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Measuring adolescents' perceived social competence in career education: A longitudinal study with Portuguese students

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Abstract

Social competence is a multidimensional construct with an important role in adolescents' career development. It allows the establishment of positive relations with adults and peers, the acquisition of information and feedback relevant to career exploration and decision-making, and it helps to cope with day-to-day challenges, by the adoption of positive social behaviors. This study aims to present and discuss the Portuguese adolescents' perceptions about their social competence to deal with interpersonal situations in career education situations. Participants were 880 adolescents, 512 girls (58.2%) and 368 boys (41.8%), aged 11 to 20 years old ($\mu=14.40\pm 1.49$), attending the 8th (N=495), 10th (N=198), and 11th (N=187) grades, at elementary and secondary schools, in the northern, central and southern Portugal. Adolescents' were administered the Perceived Social Competence in Career Scale (PSC-Car; Araújo, Teixeira, & Candeias, 2008), as part of a broader longitudinal project titled "Career and Citizenship: Personal and contextual conditions for ethical questioning of life-career projects". PSC-Car is a self-report instrument which consists of six subscales related to perceived social competence in each of six hypothetical career education situations and two other subscales related with perceived poor or excellent performance and in all of those situations. PSC-Car was administered in three different assessment moments, with an intermission of six months each. Results indicate statistical significant differences in the double date situation subscale, when comparing the T1 and T2, and in the friend counselor situation, and in the poor performance subscales, when comparing the T1 and T2, and the T1 and T3 assessment moments. Statistical significant differences were also found in the double date situation' subscales considering the 8th, 10th and 11th grades. No statistical significant differences were found considering boys and girls. Implications are discussed for the development of educational and career guidance and counseling interventions within scholar contexts.

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1. Introduction

Career development is an important process of the individual development, which has an increased importance in adolescence, since is during this period that most of the young students make their first career decisions and face their first difficulties in those decision-making processes. For that reason, having a set of core skills can be

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important in order to solve life-problems. Social intelligence and social competence can be examples of those core skills. Social intelligence, one of the most researched topics in Psychology, is the result from the interaction between the individual and the social context. This construct can be defined as the ability to solve social problems and has been associated to educational, professional and social success (Gardner, 1999; Goleman, 2006; Stenberg & Gricorenko, 2003), allowing individuals to adapt to the social and cultural changes that take place in educational and professional environments (Candeias, 2008). According to Greenspan (1981), social intelligence is a sub domain of social competence and both have common aspects in the successful tasks accomplishment taken by individuals.

1.1. Social competence in education and career development

Social competence is a multidimensional and interactive construct. It includes a set of personal, social, cognitive and emotional dimensions, which interact between them (Lemos & Menezes, 2002). This complexity makes social competence difficult to define. Nevertheless, over the past decades, several studies have emphasized the role of social competence in children and adolescents' individual development, and have been proposed various definitions of this construct. White (1959) defined social competence as an organic ability to interact effectively with the environment. O'Malley (1977) argues that social competence is characterized by productive and mutually satisfying interaction between children and peers and adults. According to Vaughn and Hogan's model (1990), socially competent behaviors are the result of the interaction between the relation with peers, social cognition, behavioral problems and efficacy social abilities. Robin and Rose-Krasnor (1992), consider social competence can be defined as the ability to achieve personal goals in social interactions, while maintaining positive relations with others over time and across contexts, simultaneously. More recently, Lemos and Menezes (2002) have defined social competence as the set of learned behaviors that are socially accepted and that allow individuals to interact effectively. The numerous definitions of social competence presented in literature place greater emphasis on one of three factors affecting its outcomes - the relationships, the skills and the others - depending on the authors' theoretical perspectives. Throughout this article we adopt the definition of Candeias (2008), which is supported by a number of previous studies, including Ford (1986, 1995), Gresham and Elliot (1990) and Greenspan and Driscoll (1997). Candeias (2008) considers that social competence is the person's ability to analyze thoughts, feelings and behaviors of his/herself and the others, and to select and implement the emotional, cognitive and behavioral resources which are more suitable to deal with specific personal and social situations.

During childhood and adolescence, social competence assumes great importance in the educational and scholar contexts. Results from previous studies indicate that there are significant differences between students with lower and higher levels of social competence. These studies suggested that lower levels of social competence are associated with negative social behaviors, low academic achievement, difficulties in adapt to different contexts and changes and peer rejection (Bryan, 1982; Gresham, 1981; Gresham & Reschly, 1986). Besides that, academic competence appears to be a central developmental task for students, and it is an important indicator of adapted social functioning (Lemos & Menezes, 2002).

In adolescence, social competence becomes important to the improvement of and commitment within intimate relationships, and to help individuals operating within a network of relationships (Englund, Levy, Hyson, & Sroufe, 2000). Despite that, since it is in this stage of human development that students of different societies have to make their first career choices, we believe that social competence is also important for career purposes. In fact, social competence plays an important role in adolescents career development, since it allows them to establish positive relations with adults and peers, receive information and feedback important to career exploration and decision making processes, and to face the daily challenges when adopting appropriate behaviors in their social relationships. In fact, over the past decades skills like communication, team work, initiative, assertiveness, resilience, resistance to frustration and emotional control, have won an increasingly importance and became essential for individuals educational and professional achievement (Barnes & Sternberg, 1989; Goleman, 2006; Stenberg & Gricorenko, 2003). Concepts like cooperation, assertiveness and self-control seem to be dimensions of social competence (Lemos & Menezes, 2002). Career behaviors are considered relational acts, and are better understood within specific interpersonal contexts (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004). Besides, career education activities are often developed in the mode of joint action with significant others (e.g., peers, family, teachers, counsellors, community members), and requiring individual's social competence.

In this study we aim to assess how the Portuguese girls and boys, attending 8th, 10th and 11th grades, perceive their social competence to deal with interpersonal situations within career education situations, according to three assessment moments (T1, T2 and T3).

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Participated in this study 880 students, 512 girls (58.2%) and 368 boys (41.8%), aged between 11 to 20 years old ($\mu=14.40\pm 1.49$), attending the 8th (N=495), 10th (N=198), and 11th (N=187) grades, at elementary and secondary schools, in the northern, central and southern Portugal. Table 1 presents participants' socio-demographic characteristics.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample

Participants	N Freq. (%)	Sex		Age	
		Girls (%)	Boy (%)	M (SD)	Min-Max
8 th grade	495 (56.3%)	265 (30.1%)	230 (26.1%)	13.25 (.250)	11-15
10 th grade	198 (22.5%)	132 (15.0%)	66 (7.5%)	15.33 (.541)	14-17
11 th grade	187 (21.3%)	115 (13.1%)	72 (8.2%)	16.46 (.749)	15-20
Total	880 (100%)	512 (58.2%)	368 (41.8%)	14.40 (1.47)	11-20

2.2. Measure

In this study the Perceived Social Competence in Career Scale (PSC-Car; Araújo, Taveira, & Candeias, 2008) was administrated to assess young students' perceptions about their social competence to deal with interpersonal situations within career education situations. PSC-Car has six hypothetical interpersonal brief situations (Homework, Double date, Leader, Friend counselor, Parents' meeting, and Student visitor situations), and asks individuals to answer to four questions about the situations' perceived ease/difficulty (e.g., "This situation would be difficult to me", "This situation would be easy to me") and their perceived performance to deal with them (e.g., "In this situation my performance would be poor" and "In this situation my performance would be excellent"), according to a five points Likert type scale (from "Never" to "Always"). Despite the six hypothetical situations, there are two additional subscales that allow assessing the individuals' perception about their performance (Poor and Excellent) across situations. PCS-Car is based on the processual, experiential and contextual concepts of human competence and is focused in intrapersonal and interpersonal domains (Candeias, Rebocho, Pires, Franco, Barahona, Charrua, Oliveira, & Beja, 2008).

2.3. Procedure

Students fulfilled the Perceived Social Competence in Career Scale (PSC-Car; Araújo, Taveira, & Candeias, 2008) in three different moments, with an intermission of six months: at the beginning (T1) and at the end (T2) of the school year 2010/2011, and at the beginning (T3) of the school year 2011/2012. The completion of PSC-Car occurred in the classroom, with the presence of a psychologist researcher of the project and a school teacher, for about 20 minutes and after obtained the parents' informed consents. The study presented here is part of broader longitudinal project entitled "Career and citizenship: personal and contextual conditions for ethical questioning of life-career projects²", developed with young people in elementary and secondary school from northern, central and southern Portugal, which aims to assess adolescents' cognitive and social skills, self-concept, and involvement in the different life-roles through elementary and secondary education, as well as, educational contexts' variables which can promote or frustrate these potential skills and attitudes in adolescence.

2.4. Analysis

² Project financed by FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, and Programa Compete (PTDC/CPE-CED/098896/2008).

Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard-deviation, minimum and maximum, were developed considering the different assessment moments, and also sex and school grade variables. A multivariate analysis of repeated measures (MANOVA) was conducted on the scores of the eight dependent variables (Homework, Double date, Leader, Friend counselor, Parents’ meeting, and Student visitor situations, and Poor and Excellent performance), considering time, sex and school grade. Time (T1, T2 and T3) is a within-subjects factor, and sex and school grade are between-subjects factors. Sex is a two level group variable (girls and boys) and school grade is a three level variables (8th grade, 10th grade, and 11th grade). The multivariate F values were followed by multiple comparisons, considering the assessment moments and school grade, conducted through the Bonferroni post-hoc tests. Data were computed with the statistical software IBM PASW Statistics, version 19.0 for Windows. Statistical significance was considered at $\alpha=.05$ level.

3. Results

The descriptive results obtained for the global sample, in each social situation, indicate a decreasing in the mean values obtained by participants, in the three assessment moments. This trend occurs in the Homework, Double date, Leader, and Friend counselor situations, and also in excellent and poor performance subscales. The exception happens in the Parent’s meeting situation, where there is a decrease in the mean values between the first and the second assessment moments (T1: 13.98; T2:13.65), followed by an increase between the second and the third assessment moments (T2: 13.65; T3:13.66), as well as, in the Student visitor situation, where there is an increase in mean values between the first and the second assessment moments (T1:13.85 T2: 13.87), followed by a between the second and the third assessment moments (T2:13.87; T3:13.77). Table 2 presents the descriptive results obtained considering the global sample.

Table 2. Descriptive results: global sample

Factor	Situation	T1		T2		T3	
		M (SD)	Min-Max	M (SD)	Min-Max	M (SD)	Min-Max
Global	Homework situation	14.49 (2.88)	4-20	14.34 (2.77)	5-20	14.37 (2.74)	4-20
	Double date situation	14.42 (3.23)	4-20	14.15 (3.06)	4-20	14.04 (3.23)	4-20
	Leader situation	23.78 (3.20)	4-20	13.69 (3.08)	4-20	13.64 (3.33)	4-20
	Friend counsellor situation	14.83 (3.09)	6-20	14.32 (3.14)	4-20	14.30 (3.48)	4-20
	Parents’ meeting situation	13.98 (3.27)	4-20	13.65 (3.22)	4-20	13.66 (3.48)	4-20
	Student visitor situation	13.85 (3.19)	4-20	13.87 (3.07)	4-20	13.77 (3.30)	4-20
	Poor Performance	23.43 (3.67)	9-30	22.71 (4.02)	9-30	22.62 (4.42)	6-30
	Excellent Performance	20.90 (3.93)	8-30	20.70 (4.00)	6-30	20.60 (4.29)	6-30

Regarding sex, in the three assessment moments, girls obtained mean results higher than those registered by boys, in almost all the career situations. The exceptions are found in the Leader Situation in which boys registered mean values in the three assessment moments (T1: 14.00; T2: 13.85, T3: 13.78), higher than the mean values obtained by girls (T1: 13.61; T2:13.567; T3:13.55), and also in the Student visitor situation, where the boys achieved higher means values (T1: 14.09; T2:13.89) than girls (T1: 14.08; T2: 13.69) in first and second assessment moments. Table 3 presents the descriptive results obtained by sex.

Table 3. Descriptive results by sex

Factor	Situation	Variable	T1		T2		T3	
			M (SD)	Min-Max	M (SD)	Min-Max	M (SD)	Min-Max
Sex	Homework situation	Girls (n=512)	14.57 (2.72)	6-20	14.34 (2.78)	5-20	14.54 (2.72)	6-20
		Boys (n=368)	14.39 (3.09)	4-20	14.34 (2.76)	6-20	14.13 (2.76)	4-20
	Double date situation	Girls (n=512)	14.86 (3.03)	5-20	14.34 (3.03)	5-20	14.36 (3.23)	4-20
		Boys (n=368)	13.81 (3.39)	4-20	13.89 (3.09)	4-20	13.60 (3.19)	4-20
	Leader situation	Girls (n=512)	13.61 (3.09)	4-20	13.57 (3.03)	4-20	13.55 (3.33)	4-20
		Boys (n=368)	14.00 (3.34)	4-20	13.85 (3.15)	4-20	13.78 (3.32)	4-20
	Friend counsellor situation	Girls (n=512)	15.23 (2.93)	6-20	14.59 (3.07)	4-20	14.50 (3.48)	4-20
		Boys (n=368)	14.26 (3.21)	6-20	13.94 (3.20)	6-20	14.02 (3.45)	4-20
	Parents’ meeting situation	Girls (n=512)	14.08 (3.26)	4-20	13.69 (3.20)	4-20	13.83 (3.34)	4-20
		Boys (n=368)	13.84 (3.29)	4-20	13.59 (3.25)	4-20	13.42 (3.66)	4-20

Student visitor situation	Girls (n=512)	13.67 (3.20)	4-20	13.85 (3.04)	4-20	13.82 (3.12)	4-20
	Boys (n=368)	14.09 (3.16)	6-20	13.89 (3.11)	4-20	13.72 (3.54)	4-20
Poor Performance	Girls (n=512)	23.98 (3.47)	14-30	22.98 (3.96)	13-30	23.16 (4.48)	6-30
	Boys (n=368)	22.67 (3.79)	9-30	22.34 (4.09)	9-30	21.86 (4.23)	6-30
Excellent Performance	Girls (n=512)	20.99 (3.96)	8-30	20.76 (3.84)	6-30	20.71 (4.49)	6-30
	Boys (n=368)	20.77 (3.88)	8-30	20.60 (4.21)	6-30	20.44 (4.00)	6-30

Regarding the school grade, the 8th grade students obtained higher mean values, compared with the other two school grades in the Leader (T1: 13.98; T2: 13.82; T3: 13.81) and Student visitor situation (T1: 14.08; T2: 14.00; T3: 13.91) over the three assessment moments. They also achieved mean results higher than the results of the 10th and 11th students' school grades in the Parent's meeting situation (T1: 14.12; T3: 13.83) and in the Excellent performance (T1: 21.15; T3:20.91) in T1 and T3 assessment moments, but not in T2, in which students of 10th grade obtained higher mean values. Students in 10th grade obtained higher mean values in the three assessment moments in Poor performance (T1: 23.59; T2: 23.23; T3: 2.72), and also in the Friend counselor situation (T1: 15.05; T2: 14.68) and Homework situation (T1: 14.73; T2: 14.84) but only the T1 and T2. Finally, the 11th grade obtained higher mean values in the Double date situation, but only in the T1 and T3 (T1: 15.00; T3: 14.19).

Table 4 presents the descriptive results obtained by age group.

Table 4. Descriptive results by school grade

Factor	Situation	Variable	T1		T2		T3	
			M (SD)	Min-Max	M (SD)	Min-Max	M (SD)	Min-Max
School year	Homework situation	8 th grade (n=495)	14.33 (3.03)	4-20	14.18 (2.85)	5-20	14.45 (2.75)	6-20
		10 th grade (n=198)	14.73 (2.83)	4-20	14.84 (2.51)	6-20	14.36 (2.72)	4-20
		11 th grade (n=187)	14.66 (2.49)	8-20	14.23 (2.76)	8-20	14.18 (2.76)	8-20
	Double date situation	8 th grade (n=495)	14.15 (3.26)	4-20	13.87 (3.12)	4-20	13.97 (3.12)	4-20
		10 th grade (n=198)	14.55 (3.14)	6-20	14.79 (2.73)	8-20	14.09 (3.40)	4-20
		11 th grade (n=187)	15.00 (3.16)	7-20	14.22 (3.16)	5-20	14.19 (3.38)	4-20
	Leader situation	8 th grade (n=495)	13.98 (3.24)	4-20	13.82 (3.20)	4-20	13.81 (3.35)	4-20
		10 th grade (n=198)	13.64 (2.94)	6-20	13.69 (2.94)	6-20	13.39 (3.38)	4-20
		11 th grade (n=187)	13.39 (3.34)	4-20	13.33 (2.90)	6-20	13.47 (3.21)	4-20
	Friend counsellor situation	8 th grade (n=495)	14.74 (3.10)	6-20	14.22 (3.17)	6-20	14.34 (3.41)	4-20
		10 th grade (n=198)	15.05 (2.96)	8-20	14.68 (3.05)	7-20	14.22 (3.65)	4-20
		11 th grade (n=187)	14.84 (3.20)	6-20	14.19 (3.16)	4-20	14.31 (3.48)	4-20
	Parents' meeting situation	8 th grade (n=495)	14.12 (3.38)	4-20	13.60 (3.29)	4-20	13.83 (3.36)	4-20
		10 th grade (n=198)	13.67 (3.15)	4-20	13.88 (3.17)	6-20	13.40 (3.75)	4-20
		11 th grade (n=187)	13.94 (3.09)	5-20	13.53 (3.90)	6-20	13.49 (3.49)	4-20
	Student visitor situation	8 th grade (n=495)	14.08 (3.21)	5-20	14.00 (3.14)	4-20	13.91 (3.29)	4-20
		10 th grade (n=198)	13.62 (3.09)	4-20	13.92 (2.94)	6-20	13.34 (3.25)	4-20
		11 th grade (n=187)	13.48 (3.19)	4-20	13.47 (3.01)	4-20	13.90 (3.38)	4-20
	Poor Performance	8 th grade (n=495)	23.45 (3.83)	9-30	22.62 (4.11)	11-30	22.71 (4.35)	7-30
		10 th grade (n=198)	23.59 (3.49)	14-30	23.23 (3.67)	9-30	22.72 (4.65)	6-30
		11 th grade (n=187)	23.20 (3.41)	13-30	22.39 (4.12)	14-30	22.27 (4.36)	6-30
	Excellent Performance	8 th grade (n=495)	21.15 (4.18)	8-30	20.65 (4.05)	6-30	20.91 (4.14)	6-30
		10 th grade (n=198)	20.58 (3.61)	8-30	20.86 (3.78)	12-30	20.10 (4.58)	6-30
		11 th grade (n=187)	20.56 (3.50)	8-30	20.63 (4.11)	8-30	20.29 (4.33)	6-30

The multivariate analysis of repeated measures (table 5) revealed a significant multivariate main effect for assessment moments in the Double date situation (Wilks' $\lambda=.992$, $F(2,873)=3.455$, $p=.032$, partial eta squared=.008. Power to detect the effect was .648), Friend counsellor situation (Wilks' $\lambda=.982$, $F(2,873)=7.843$, $p=.000$, partial eta squared=.018. Power to detect the effect was .952), and Poor performance (Wilks' $\lambda=.974$, $F(2,873)=11.68$, $p=.000$, partial eta squared=.026. Power to detect the effect was .994).

The multivariate analysis of repeated measures also indicated a significant multivariate main effect for school year in the Double date situation (Wilks' $\lambda=.989$, $F(2,873)=2.497$, $p=.041$, partial eta squared=.006 Power to detect the effect was .714).

No significant multivariate main effects were found considering boys and girls, in any social situation.

Table 5. Multivariate analysis of repeated measures

Situation	Factor	F(2, 873)
Homework situation	Assessment moment	2.429
	Assessment moment *Sex	.571
	Assessment moment *School year	2.210
Double date situation	Assessment moment	3.455*
	Assessment moment *Sex	2.802
	Assessment moment *School year	2.497*
Leader situation	Assessment moment	.203
	Assessment moment *Sex	.366
	Assessment moment *School year	.231
Friend counsellor situation	Assessment moment	7.843***
	Assessment moment *Sex	1.925
	Assessment moment *School year	.598
Parents' meeting situation	Assessment moment	2.325
	Assessment moment *Sex	.082
	Assessment moment *School year	1.256
Student visitor situation	Assessment moment	.146
	Assessment moment *Sex	1.154
	Assessment moment *School year	1.744
Poor Performance	Assessment moment	11.68***
	Assessment moment *Sex	1.42
	Assessment moment *School year	.523
Excellent Performance	Assessment moment	1.359
	Assessment moment *Sex	.146
	Assessment moment *School year	1.522

Given the significance of the overall test, multiple comparisons were developed considering the assessment moments and school grade. The obtained results are presented in table 6. Significant mean differences were obtained between T1 and T3 considering the Double date situation (Mean difference=.392, $p=.026$), between T1 and T2 (Mean difference=.525, $p=.002$) and T1 and T3 (Mean difference=.513, $p=.004$), considering the Friend counsellor situation, and between T1 and T2 (Mean difference=.617, $p=.002$), and T1 and T3 (Mean difference=.778, $p=.000$) considering poor performance. Significant mean differences were also obtained between 8th and 10th (Mean difference=-.477, $p=.023$), and 8th and 11th (Mean difference=-.475, $p=.028$) grades, in the Double data situation.

Table 6. Multiple comparisons considering assessment moments and school grade

Situation	T1-T2	T1-T3	T2-T3
Double date situation	.202	.392*	.191
Friend counsellor situation	.525**	.513**	-.012
Poor Performance	.617**	.778***	.161
Situation	8 th -10 th grades	8 th -11 th grades	10 th -11 th grades
Double date situation	-.477*	-.475*	.002

4. Discussion

The main goal of the present study was to present and discuss the Portuguese adolescents' perceptions about their social competence to deal with interpersonal situations within career education domains. We analyzed the statistically significant differences in the career interpersonal situations, considering a set of independent variables - the assessment moment, sex and school grade - of the young adolescents - taken together and separately.

The obtained results indicate the existence of differences, over time in the double date situation, in the friend counsellor situation, and in the poor performance subscales of the Perceived Social Competence in Career Scale. These differences occur in the negative direction, from the first to the second, and from the first to the third assessment moments. This suggests that, in the period of a year and a half, participants decreased the general belief

on their ability to handle career social situations in which they are asked to support their peers. However, it is noteworthy that there are no significant changes in their beliefs about the ability to handle interpersonal situations involving significant adults. Moreover, it should be noted a decrease in their general belief about the poor performance to deal with the interpersonal contexts of career education activities. Results also indicate differences according to the school grade in the double date situation, between the 8th and 10th grades and the 8th and 11th grades, suggesting that older students believe in themselves as more competent to handle with situations in which they are expected to support their peers to make career decisions and solve career problems. These results are congruent with the ones obtained in other recent studies, indicating that perceived social competence can differ between students of different school years, and also along the different school year moments (Pinto, Taveira, Candeias, Araújo, & Mota, 2012). These results also suggest social competencies may not be effectively promoted by educational agents (e.g., parents, professors, and career psychologists) in the school context. Therefore, school career counselors should consider social competence as a developmental construct (Waters & Stoufe, 1983) in which a set of socio-cognitive and motivational variables interact with each other (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2003). On the one hand, these interventions should help adolescents to identify and accept the values, norms and beliefs of their social groups, and to develop personal life goals that are socially relevant (Luftey & Mortimer, 2003). On the other hand, motivation is considered essential for problem solving, and it is assumed as an important variable from the social intelligence and, in consequence, for the social competence (Ford, 1995). Thereby, it is justified that career interventions focus on the promotion and development of individuals' perceived self-efficacy and, consequently, increase the individuals' motivation to make good use of their personal and environmental resources in order to achieve their personal, academic and professional goals (Bandura, 1986). It is also important to alert children and adolescents about the importance of adopting socially expected behaviors. Above all, it is relevant to teach the adults of tomorrow that the adoption of a wide range of (social) behaviors is essential to assure that they carry out their goals, and thus can successfully achieve those goals and targets, either in the personal, as well as, in the academic and professional fields. In other words, it becomes essential that adolescents and their respective educational agents understand the instrumentality of social competence in promoting the overall healthiness of the individual and the society.

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