

Singulate Mean Age at Marriage in South Africa 1996-2016: Trends, Differentials and Implications*

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Abstract: *In South Africa, marriage incidence is undergoing changes. The Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) in the country is high and on the increase, as such a concern to the government and other stakeholders. The study used the census and survey data collected in South Africa between 1996 and 2016 to examine the trends and differentials in the SMAM age in the country. These are secondary cross-sectional data collected at four different points in time across the country by Statistics South Africa (de-facto), using the (PAPI) and (CAPI) modes. The Singulate Mean age at Marriage (SMAM) was used as a measure of timing at marriage in the study. This was achieved using the John Hajnal (1953) estimation method technique. Controls were made for province, population group, levels of education in South Africa. Results from the study indicates that SMAM age in South Africa is high, maintaining a slightly increasing pattern over the years. The average mean age was 31.6 years for male, 28.9 years for female and 31.2 years for South Africa. Thus, indicating that the male SMAM age is higher than that of the female and the female marry a little earlier than the male. Also, that marriage does not take place at very early ages (i.e below 25 years) for both sex in South Africa as both couples marry late compared to traditional African society. Compared to other population groups the black Africans has the highest SMAM age and at 34.7 years, Kwazulu-Natal recoded the highest mean age in 2016. Over all, age differentials between sex seems to be more pronounced by educational levels and population groups, while differentials between years tends to decrease negatively in few cases for all controlled characteristics in the study. The study recommending that findings in the study be considered in all programme and policy development around family formation incidences in South Africa.*

Keywords: Singulate mean age at marriage, population group, education, South Africa

Background

Also known as the timing at marriage (age at marriage), the Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) is an estimate of the average number of years lived in a single state by persons married before age 50. It is a robust measure of the years of being single before marriage and is calculated for both male and female and the country. As a universal phenomenon and an important marriage status incidence, the SMAM age is a good indicator of age of first birth, fertility levels and consequently, family size (Narumon, 2001; Palamuleni et al, 2007; Udjo, 2003; Wong, 2005). These are especially so, assuming marriage is the true context of having children (Udjo, 2001) According to Narumon, (2001), the SMAM age is also “important for social security researchers and actuaries involved in the design of second-to-die life insurance policies and last survivor annuities, or in the pricing of healthcare policies such as nursing home and long-term care” (Narumon, 2001).

* The views expressed in this essay are, unless otherwise stated, those of the author and not those of Statistics South Africa or its management.

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Literary evidence indicates that SMAM age is not only in a constant transition and but also on an increasing trajectories (Narumon, 2001; Palamuleni and Palamuleni, 2011; Victoria et al, 2006). These is so as people in the present time have the more right and freedom in choosing marriage partners and even more freedom in getting out of marriage (separation/divorcing) without any societal stigma (punity). A development associated to globalization, modernizations, urbanisation, educational development, etc (Amoateng, 2004; Narumon, 2001; Palamuleni and Palamuleni, 2011; Victoria et al, 2006), all leading to social and cultural influences and perpetuating delay, separation and dissolution of marriages.

Globally, statistics from the United Nations (UN), covering 156 countries suggest an average SMAM age near thirty (30) years for female and slightly above that for the male population (Narumon, 2001). Also, in consistent with this pattern, the mean ages at marriage in South Africa is also said to be high and rising gradually. According to Palamuleni and Palamuleni, (2011), this development is so as South Africa is currently “characterized by late marriage as well as substantial numbers delaying marriage until into their 30s” (Palamuleni and Palamuleni, 2011). However, while Pillay (2018) insist that these levels in the country has only increased since 2002, Palamuleni and Palamuleni (2011) observed that these developments are so with variation by population group in the country. In all, further supporting the notion that couples in South Africa are not only delaying marriage, but more or less, feeding into the global idea that marriage is perpetually shifting among the millenniums in the country (Pillay, 2018).

Despite these facts, literature evidence indicates paucity of studies around marriage pattern incidences in South Africa in recent time. This development is so especially in the research of age at first marriage in the country over time. Based on these narratives, this study will therefore explore the trends and differentials in the Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) in South Africa, between 1996 and 2016 and highlight on their implications.

Method

The study used the census and community survey (CS) data collected in South Africa between 1996-2016 to examine the trends and differentials in the timing at marriage in the country. These are secondary cross-sectional data collected at four different points in time across the country by Statistics South Africa (*de-facto*). The 1996 to 2011 data were collected using the traditional Paper-and-Pencil Interviewing (PAPI) mode, while the 2016 data was collected using the Computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) mode. The Singulate Mean age at Marriage (SMAM) was used as a measure of timing at marriage in the study. This was achieved using the John Hajnal (1953) estimation method technique. In the study, estimates were derived for province, population group, levels of education and for South Africa. The SuperCross statistical software was used in running the data and findings were expresses in charts and tables.

Results

SMAM/Age at First Marriage in South Africa, 1996-2016

Table 1: Trends in the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM), Province by Sex and in South Africa 1996-2016

	Male				Female				South Africa			
	1996	2001	2011	2016	1996	2001	2011	2016	1996	2001	2011	2016
Western Cape	29.0	29.5	29.8	32.1	27.3	27.3	27.1	29.6	28.1	28.4	28.5	30.9
Eastern Cape	32.0	32.7	32.5	35.4	28.1	28.7	29.0	31.6	29.8	30.5	30.7	33.4
Northern Cape	29.8	30.4	31.0	32.4	27.5	28.1	28.4	30.1	28.9	29.3	29.7	31.3
Free State	27.6	29.4	30.3	32.2	26.2	26.9	27.3	29.4	27.1	28.1	28.8	30.8
KwaZulu-Natal	32.3	32.5	33.2	36.3	30.0	30.2	30.6	33.3	31.1	31.8	31.9	34.7
North West	30.6	31.5	31.5	33.8	28.4	28.7	28.3	30.8	28.4	30.2	30.0	32.4
Gauteng	29.7	30.2	30.2	32.9	27.1	26.9	25.9	28.8	28.5	28.5	28.1	31.0
Mpumalanga	30.4	30.9	31.9	34.1	27.5	28.0	28.3	30.7	28.7	29.4	30.2	32.4
Limpopo	30.3	30.9	31.8	34.1	27.0	27.8	28.9	30.8	28.4	29.2	30.3	32.4
South Africa	30.3	30.9	31.2	33.8	27.9	28.2	28.0	30.6	30.3	30.9	31.2	32.2

Table 2: Trends in the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM), Population Group by Sex and in South Africa 1996-2016

	Male					Female					South Africa			
	1996	2001	2011	2016		1996	2001	2011	2016		1996	2001	2011	2016
Black Africans	31.2	31.6	31.8	34.3	28.5	28.6	28.3	30.8	29.8	30.1	30.0	32.6		
Coloured		28.2	28.9	29.6	32.0	27.1	27.2	27.3	29.8	27.6	28.0	28.4	30.9	
Indian/Asian		26.7	27.5	28.5	31.3	23.5	24.4	25.4	27.7	25.1	26.0	27.0	29.6	
White		26.8	27.3	27.5	29.5	24.4	25.0	25.1	26.2	25.5	26.2	26.3	27.9	

Table 3: Trends in the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM), H/level of education by sex and in South Africa, 1996-2016.

	Male					Female					South Africa			
	1996	2001	2011	2016		1996	2001	2011	2016		1996	2001	2011	2016
No schooling		30.9	31.5	31.0	34.3	27.2	27.3	26.3	30.2	28.9	29.2	28.8	32.3	
Primary	30.8	31.2	31.7	34.4	27.3	27.1	26.3	28.8	29.1	29.2	29.3	32.0		
Secondary		30.6	31.1	31.6	34.3	28.5	28.8	28.7	31.1	29.5	29.9	30.2	32.7	
Tertiary/Higher	28.4	29.8	30.2	32.2	27.0	28.2	27.9	29.9	27.7	29.9	30.2	32.7		

Differentials in the SMAN age in South Africa, 1996-2016

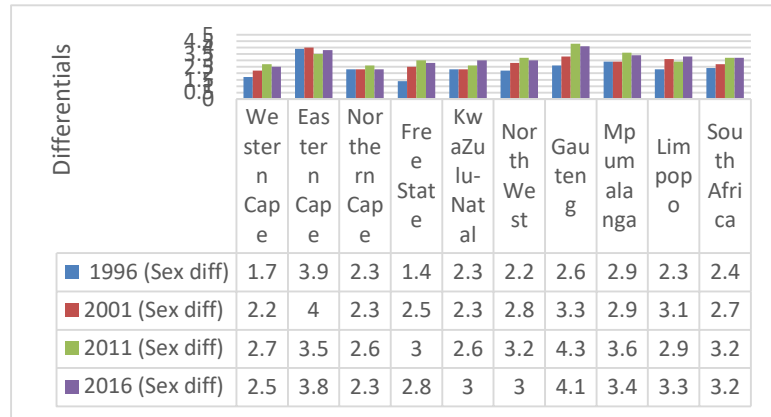


Figure 1a: Provincial differential Patterns by Sex

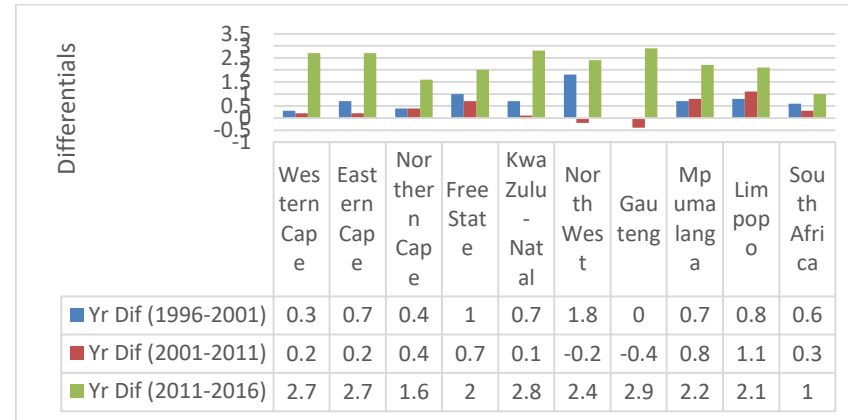


Figure 1b: Provincial differential Patterns by Year

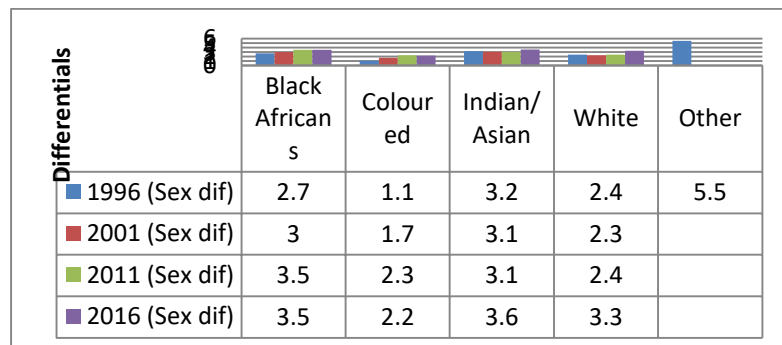


Figure 2a: Pop grp differential Patterns by Sex

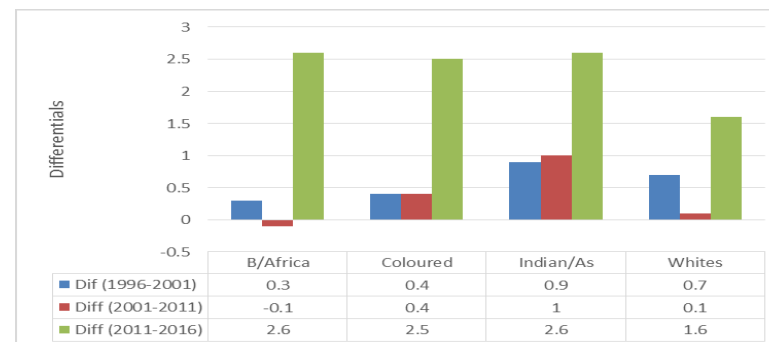


Figure 2b: Pop grp differential Patterns by Year

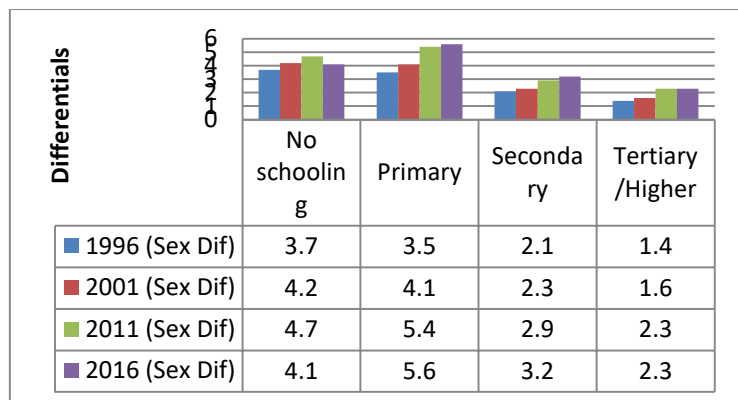


Figure: 3a Edu Level differential Patterns by Sex

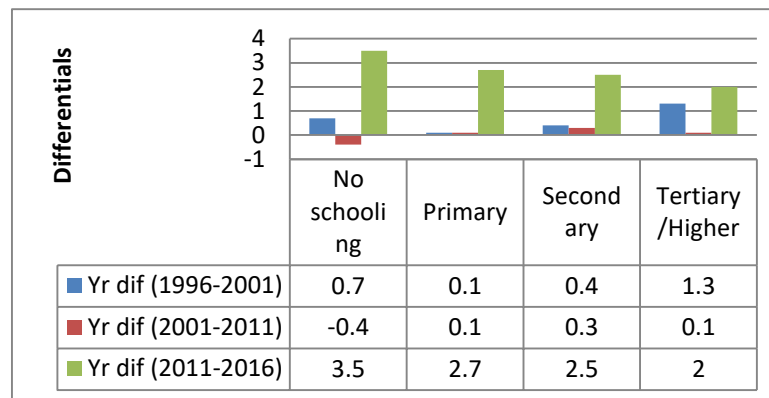


Figure: 3b Edu Level differential Patterns by Year

Discussions

The study examined the trends and differentials in the Singulate Mean Age at Marriage (SMAM) i.e. age at first marriage in South Africa, using the census and community survey (CS) data collected between 1996 and 2016 and highlighted on their implications. Distinctively, the result from the study shows that South Africa mean age at marriage is very high and maintained an increasing pattern over the years, which is a concern. In South Africa, the SMAM age was 30.3 years in 1996. This increased to 31.2 years in 2011 and 32.2 years in 2016. The result also shows that the highest SMAM age for male (33.8 years) and female (30.6 years) in South Africa was recorded in 2016, and the lowest SMAM age for male (30.3) and female (27.9) was recorded in 1996.

This high and increasing pattern observed in the study is consistent with findings from early studies around family formation incidence in South Africa such as Amoateng (2004), Palamuleni (2010), Udjo (2010), Palamuleni and Palamuleni (2011), etc. The result also shows that the male age at first marriage is generally higher than the female in the country, indicating that the female South Africans marry earlier than male South African and both sex marry late, compared to traditional societies in sub-Saharan Africa. In other words, indicating that marriage does not take place at very early ages (i.e below 25 years) in South Africa as it is the case with traditional African society. And further supports the fact established by studies such as Palamuleni (2010), Palamuleni and Palamuleni (2011), Udjo (2004), etc in their earlier studies. Specifically, Palamuleni and Palamuleni (2011) observed that South Africa mean age at marriage “is characterized by late marriage as well as substantial numbers delaying marriage until into their 30s” (Palamuleni and Palamuleni, 2011).

The result also showed that the patterns observed at the national level were consistent at the provincial level, although with considerable variation. This is so as the result shows that KwaZulu-Natal (34.7), followed by Eastern Cape (33.3 years) have the overall highest years and the Free State (27.1 years) having the least. This pattern is consistent with the findings of Palamuleni and Palamuleni (2011) in an earlier study, which found Kwazulu-Natal as the province having the highest SMAM age. Also, control for sex at the provincial level indicates a similar pattern, as a closer examination indicates that men (36.3 years) and women (33.3 years) in Kwazulu-Natal, followed by Eastern Cape has the overall highest mean age at marriage in South Africa.

In the study, results of provincial differentials by sex indicates that South Africa has an increasing age difference patterns in most cases. The study found that the deference increased from 2.4 to 3.2 between 1996 and 2016, remaining constant between 2011 and 2016. The result also found that this pattern is consistent with provinces such as Western Cape, Free State, North West, Gauteng and Mpumalanga. The study also found that the Northern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal has a constant age different pattern between 1996 and 2001 and an increase, between 2001 and 2011. On the other hand, provinces such as Eastern

Cape and Limpopo experienced a decrease age differential between 2001 and 2011. In South Africa, the result shows that differentials by sex seems to be more prominent in Gauteng closely followed by Mpumalanga. Specifically, at a differential of 4.3 in 2011 and 4.1 in 2016, Gauteng recorded the highest differential, while at 1.7, the Western Cape province recorded the least in 1996. On average, the result shows that sex differentials in South Africa has been increasing progressively in the country, with a current differential peak of 3.2 years.

Provincial differentials by year show that South Africa has an inconsistent year difference pattern, decreasing from 0.6 and increasing slightly to 1 between 2011 and 2016. This pattern is also found to be consistent in Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Free State and KwaZulu-Natal. Mpumalanga and Limpopo recorded a constant increasing pattern, while North-West (-0.2) and Gauteng (-0.4) recorded a negative differential; decline between 2001 and 2011. With the exception of 2011-2016 year differential, the result indicated that the provincial differentials in SMAM age over the years are not significant (distinct) in all provinces in South Africa.

The result also shows that all population groups in South Africa has a relatively high SMAM age, thus indicating that marriage is also late among all population group in South Africa. In South Africa, the result shows that the black Africans reported the highest age (32.6 yrs) in 2016, and the white the least (25.5 yrs) in 1996. These patterns are also consistent controlling for sex in the country. This finding is consistent with the findings made by Ziehl (2001) which suggest that the black African population group generally marry late. A development, associated to their cultural belief in terms of their understanding of marriage and or strict interpretation of what marriage is.

Also, in support of these, Palamuleni and Palamuleni (2011) in an earlier study found that the “mean age at first marriage is very late among Africans and Coloured males and females (above 27 years), and a moderately high mean age at first marriage among Indians and whites (24-27 years)” (Palamuleni and Palamuleni, 2011). According to the authors, this development is associating to the wide regional variations in economy, culture and living conditions (ibid). Also, although these findings are consistent with an earlier study by Palamuleni (2010), which found that Africans marry youngest at an average age of 30.8 years. It is however, not in consistent with a much earlier study by Chimere-Dan (1998), which found that whites in South Africa marries at “an average age of 20.9 while Africans marry youngest at an average age of 18.9 years” (Palamuleni, 2010; Chimere-Dan, 1998).

The result of population group differentials by sex shows that all the population groups has increasing age different pattern between the years. At 5.5 years, the result shows that the differentials of other population group is an outlier. However, overall, the coloured population has the least differentials between sex (1.1) in 1996 while the Indian/Asian (3.6) followed by the black Africans (3.5 years) has the highest in 2011 and

2016. Differentials by year shows that black population group registered a negative decline (-0.1) between 2001 and 2011, compensating with a sharp increase between 2011 and 2016. The coloured and Indians/Asian registered a slightly increase over the years, while that white population recoded a decline (0.1) between 2001 and 2011, compensating with a sharp increase (1.6 yrs) between 2011 and 2016. Although not in all cases, this findings partially supports the finding from earlier studies in South Africa which insist that age at first marriage is increasing for all the population groups in the country over the years (Palamuleni, 2010; Udjo, 2004). However, negates the notion which insist that Africans and coloureds have the highest increase and whites and Indian/Asians the lowest increase (Palamuleni, 2010).

Also, control for level of education also reveals that the age at first marriage in South Africa is high. This so irrespective of the levels of education. Also, a closer examination seems to suggest that the population with secondary and tertiary/higher education records the highest level of SMAM age in the country across board. Therefore supporting the notion that education is associated with late marriage as people with higher education tend to marry late.

This is so, as the result suggest that level of education increases, the SMAM age in South Africa tends to increase slightly in the country. In consistent with earlier findings, the result also shows the SMAM age for male is higher than the female, irrespective of the level of education.

The result of highest levels of education differentials by sex shows that with the exception of those with no schooling in 2016, all other educational levels differentials maintained a constant increasing pattern over the years between 1996-2016. Therefore, justifying the notion that education is associated to age at first marriage in South Africa. The population with tertiary/higher education level (1.4 years) has the least difference between male and female in 1996, while those with primary (5.4 years) followed by those with no schooling (4.7 years) has the highest difference in 2011 respectively. Sex difference is more significant (pronounced) among those with no schooling and primary education levels, compared to other levels. Also, result of differentials over years shows that while those with no schooling maintained a negative decline from 0.7 to -0.4, all others maintained a consistent age decline pattern. Overall, the highest decline over the year was recoded among those with no schooling (3.5), followed by those with primary (2.7) in 1996.

In summary, results from the study indicates that South Africa has a high SMAM age, which has maintained a slightly increasing pattern across board for both sex over the years. A finding consistent with early studies in the country. The result also shows that the male SMAM age is generally higher than the female SMAM age in the country. Thus, indicating that the female marry a little earlier than the male. And in all, that marriage does not take place at very early ages (i.e below 25 years) for both sex in South Africa as both couples marry late in South Africa compared to traditional African society. Specifically, Kwazulu-Natal recoded the highest mean age, with the highest (34.7 years) recoded in 2016 and the black Africans has

the highest SMAM age compared to other population groups in the country. Overall, age differentials between sex seems to be more pronounced by educational levels and population groups, while differentials between years tends to decrease negatively in few cases for all controlled characteristics in the study.

Broadly, the overall finding of the study are in consistent with these those made by earlier studies in the southern African context. For example, Palamuleni (2010) in reference to Udjo (2002) in an earlier study observed that the age at first marriage values for South Africa give the impression that South Africa has about the highest mean age at first marriage in the world, comparing favourably with those of neighboring countries (Palamuleni, 2010). Also that marrying late (above age 25) seems to be a common feature of modern societies and as well as typical Southern African societies such as South Africa, Namibia, Botswana (ibid). This study demonstrates that this assertion are consistent, irrespective of the province, population group and level of education in the South Africa context. Other studies such as those carried out by Rakgoasi and Gaise (1999) in Botswana, and Shemeikka, et al (2005) in Namibia also had findings consistent with these patterns observed in South Africa.

Implications, Conclusions and Recommendation

In South Africa, demographic thinking suggest that these SMAM age has demographic and socio-economic implications. Firstly, the reality of late marriage in South Africa donates strong negative implications. Late age at marriage results to postponement of child bearing, shortening of reproductive life of a woman and late age at childbearing for women in South Africa. Also, it implies lower chance of fertility among women and distortion of age structure in the country. Demographic implication dictates that lower chance of child bearing (fertility) brings about decline in total fertility rate (TFR) as women are not able to have the true number of children they are designed to have. This development eventually results to decline in the overall population and other socio-economic distortion at the long run. This development is especially so, assuming that marriage is the true context for having children (Udjo, 2001).

Clearly, late age at marriage implies that many marriageable South Africans adults are postponing marriage and that the percentage who will not be married by the end of their reproductive age will be fairly high (Palamuleni, 2010). A development not desirable, as such a concern. Biological thinking also suggest that late age at marriage as it is the case in South Africa, has the implication of exposing women to higher risk of child bearing, increased maternal mortality and after health complications (disability) resulting from giving birth in the country.

In line with earlier study (Palamuleni, 2010), this study also found that the difference between male and female mean age at marriage (i.e. spousal differences) is not consistent with traditional African society expectation. However, looking at the positive side, Palamuleni (2010), argued that the demographic implication of this include better spouse communication (especially in the area of contraceptive use and

parity, etc), more stable relationships, higher commitment to marriage, low divorce rate, etc. Therefore, Palamuleni (2010) insist that the fact that South African women are slow to getting married. However, "once they tie the knot they tend to be committed to the institution of marriage" (Palamuleni, 2010; Amoateng, 2004). Based on these understandings, the study therefore concludes by recommending that all findings in the study be considered in all programme and policy development around family formations incidence in South Africa.

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