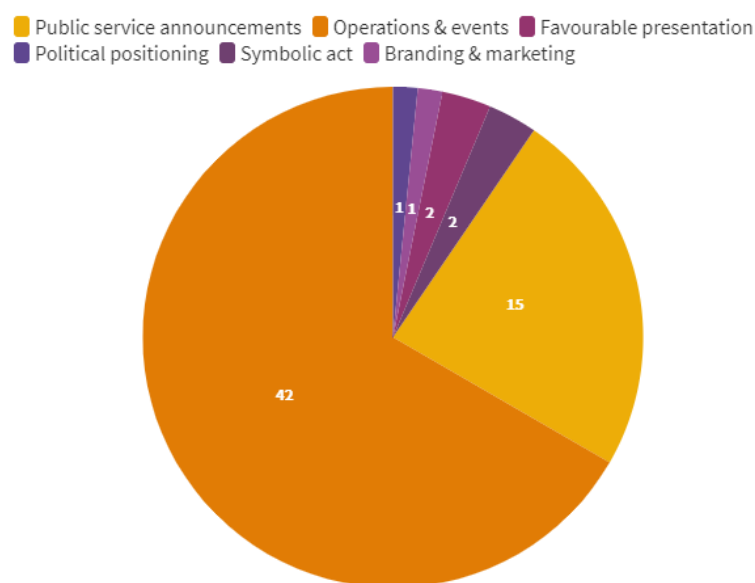
Q3: What similarities and differences can be observed across both Facebook pages?

3 RESULTS

The La Moncloa Facebook page was created on January 2nd, 2012, shortly after Mariano Rajoy became the Prime Minister of Spain. Rajoy was the Prime Minister until June 2018, when Pedro Sánchez, the current Prime Minister, took office. The La Moncloa Facebook page has been used continuously since January 2012.

Graphic 1 presents the extent to which the different categories and types of posts were used by La Moncloa on Facebook throughout January 2021. A total of 102 posts were published, from which only a sample of 51 posts was analysed.

Graphic 1: Quantity of posts across the categories of communication from the La Moncloa page



Source: created by the author.

From the total 51 analysed posts, 49 posts (96.07%) are categorized as information provision: 42 (82.35%) are categorized as operations & events and 15 (29.41%) are categorized as public service announcements.

The posts categorised as information provision refer mostly to the Covid-19 measures, statistics, and vaccination plan in Spain. These posts have a variety of formats: ranging from live streaming of press conferences with health authorities to images and videos presenting safety recommendations. The latter always presents links to the government's website that provides more information on the coronavirus. Other posts refer mainly to Storm Filomena, a cyclone that hit Spain in early January 2021 and caused unusually heavy snowfall, and to updates on national public policies.

From this same sample, 4 posts (7.84%) are categorized as symbolic presentation: 2 (3.92%) posts are categorized as favourable presentation, 2 (3.92%) are categorized as symbolic act, 1 (1.96%) post is categorized as political positioning, and 1 (1.96%) post is categorized as branding & marketing.

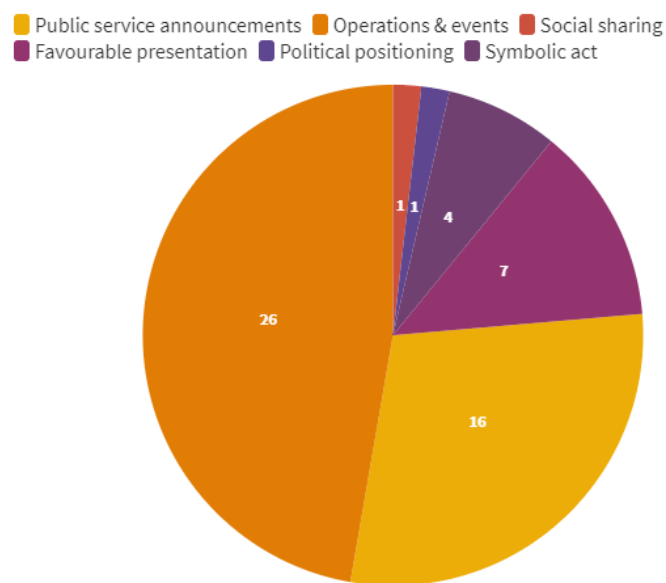
No posts are categorised as input seeking neither as online dialogue/offline interaction.

A total of 12 posts are double coded: 8 posts are double coded as operations & events and public service announcements; 1 post is double coded as symbolic act and public service announcements; 1 is doubled coded as favourable presentation and operations & events; and 2 posts are double coded as symbolic presentation and information provision. Therefore, percentages exceed 100%.

The República Portuguesa Facebook page was created on March 26th, 2020 and has been updated since then.

Graphic 2 presents the extent to which the different categories and types of communication were used by the República Portuguesa on Facebook throughout January 2021, when a total of 51 posts were published.

Graphic 2: Quantity of posts across the categories of communication from the República Portuguesa page



Source: created by the author.

From the total posts, 41 posts (80.39%) are categorized as information provision: 26 (50.98%) are categorized as operations & events, 16 (31.37%) are categorized as public service announcements and 1 (1.96%) is categorized as social sharing.

The posts categorised as information provision refer mostly to the Covid-19 measures, statistics, and vaccination plan in Portugal. These posts have a variety of formats: ranging from live streaming of press conferences with health authorities to images and videos presenting safety recommendations. Most of these posts do not present a link to the official website for more information on the coronavirus. Many posts refer to the Portuguese presidency of the Council of the European Union, which runs from January 1st to June 30th, 2021, and are categorised as information provision and/or symbolic presentation. At last, a few posts were dedicated to public policies and the Portuguese presidential election, held on January 24th, 2021.

From the total posts, 11 (21.56%) posts are categorized as symbolic presentation: 7 (13.72%) posts are categorized as favourable presentation, 4 (7.84%) posts are categorized as symbolic act and 1 (1.96%) post is categorized as political positioning.

The posts categorised as symbolic presentation refer to a variety of topics: the Covid-19 vaccine, Portuguese presidency of the Council of the European Union, grief for the death of a Fado² singer and the International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

No posts are categorised as input seeking neither as online dialogue/offline interaction.

A total of 4 posts are double coded: 1 post is double coded as operations & events and favourable presentation, which means it is also double coded as information provision and symbolic presentation; 1 post is double coded as symbolic act and favourable presentation, 1 post is double coded as operations & events and public service announcement, and 1 post is double coded as operations & events and social sharing. Therefore, percentages exceed 100%.

3.1 Discussion

All 102 analysed posts fit DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison's (2018) typology.

It was found that most posts present information about government operations, policies and, especially, information on the Covid-19 pandemic. This result reflects previous findings that government use of social media is mostly for information provision purposes (DePaula, Dincelli, & Harrison, 2018; Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Mergel, 2013; Zheng & Zheng, 2014).

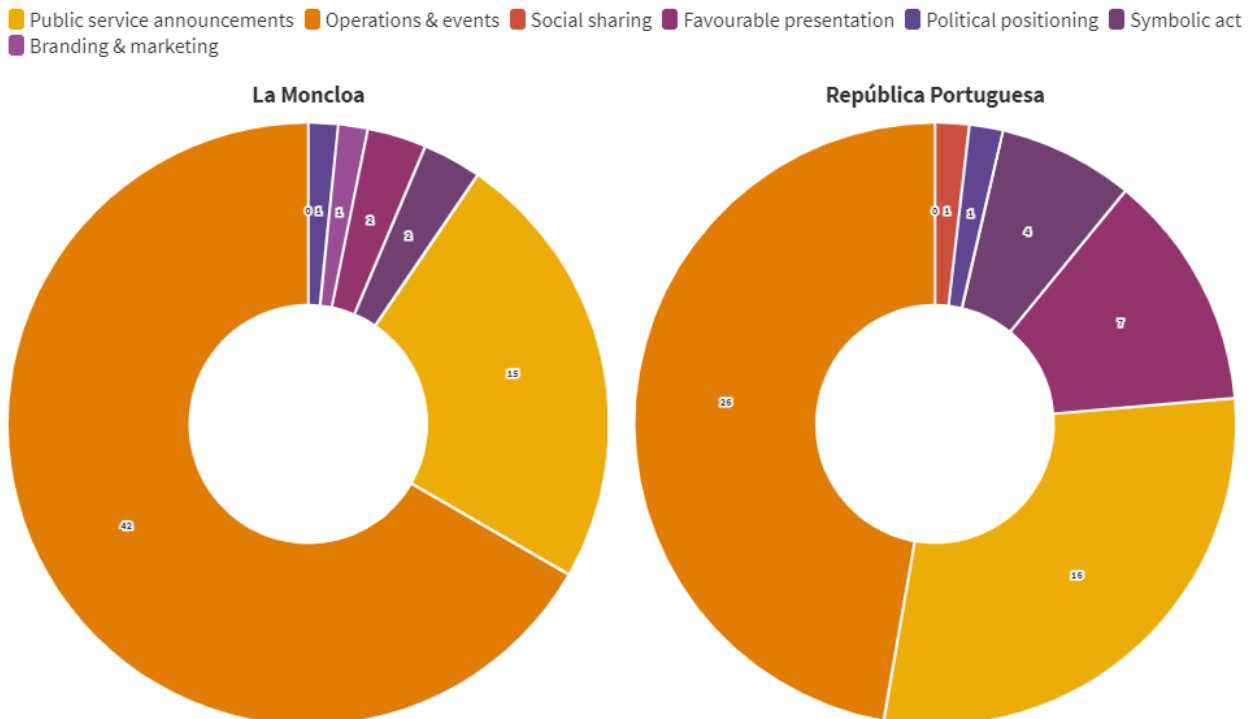
Consistently with DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison's (2018) and Vaidhyanathan's (2018) research, the results enhance the idea that Facebook is less a tool of collaboration and interaction than a tool for self-presentation and symbolic acts.

Notwithstanding the disparity in the average of published posts per day, the proportional use of types of communication are somehow similar between both Facebook pages: information provision is the most used type of communication while symbolic presentation is the second one. None of the pages published input seeking neither online dialogue/offline interaction posts.

As for the categories, the similarities linger: operations & events is the most used category, followed by public service announcements. Social sharing, favourable presentation, political positioning, and symbolic act represent together less than 25% of the analysed posts from both pages.

Yet, it was observed that the República Portuguesa had many more symbolic acts posts (21.56%) than La Moncloa (7.84%). Figure 1 contrast the results from the analysis of both pages.

² Fado is Portugal's most famous music genre.

Figure 1: Quantity of posts across the categories on the Spanish and Portuguese pages

Source: created by the author.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Understandably, the findings of this research cannot be generalised or applied to other objects of study. Still, the findings support Vaidhyathan's (2018) and DePaula, Dincelli and Harrison's (2018) perspectives that social media, particularly Facebook, do not foster a true connection between citizens and politics. It is acknowledged that the coronavirus situation in Portugal and Spain in early 2021 might have influenced the quantity of posts dedicated to providing information to citizens through social media. Yet, Facebook seems to be less used for deliberative politics and more for self-presentation and self-promotion purposes.

It is believed that the investigation carried out in this thesis contributes to the development of the government's use of social media research. Considering the increasing limitations Facebook imposes on the collection of data, this research presented constructive frameworks based on previous research for Facebook pages analysis. Although it is acknowledged that Facebook constantly changes its features, the frameworks resumed in this thesis could be used and adapted for further research.

The limitations of this study include the impossibility of accessing and gathering a large amount of Facebook data and posts as well as accessing the Facebook analytics tool, which is only available to the managers of the pages. Since the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018, Facebook announced stronger surveillance of applications that collect information on the platform, such as Netvizz – a widely known tool used in previous investigations (Bastos & Walker, 2018). Therefore, it was

not possible to conduct an automated analysis neither to access the analytics data of the República Portuguesa and La Moncloa pages.

Overall, this thesis represents a contribution to the comparative political communication research field. Since comparative political communication is connected to cultural comparison, its value lies in the fact that one observation alone has no meaning unless it is compared with other observations (Pfetsch & Esser, 2004). Therefore, the results of this investigation are potentially useful for further comparative studies of different objects of study.

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