

Attitudes towards marriage and cohabitation

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Of all the milestones in life, couple formation is among the most momentous. Its repercussions, whether positive or negative, can be enormous. It is typically the key pre-requisite for parenthood, and can also result in step-parenthood. The relationship may also break down—a situation that is likely to engender considerable turmoil, stemming not only from the breakdown process itself, but also from the stressful negotiations, pathways and reactions of others that this process typically generates.

Over the past few decades, couple formation patterns have changed dramatically in Australia and other Western countries. Although most people get married at some stage, marriage rates have declined, and those who enter marriage do so later in life, often having lived together before they marry.¹ As indicated in the “Family Statistics and Trends” article in a previous issue of the *Family Relationships Quarterly* (Weston & Qu, 2007), the proportion of all Australian couples who are living together outside marriage—here called “cohabiting”—increased from 6% in 1986 to 15% in 2006 (i.e. 20 years later). Cohabitation rates among partnered men and women increased across all age groups during this period. Given the delays in getting married these days, it is not surprising that most people under the age of 25 who are living with a partner are cohabiting.

Conversely, ABS censuses of the population indicate that marriage rates have been falling progressively over the past 35 years. The proportion of the Australian population aged 15 years or over who were in a registered marriage at the time of the Census fell from 65% in 1971 to 58% in 1986, and to just under 50% in 2006. Indeed, there are only two national Census periods in which less than half the population aged 15 years or over was married—the first one ever taken by the Commonwealth of Australia (in 1911) and the most recent one.

To what extent does the decline in marriage rates over the past few decades reflect changing attitudes to marriage and cohabitation? Are we seeing a high proportion of young adults in particular rejecting the institution of marriage and adopting the view that cohabitation is acceptable for partners who have no intention of marrying each other? Do men and women share the same views on these matters?²

This article examines the views of men and women in general and people in different age groups on whether: “Marriage is an outdated institution” and “It is alright for an unmarried couple to live together even if they have no intention of marrying”. The analysis is based on data from Wave 5 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, conducted in 2005.³ Respondents aged 15 years and over were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with these statements on a scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. Other ratings between these extremes of intensity were not given labels, but the mid-point (4) would suggest that a respondent neither agreed nor disagreed—here referred to as holding mixed feelings about the issue in question.

In analysing these data, we were particularly interested in identifying the proportion of people who felt strongly about these issues, but we also wanted to simplify the results as much as possible. We therefore reduced the set of seven ratings to five classifications by combining ratings of 2 and 3 (here taken as reflecting moderate disagreement) and ratings of 5 and 6 (taken as reflecting moderate agreement).

Attitudes towards marriage

Table 1 sets out the proportions of respondents who indicated different levels of agreement or disagreement with the statement: “Marriage is an outdated institution”. The first column of percentages shows the pattern of responses for all respondents, the second and third summarise the responses of all men and all women respectively, and the remaining set of columns present the patterns of responses provided by the different age groups (men and women combined).

- 1 In this article, “marriage” refers to a registered marriage.
- 2 These questions are not meant to imply an assumption that the decline in marriage rates has been entirely offset by the increase in cohabitation rates. In fact, overall partnership rates have declined across all age groups from at least 1986, although the pace of decline has slowed (see Birrell, Rapson, & Hourigan, 2004; Weston & Qu, 2007).
- 3 HILDA is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). It is managed by a consortium that is led by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne. The other members of the consortium are the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). For a description of HILDA, see Watson & Wooden (2002).

Table 1. Attitudes towards marriage by gender and age, HILDA 2005 survey

"Marriage is an outdated institution"	All	Men	Women	Age (years; men and women combined)						
				15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
%										
Strongly disagree	37.8	34.4	40.9	30.9	33.7	33.3	31.3	38.3	49.1	56.2
Disagree somewhat	32.7	33.6	31.9	37.1	35.8	36.1	35	32.6	25.9	21.9
Mixed feelings	14.1	14.8	13.4	18.3	14.7	14.1	17.5	14.3	9.8	7.8
Agree somewhat	11.2	12.0	10.4	10.9	11.5	12.6	12.1	10.1	10.9	9.0
Strongly agree	4.2	5.1	3.3	2.8	4.3	3.8	4.1	4.7	4.3	5.2
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>99.9</i>	<i>99.9</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>99.9</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.1</i>
No. of observations	11,344	5,293	6,051	1,063	1,737	2,042	2,313	1,759	1,232	1,198

Notes: Patterns of responses varied significantly according to gender and age ($p < .01$ for both sets of comparisons). Total percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Most men and women disagreed with this statement (68–73%), and the remainder were fairly evenly split between agreeing (14–17% of the total sample of men and women) or holding mixed feelings (13–14%). In other words, most believed that marriage is *not* an outdated institution—thereby suggesting widespread endorsement of marriage. Indeed, a substantial proportion of men and women strongly disagreed with the statement, which can be interpreted as strong endorsement of marriage. Patterns of responses varied significantly according to gender, with a higher proportion of women than men indicating strong disagreement with the statement (41% vs 34%). At the same time, the substantial proportion of men and women who agreed with, or held mixed feelings about, the statement that marriage is an outdated institution should not be ignored (27–32%).

Table 1 also suggests widespread endorsement of marriage across the age groups. Around two-thirds to three-quarters of respondents in each age group disagreed with the statement that marriage is an outdated institution, with 31–56% strongly disagreeing. Mixed feelings were expressed by 8–18%, while much the same proportions of respondents in each age group agreed with the statement (14–16%).

The results for the different age groups are further simplified in Figure 1, which shows the proportions of respondents who disagreed somewhat or strongly. These proportions are "stacked" so that the overall percentage of respondents in each age group who disagreed (somewhat or strongly) is also made apparent.

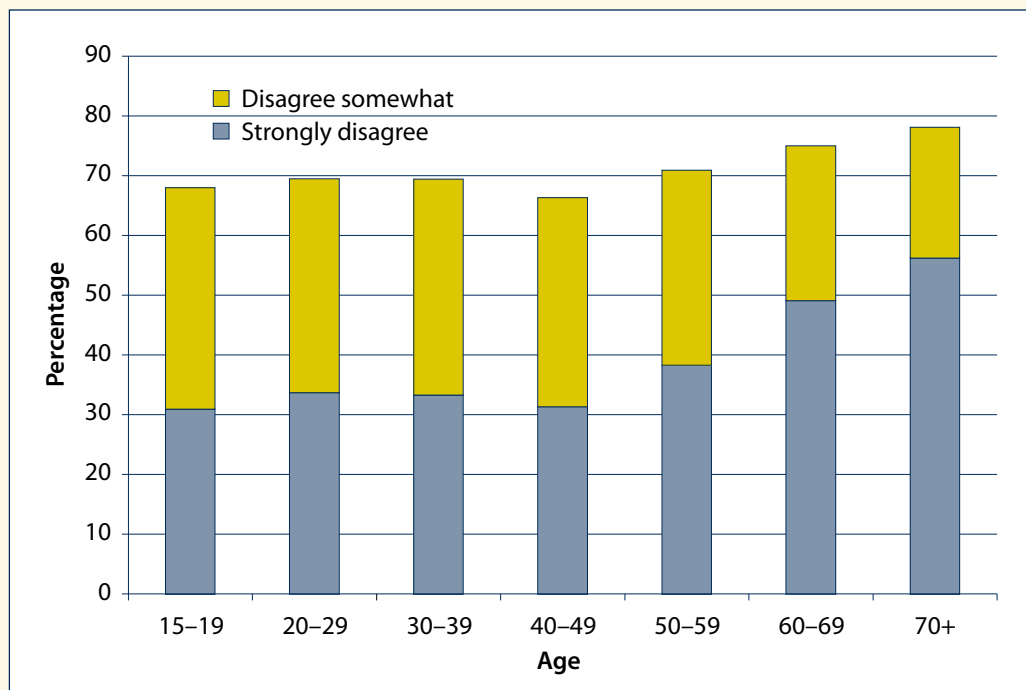


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who reported strong or moderate disagreement with the statement "Marriage is an outdated institution", HILDA 2005 survey

Given the continuing rise in cohabitation that is apparent in Australia, particularly among young people, it might be expected that the tendency to reject the notion that marriage is an outdated institution would be lowest among the youngest group and highest among the oldest group. On the other hand, young adults would be the least likely to have experienced divorce—an experience that may lead a person to become sceptical about the institution of marriage. Conversely, the two oldest groups grew up in an era when cohabitation or having a child outside wedlock were typically seen as unreservedly disgraceful behaviour and the stigma attached to marital separation or divorce was also far stronger than it is today. Although these groups would have been in their 30s and 40s when the *Family Law Act 1975* was introduced, it could be anticipated that their lifetime experiences might lead them to be the most likely of all age groups to express strong endorsement of marriage as an institution.

As expected, rejection of the notion that marriage is an outdated institution was most prevalent among the respondents who were aged 70 years or over (78%), followed by those aged 60–69 years (75%). In fact, close to half or more in these groups, and no more than 40% in younger groups, strongly rejected this view. The lowest rejection rate emerged among those aged 40–49 years, although differences in trends for this group and other groups under 60 years old were not statistically significant. Indeed, the patterns of responses apparent for the four youngest groups (from teenagers to age 40–49 years) were very similar.

Attitudes towards cohabitation

Table 2 summarises the responses to the statement: “It is alright for an unmarried couple to live together even if they have no intention of marrying”. The results suggest that most people accept living together in the absence of any intention to marry. Specifically, 65–69% of men and women agreed with this statement, 20–21% expressed disagreement, and 10–11% indicated mixed feelings about it. The patterns of responses provided by men and women were similar, although a slightly higher proportion of men than women believed that such behaviour was unacceptable (19% vs 13%).

Table 2. Attitudes towards cohabitation by gender and age, HILDA 2005 survey

“It is alright for an unmarried couple to live together even if they have no intention of marrying.”	Age (years; men and women combined)									
	All	Men	Women	15–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70+
	%									
Strongly disagree	10.4	9.8	11.0	5.3	8.7	8.0	8.5	9.1	14.7	22.3
Disagree somewhat	10.2	9.6	10.8	8.9	8.0	7.0	7.3	11.8	15.1	18.2
Mixed feelings	12.1	11.2	13.0	12.0	6.6	8.3	11.5	13.5	17.4	20.9
Agree somewhat	33.5	36.2	31.0	33.0	31.0	33.8	38.1	35.4	34.1	25.2
Strongly agree	33.7	33.2	34.2	40.7	45.8	42.9	34.6	30.2	18.8	13.4
<i>Total</i>	<i>99.9</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>99.9</i>	<i>100.1</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.1</i>	<i>100.0</i>
No. of observations	11,315	5,278	6,037	1,060	1,727	2,039	2,308	1,760	1,232	1,189

Note: Patterns of responses varied significantly according to gender and age ($p < .01$ for both sets of comparisons). Total percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Table 2 also shows that views on cohabitation varied across age groups. About three-quarters of those under 50 years old expressed strong or moderate agreement with the statement (73–77%). For the older groups, the proportion agreeing with the statement declined progressively as age of the group increased—a trend that can be more easily seen in Figure 2 than Table 2. Approval of cohabitation where couples do not intend to marry was reported by 66% of respondents aged 50–59 years, 53% of those aged 60–69 years, and only 39% of those aged 70 years and over.

Table 2 also shows that the oldest respondents (aged 70 or more years) were the most likely to disapprove of such behaviour (41%), followed by those in their 60s (30%), while 14–20% of respondents in other age groups expressed disapproval. Similarly, mixed feelings were most commonly expressed by the oldest group, followed by the second oldest group (21% and 17% respectively, compared with 7–14% of younger respondents).

These results can also be examined in terms of how unanimous or divided opinions were within an age group. The oldest respondents tended to be evenly divided on the issue, with 39% accepting such living arrangements and 41% disapproving of them. All other groups were more likely to approve than disapprove of these arrangements,

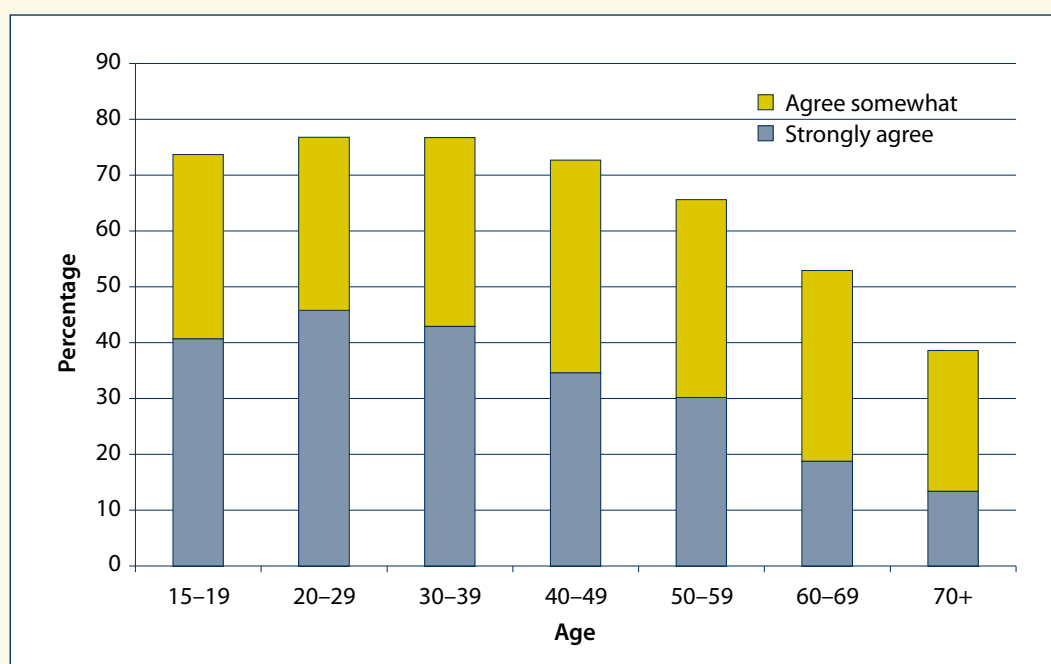


Figure 2. Percentage of respondent who reported strong or moderate agreement with the statement “It is alright for an unmarried couple to live together even if they have no intention of marrying”, HILDA 2005 survey

although the difference was greatest for those under 50 years old (of those under 50 years old, 73–77% approved and 15–17% disapproved).

To what extent have views about cohabitation changed?

The discrepancies between age groups in attitudes to cohabitation may reflect either changes in attitudes as people mature or differences between groups that will be retained over time owing to the different lifetime experiences of those born in different decades. The first of these alternatives would suggest that, as they grow older, people become less tolerant of cohabitation (at least where there is no intention to marry). The second alternative is related to the fact that most of those under 25 years old who are partnered are likely to be cohabiting rather than married, whereas those in their 70s grew up in an era when cohabitation was rare and received strong social condemnation.

However, many people who were once opposed to cohabitation are likely to develop greater tolerance of this arrangement as it becomes increasingly common. In other words, those who grew up in an era when cohabitation received marked social disapproval (the older people) would have greater opportunity than others to experience a change in views to accommodate this new reality. To what extent have views changed about the acceptability of cohabitation where there is no intention to marry? This question is examined through reference to the Australian Family Values Survey, conducted in 1995. Following the latter analysis, the results of an even earlier study (the Family Formation Project, conducted in 1971) that throws light on Melbourne-based married women’s attitudes to cohabitation in general are also discussed.

Like the HILDA 2005 survey, the Australian Family Values Survey 1995 examined views about the acceptability of a man and woman living together without planning marriage. In reporting on the results of the latter survey, de Vaus (1997) provided the percentages of respondents aged 20 and over who disapproved of such arrangements. These results are depicted in Figure 3, along with those for the HILDA 2005 survey.

Three key differences between the trends in the two surveys concerning disapproval of cohabitation in the absence of any intention to marry are worth noting. It seems unlikely that such differences could be entirely due to variations in the methodologies of the two surveys.

Firstly, there was little difference between the two surveys in the rate of disapproval concerning this arrangement among respondents who were in their 20s (16–17% disapproved) or in their 30s (19% in 1995 and 15% in 2005 expressed disapproval). For older age groups, the rate of disapproval was higher in the 1995 survey than in the 2005 survey—a difference that was greatest for those aged in their 50s and older. Specifically, for the 1995 and 2005

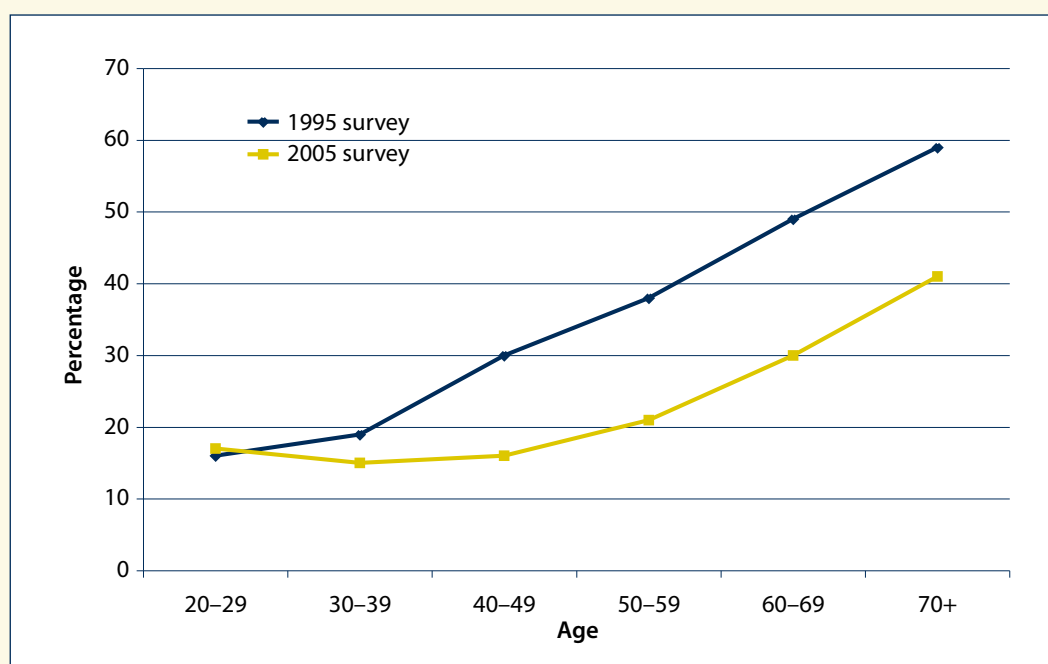


Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who expressed disapproval of couples living together if they have no intention of marrying, by age and year of survey

surveys respectively, rates of disapproval were expressed by: 30% and 16% of those in their 40s; 38% and 21% of those in their 50s; 49% and 30% of those in their 60s; and 59% and 41% of those aged 70 years and older.

Secondly, while in the 2005 survey there was little difference in the proportions of respondents in their 20s, 30s and 40s who expressed disapproval about this arrangement, in the 1995 survey, the rate of disapproval increased sharply after age 30–39 years.

Thirdly, the difference in views across the age groups was lower for the 2005 survey than for the 1995 survey. In other words, there appeared to be greater consensus in 2005 among the different age groups than was apparent a decade earlier. This greater consensus is characterised by the lower opposition to cohabitation (in the absence of any marriage intention) among older groups in the more recent than earlier survey.

The other survey of note is Family Formation Project 1971.⁴ In this survey, married women who lived in Melbourne were asked how they would feel if they had a son of twenty who announced that he was going to cohabit with a girl (i.e., live with a girl without marrying her first). They were then asked whether they would feel more upset, less upset or react in much the same way if it were their daughter rather than son who indicated this intention. It should be noted that the sample included a substantial proportion of young adults (34% were aged under 30 years), because the median age at first marriage was historically low at the time of this survey (21 years for women and 23 years for men (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 1980)).

In reference to their son's announcement, 68% indicated that they would be "extremely horrified", "considerably upset" or that they would "consider they failed as a parent in his upbringing". In addition, 52% of respondents reported that they would be more upset if their daughter reported such intentions, while 44% indicated that their reactions would not differ, and only 2% said that they would be less upset if their daughter rather than son indicated such intentions. It is worth noting that this survey focused on cohabitation per se, and did not take into account whether or not there was any intention to treat cohabitation as a trial marriage or as part of a plan involving subsequent marriage.

While the results for the 1971 survey focused on married women in Melbourne only, comparison of these results with those of the HILDA 2005 survey suggest that attitudes about cohabitation have changed markedly over the last 35 years or so, in line with the increasing trend towards cohabitation.

⁴ This 1971 survey was conducted by the Australian National University (Department of Demography). Relevant information about the project is available at the Australian Social Sciences Data Archives (ASSDA) website: <http://assda-nesstar.anu.edu.au/webview>

Summary

This analysis has largely focused on views expressed in the HILDA 2005 survey about whether: (a) marriage is an outdated institution, and (b) it is acceptable for couples to cohabit if they have no intention of marrying. Comparisons were made of the views of men and women and of respondents of different ages. In addition, in order to assess the extent of change in attitudes about cohabitation over time, the age-related results concerning cohabitation that were apparent in the HILDA 2005 survey were compared with those that emerged in a 1995 survey. Finally, results of a 1971 survey of Melbourne-based married women concerning attitudes towards cohabitation in general were outlined.

In the 2005 survey, most men and women, and most respondents in all age groups (from teenagers to those aged 70 years and over), rejected the notion that marriage is an outdated institution. In other words, endorsement of marriage appears to be widespread. Nevertheless, most people also appeared to approve of couples living together in the absence of any intention of marrying. Only about two in ten disapproved of such an arrangement. Not surprisingly, there appeared to have been considerably less tolerance of this arrangement in 1995, and there is evidence that, in 1971, cohabitation per se was considered to be a scandalous arrangement—at least by married women who lived in Melbourne.

While men and women in the 2005 survey held similar views on marriage and cohabitation, opinions differed according to age. Older respondents were more likely than younger respondents to reject the notion that marriage was an outdated institution and to disapprove of couples cohabiting if they have no intention of marrying. Nevertheless, it appears that the greater tolerance of such an arrangement in 2005 compared with 1995 was most apparent for those aged 50 years and older. Indeed, there was little difference between the 1995 and 2005 surveys in the rates of disapproval among those who were in their 20s and 30s.

At the beginning of this article, we posed three questions: (a) To what extent does the decline in the marriage rate over the past few decades reflect changing attitudes to marriage and cohabitation? (b) Are we seeing a high proportion of young adults in particular rejecting the institution of marriage and adopting the view that cohabitation is acceptable for partners who have no intention of marrying each other? and (c) Do men and women share the same views on these matters?

Despite the decline in the marriage rate, there is widespread endorsement of marriage as an institution. Nevertheless, a substantial minority did not indicate clear endorsement of marriage. Given that in the 1950s and 1960s marriage was an almost universal experience in the life course, it seems reasonable to argue that there is some evidence of an erosion of the value attached to marriage. Secondly, most people approve of cohabitation in the absence of any intention of marrying and there is evidence that outright disapproval rates have fallen, except for those under the age of 40 years. Disapproval rates for these younger age groups were already low (less than 20%) in 1995.

The common acceptance of both marriage as an institution and of cohabitation in the absence of any intention to marry is consistent with the diversity of couple formation trends apparent today. If young people's endorsement of marriage provides any indication of future trends in couple formation, it would appear that marriage is here to stay. However, the picture is not entirely positive. It has been argued that "marriage has evolved from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige" and "is sometimes a capstone" (Cherlin, 2004, p. 855). Cherlin also observed that some people may not be able to achieve marriage even if they wish to do so. Consistent with this view, Birrell et al. (2004) found that in Australia men with low socioeconomic status are particularly less likely than others to be married.

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