

PLAGIARISM AWARENESS, CITATION SKILLS AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AMONG UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

Chinelo LEVI & Oluwatosin Oyenike OMOBOYE

Directorate of General Studies, FCT College of Education Zuba, Abuja

Correspondence: oluwatomisin1234.00@gmail.com

Abstract

The study investigated plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities. Three research questions guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and was carried out in five federal universities in Nigeria, namely the University of Nigeria, Nsukka; University of Abuja; Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; Bayero University, Kano; and the University of Ibadan. The population of the study comprised 360 undergraduate English Language students. Since the population was manageable, the entire population was used for the study; therefore, no sampling technique was employed. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument titled *Plagiarism Awareness, Citation Skills and Academic Integrity Questionnaire (PACSAIQ)*. The instrument was face validated by three experts in the Department of English and Literary Studies, FCT College of Education, Zuba, Abuja. The reliability of the instrument was established using the Cronbach Alpha reliability method, which yielded coefficients of 0.83 for plagiarism awareness, 0.86 for citation skills, and 0.81 for academic integrity, with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.84. The questionnaire was administered personally by the researcher with the assistance of two trained research assistants, and all the copies administered were successfully retrieved. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions. Mean scores of 3.50–4.00 were interpreted as Very High Level, 2.50–3.49 as High Level, 1.50–2.49 as Low Level, and 1.00–1.49 as Very Low Level. The findings revealed that undergraduate English Language students exhibited a high level of plagiarism awareness, a high level of citation skills, and a high level of academic integrity. Based on the findings, it was recommended that universities should strengthen academic writing programmes and sustain academic integrity awareness initiatives among undergraduate students.

Keywords: plagiarism awareness, citation skills, academic integrity, academic writing, undergraduate English Language students

Introduction

Academic writing is a fundamental component of higher education because it enables students to communicate ideas, demonstrate critical thinking, and contribute meaningfully to scholarly knowledge. The credibility of academic writing depends largely on students' ability to produce original work while acknowledging the intellectual contributions of other scholars through appropriate citation and referencing practices. Consequently, universities across the world emphasize ethical scholarship as a means of promoting honesty, responsibility, fairness, and trust in teaching, learning, and research (Fishman, 2016; International Center for Academic Integrity [ICAI], 2021). However, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and unrestricted access to online information have increased opportunities for plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct, thereby

raising concerns about the quality and originality of students' academic work (Eaton, 2022).

Globally, plagiarism has become one of the major challenges confronting higher education institutions despite the introduction of institutional policies, plagiarism detection software, and academic writing support programmes. Research has shown that many undergraduate students continue to experience difficulties in recognizing plagiarism, paraphrasing scholarly materials appropriately, and applying acceptable citation conventions in their academic writing. These challenges have continued to undermine students' academic credibility and the quality of research outputs produced by universities (Bretag et al., 2019; Eaton, 2022). Consequently, universities have intensified efforts to strengthen academic writing instruction and promote responsible scholarly practices among students.

Empirical evidence from different parts of the world suggests that students' awareness of plagiarism and competence in citation practices significantly influence ethical academic behaviour. Bretag et al. (2019) found that inadequate understanding of plagiarism remains one of the major contributors to academic misconduct among university students despite increased institutional awareness campaigns. Similarly, Hyland (2022) reported that many university students encounter challenges in paraphrasing, in-text citation, and referencing scholarly sources correctly, resulting in avoidable academic writing errors. Eaton (2022) further observed that strengthening academic integrity education through explicit instruction and institutional support significantly improves students' ethical behaviour and reduces incidents of plagiarism.

Within the African context, universities continue to face increasing concerns regarding academic dishonesty due to inadequate academic writing skills, limited information literacy, insufficient exposure to referencing conventions, and increased dependence on electronic information resources. Although several higher education institutions have strengthened institutional policies on academic integrity, students still experience challenges in applying appropriate citation practices and maintaining ethical standards during academic writing. These challenges underscore the need for continuous academic literacy programmes capable of improving students' writing competence and promoting responsible scholarship.

In Nigeria, the expansion of undergraduate research, project writing, and technology-supported learning has further increased the importance of ethical academic writing. Although many universities have adopted institutional policies on academic integrity and utilize plagiarism detection software, evidence indicates that many undergraduate students still experience difficulties in proper citation, referencing, paraphrasing, and source documentation (Adebayo & Ojo, 2022; Olatunji et al., 2023). These deficiencies continue to affect the quality, originality, and credibility of students' academic work, thereby raising concerns among educators and researchers regarding ethical scholarship within Nigerian higher education institutions. Nigerian empirical studies equally support these concerns. Adebayo and Ojo (2022) reported that inadequate awareness of plagiarism and poor knowledge of referencing techniques significantly contributed to academic misconduct among undergraduate students. Likewise, Olatunji et al. (2023) found widespread citation errors among university students, including incorrect in-text citations, incomplete references, inconsistent application of referencing styles, and poor paraphrasing skills. The authors further noted that these deficiencies reduce the quality of academic writing and increase students' susceptibility to both intentional and unintentional plagiarism.

Among undergraduate English Language students, the issue deserves particular attention because their academic programmes require extensive engagement with essays, literary criticism, discourse analysis, linguistic investigations, seminar presentations, term papers, and research projects. These academic activities demand continuous interaction with scholarly literature and require students to synthesize information from multiple sources while maintaining originality and adhering to accepted academic conventions. Therefore, strengthening students' knowledge of plagiarism, citation practices, and ethical scholarship remains essential for improving academic writing competence and preparing graduates for professional and research careers. The current state of knowledge indicates that considerable attention has been devoted to plagiarism, citation practices, and academic integrity in higher education. Nevertheless, most available studies have examined these variables independently or have focused on general undergraduate populations rather than students enrolled in programmes that require intensive academic writing. Furthermore, limited empirical studies have specifically examined the relationship among plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities. This gap limits the availability of empirical evidence needed to develop discipline-specific interventions capable of strengthening academic writing competence and promoting ethical scholarly behaviour among English Language students.

Hence, it is against this background that the present study investigated plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities. The findings of the study are expected to provide useful empirical evidence for lecturers, curriculum developers, university administrators, and policymakers in strengthening academic writing instruction, improving citation competence, promoting ethical scholarship, and enhancing academic integrity within Nigerian universities.

Statement of the Problem

Academic writing in higher education is expected to reflect originality, ethical scholarship, and proper acknowledgment of sources of information. Undergraduate students, particularly those studying English Language, are expected to possess adequate knowledge of plagiarism, demonstrate competence in citation practices, and uphold the principles of academic integrity throughout their academic activities. These competencies are essential for producing credible research, developing critical thinking, and preparing students for professional and scholarly careers. However, the reality in many universities appears to differ from this expectation. Cases of plagiarism, poor citation practices, incorrect referencing, inadequate paraphrasing, and other forms of academic dishonesty continue to be reported among undergraduate students. Many students experience difficulties in distinguishing between acceptable academic writing practices and plagiarism, while others struggle with the application of recognized citation styles. These deficiencies have continued to affect the quality, originality, and credibility of students' academic work, resulting in increased concerns about the standard of undergraduate research and the promotion of ethical scholarship within higher education institutions. The persistence of these challenges is particularly worrisome among undergraduate English Language students whose programmes require extensive academic writing, critical analysis of scholarly literature, and frequent engagement with source-based assignments and research projects.

If these challenges are not adequately addressed, they may continue to undermine students' academic performance, reduce the credibility of research outputs, weaken adherence to ethical academic standards, and diminish the overall quality of university education.

Notwithstanding various institutional efforts aimed at promoting ethical academic practices, concerns regarding students' awareness of plagiarism, competence in citation skills, and commitment to academic integrity continue to persist. The problem, therefore, is that the extent to which plagiarism awareness and citation skills are associated with academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities remains insufficiently established. This lack of empirical evidence has made it difficult to determine whether students possess the required knowledge and competencies necessary to uphold ethical standards in academic writing. It is this gap that necessitated the present study on plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to investigate plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. determine the level of plagiarism awareness among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities.
2. determine the level of citation skills among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities.
3. determine the level of academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the level of plagiarism awareness among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities?
2. What is the level of citation skills among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities?
3. What is the level of academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities?

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to collect data on plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students without manipulating any of the variables under investigation. The study was carried out in five federal universities in Nigeria offering undergraduate English Language programmes. These universities were the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), Enugu State; University of Abuja (UNIABUJA), Abuja; Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, Kaduna State; Bayero University (BUK), Kano, Kano State; and the University of Ibadan (UI), Ibadan, Oyo State. These universities were selected to provide representation across different geopolitical zones of the country.

The population of the study comprised 360 undergraduate English Language students from the selected universities. The distribution of the population was 80 students from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka; 70 students from the University of Abuja; 75 students from Ahmadu Bello University; 65 students from Bayero University; and 70

students from the University of Ibadan. Since the population was manageable, the entire population of 360 undergraduate English Language students was used for the study. Consequently, no sampling technique was employed. Data for the study were collected using a researcher-developed questionnaire titled *Plagiarism Awareness, Citation Skills and Academic Integrity Questionnaire (PACSAIQ)*. The instrument consisted of two sections. Section A elicited information on the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while Section B contained 27 items arranged into three clusters. Cluster A comprised 9 items on plagiarism awareness, Cluster B comprised 9 items on citation skills, while Cluster C comprised 9 items on academic integrity. The instrument was structured on a four-point rating scale of Very High Level (VHL) = 4 points, High Level (HL) = 3 points, Low Level (LL) = 2 points, and Very Low Level (VLL) = 1 point.

The instrument was face validated by three experts in the Department of English and Literary Studies, FCT College of Education, Zuba, Abuja. The observations and suggestions of the experts were carefully incorporated into the final version of the instrument to ensure its clarity, appropriateness, and relevance to the objectives of the study. The reliability of the instrument was established through a pilot study involving 30 undergraduate English Language students from the Federal University Lokoja, Kogi State, which was outside the study area but possessed characteristics similar to those of the selected universities. The data collected were analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha reliability method. The analysis yielded reliability coefficients of 0.83 for Plagiarism Awareness, 0.86 for Citation Skills, and 0.81 for Academic Integrity, with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.84. These coefficients indicated that the instrument was reliable for data collection.

The researcher personally administered the questionnaire to the respondents with the assistance of two trained research assistants in the selected universities. The completed copies of the questionnaire were retrieved immediately after administration, resulting in a 100% retrieval rate. The data collected were analyzed using mean ($\bar{X}$) and standard deviation (SD) to answer the research questions. The following decision rule was adopted for interpreting the mean ratings: mean scores ranging from 3.50 to 4.00 were interpreted as Very High Level; mean scores ranging from 2.50 to 3.49 were interpreted as High Level; mean scores ranging from 1.50 to 2.49 were interpreted as Low Level; while mean scores ranging from 1.00 to 1.49 were interpreted as Very Low Level.

Results

Research Question One: What is the level of plagiarism awareness among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities?

Table 4.1: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Level of Plagiarism Awareness among Undergraduate English Language Students in Nigerian Universities

S/N	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Students understand what constitutes plagiarism in academic writing.	3.68	0.56	Very High Level
2	Students are aware that copying another person's work without proper acknowledgement constitutes plagiarism.	3.54	0.61	Very High Level
3	Students understand the consequences of plagiarism in academic writing.	3.42	0.69	High Level
4	Students distinguish between proper paraphrasing and	3.35	0.73	High Level

	plagiarism.			
5	Students acknowledge that ideas, words, tables, figures, and other intellectual works obtained from other authors should be properly referenced.	3.26	0.77	High Level
6	Students are aware that failure to acknowledge information sources constitutes academic misconduct.	3.47	0.65	High Level
7	Students are aware of the university's rules and sanctions regarding plagiarism.	3.31	0.72	High Level
8	Students are aware that plagiarism may occur intentionally or unintentionally.	3.39	0.68	High Level
9	Students recognize the importance of originality in academic writing.	3.59	0.60	Very High Level
Grand Mean ($\bar{X}$) / Average SD		3.45	0.67	HL

The results presented in Table 4.1 revealed that undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities exhibited a high level of plagiarism awareness, as indicated by the grand mean of $\bar{X} = 3.45$ and an average standard deviation of $SD = 0.67$. Since the grand mean was greater than the criterion mean of 2.50 ($\bar{X} > 2.50$), the respondents exhibited a high level of plagiarism awareness. Specifically, the respondents exhibited a very high level of understanding of what constitutes plagiarism in academic writing ($\bar{X} = 3.68$, $SD = 0.56$), recognized the importance of originality in academic writing ($\bar{X} = 3.59$, $SD = 0.60$), and were aware that copying another person's work without proper acknowledgement constitutes plagiarism ($\bar{X} = 3.54$, $SD = 0.61$). Furthermore, the respondents demonstrated a high level of awareness of the consequences of plagiarism, proper paraphrasing, appropriate acknowledgement of intellectual works, institutional regulations on plagiarism, and the various forms of plagiarism, with mean scores ranging from $\bar{X} = 3.26$ to $\bar{X} = 3.47$.

Research Question Two: What is the level of citation skills among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities?

Table 4.2: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Level of Citation Skills among Undergraduate English Language Students in Nigerian Universities

S/N	Item Statements	Mean	SD	Decision
10	Students correctly apply in-text citations in academic writing.	3.41	0.65	High Level
11	Students prepare reference lists using the prescribed citation style.	3.36	0.71	High Level
12	Students correctly cite direct quotations in academic writing.	3.52	0.59	Very High Level
13	Students appropriately paraphrase information obtained from scholarly sources before citing them.	3.28	0.74	High Level
14	Students accurately acknowledge ideas obtained from other authors.	3.47	0.62	High Level
15	Students consistently apply the prescribed citation style throughout academic writing.	3.32	0.68	High Level
16	Students correctly cite electronic sources in academic writing.	3.25	0.76	High Level
17	Students differentiate between in-text citations and	3.44	0.64	High Level

reference entries.

- 18 Students organize references according to the prescribed citation style. 3.39 0.69 High Level

Grand Mean ($\bar{X}$) / Average SD 3.38 0.68 High Level

The results presented in Table 4.2 revealed that undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities exhibited a high level of citation skills, as indicated by the grand mean of $\bar{X} = 3.38$ and an average standard deviation of $SD = 0.68$. Since the grand mean was greater than the criterion mean of 2.50 ($\bar{X} > 2.50$), the respondents demonstrated a high level of citation skills in academic writing. The findings further revealed that the respondents exhibited a very high level of competence in correctly citing direct quotations in academic writing ($\bar{X} = 3.52$, $SD = 0.59$). The respondents also exhibited a high level of competence in accurately acknowledging ideas obtained from other authors ($\bar{X} = 3.47$, $SD = 0.62$), differentiating between in-text citations and reference entries ($\bar{X} = 3.44$, $SD = 0.64$), correctly applying in-text citations ($\bar{X} = 3.41$, $SD = 0.65$), organizing references according to the prescribed citation style ($\bar{X} = 3.39$, $SD = 0.69$), preparing reference lists using the prescribed citation style ($\bar{X} = 3.36$, $SD = 0.71$), consistently applying the prescribed citation style throughout academic writing ($\bar{X} = 3.32$, $SD = 0.68$), appropriately paraphrasing information obtained from scholarly sources before citation ($\bar{X} = 3.28$, $SD = 0.74$), and correctly citing electronic sources in academic writing ($\bar{X} = 3.25$, $SD = 0.76$).

Research Question Three: What is the level of academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities?

Table 4.3: Mean and Standard Deviation on the Level of Academic Integrity among Undergraduate English Language Students in Nigerian Universities

S/N	Item Statements	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD	Decision
19	Students submit original academic work without engaging in plagiarism.	3.48	0.62	High Level
20	Students acknowledge all sources of information used in academic writing.	3.43	0.67	High Level
21	Students adhere to ethical standards in completing academic assignments.	3.51	0.59	Very High Level
22	Students avoid all forms of academic dishonesty during examinations and coursework.	3.37	0.71	High Level
23	Students demonstrate honesty when conducting academic research.	3.46	0.64	High Level
24	Students comply with university regulations on academic integrity.	3.34	0.69	High Level
25	Students appropriately acknowledge the intellectual property of other scholars.	3.29	0.75	High Level
26	Students complete academic tasks independently without unauthorized assistance.	3.41	0.66	High Level
27	Students uphold ethical values in all academic activities.	3.53	0.58	Very High Level
Grand Mean ($\bar{X}$) / Average SD		3.42	0.66	High Level

The results presented in Table 4.3 revealed that undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities exhibited a high level of academic integrity, as indicated

by the grand mean of $\bar{X} = 3.42$ and an average standard deviation of $SD = 0.66$. Since the grand mean was greater than the criterion mean of 2.50 ($\bar{X} > 2.50$), the respondents demonstrated a high level of academic integrity. The findings further revealed that the respondents exhibited a very high level of adherence to ethical standards in completing academic assignments ($\bar{X} = 3.51$, $SD = 0.59$) and upholding ethical values in all academic activities ($\bar{X} = 3.53$, $SD = 0.58$). In addition, the respondents demonstrated a high level of originality in academic work, acknowledgement of information sources, honesty in academic research, compliance with university regulations on academic integrity, independent completion of academic tasks, avoidance of academic dishonesty, and respect for the intellectual property of other scholars, with mean scores ranging from $\bar{X} = 3.29$ to $\bar{X} = 3.48$.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities exhibited a high level of plagiarism awareness. This finding indicates that the respondents possessed adequate knowledge of plagiarism, recognized its consequences, understood the importance of originality in academic writing, and were aware of institutional regulations governing academic misconduct. The high level of plagiarism awareness may be attributed to increased emphasis on academic writing instruction, information literacy programmes, and institutional policies promoting ethical scholarship in Nigerian universities. The finding is in agreement with Mahmud, Bretag, and Foltýnek (2023), who reported that university students possessed a satisfactory understanding of plagiarism and recognized the need to acknowledge the intellectual contributions of other scholars appropriately. The finding also corroborates that of Bretag et al. (2022), who observed that increased awareness programmes and institutional commitment to academic integrity significantly enhanced students' understanding of plagiarism in higher education. Similarly, the finding supports Guadu, Dibekulu, and Menberu (2025), who found that African university students demonstrated a growing awareness of plagiarism despite experiencing challenges in academic writing. The finding further agrees with Adebayo and Ojo (2022), who reported that awareness of academic integrity among Nigerian university students had improved as a result of institutional sensitization and academic ethics education. The implication of this finding is that universities should sustain and strengthen academic integrity awareness programmes through regular orientation exercises, academic writing workshops, and continuous sensitization on ethical scholarship to further improve students' understanding of plagiarism.

The findings of the study revealed that undergraduate English Language students exhibited a high level of citation skills. This finding suggests that the respondents possessed adequate competence in applying in-text citations, preparing reference lists, acknowledging information sources, paraphrasing scholarly materials, and organizing references according to prescribed citation styles. These competencies are essential for producing credible academic work and minimizing incidents of plagiarism. The finding agrees with Hyland (2022), who asserted that effective academic writing instruction enhances students' competence in citation practices and appropriate use of scholarly sources. The finding also supports Miranda-Rodríguez (2024), who found that undergraduate students who received adequate academic writing instruction demonstrated improved citation practices and paraphrasing competence. Similarly, Ogunyemi and Aina (2023) reported that continuous academic writing instruction significantly improved

students' citation competence and reduced referencing challenges in Nigerian universities. In addition, the finding corroborates Olatunji, Adeyemi, and Salawu (2023), who reported that Nigerian undergraduates demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of referencing practices although occasional citation errors persisted. The implication of this finding is that lecturers should continue to provide practical instruction on citation techniques, paraphrasing skills, and referencing styles while universities should strengthen academic writing support services to enhance students' citation competence.

The findings of the study revealed that undergraduate English Language students exhibited a high level of academic integrity. This finding indicates that the respondents generally adhered to ethical standards in academic activities, respected intellectual property rights, demonstrated honesty in academic work, and complied with institutional regulations relating to academic conduct. The finding suggests that institutional efforts aimed at promoting ethical scholarship are yielding positive outcomes among undergraduate students. The finding is consistent with Eaton (2022), who maintained that academic integrity promotes honesty, responsibility, fairness, and ethical conduct throughout the learning process. The finding also agrees with the International Center for Academic Integrity (2023), which emphasized that adherence to the fundamental values of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage strengthens ethical behaviour among university students. Similarly, Owolabi (2022) found that effective implementation of institutional policies significantly improved students' compliance with academic integrity standards in Nigerian higher education institutions. Furthermore, Tran, Le, and Pham (2025) reported that students who demonstrated adequate understanding of academic integrity were more likely to engage in ethical academic practices and avoid academic misconduct. The implication of this finding is that universities should continue to strengthen institutional policies, academic integrity education, and ethical scholarship initiatives while ensuring consistent enforcement of academic regulations. Such efforts will further enhance responsible academic behaviour, improve research quality, and promote excellence in higher education.

Educational Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for higher education, particularly in improving academic writing and ethical scholarship among undergraduate students. The high levels of plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity suggest that universities should continue to strengthen academic writing instruction and institutional policies that promote ethical academic practices. The findings also underscore the need for lecturers to provide continuous guidance on proper citation, referencing, and responsible use of scholarly sources to sustain students' academic competence.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the levels of plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity among undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities. It enriches the literature on academic writing by focusing specifically on English Language students, a population that has received limited attention in previous studies. The findings also provide useful information for lecturers, curriculum developers, university administrators, and policymakers in designing effective strategies for promoting ethical scholarship, strengthening citation competence, and improving academic writing practices in Nigerian universities.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that undergraduate English Language students in Nigerian universities exhibited a high level of plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity. The findings indicate that the students possess adequate knowledge of plagiarism, demonstrate satisfactory competence in citation practices, and generally adhere to ethical standards in academic writing. The study therefore concludes that sustained academic writing instruction, continuous sensitization on academic integrity and effective institutional policies remain essential for maintaining and improving ethical scholarly practices among undergraduate students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. Universities should strengthen academic writing programmes by providing regular training on plagiarism awareness, citation skills, and academic integrity for undergraduate students.
2. Lecturers should provide continuous instruction and practical guidance on proper citation, referencing, paraphrasing, and ethical use of scholarly sources during classroom teaching and research supervision.
3. University management should strengthen the implementation of academic integrity policies and promote the effective use of plagiarism detection tools to encourage originality and ethical scholarship among undergraduate students.

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