

Participation in the "Erasmus+": Perspectives on Attitudes, Motivational Drivers and Barriers to Engagement

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Abstract

This study examines students' engagement in the "Erasmus+" program in Georgia, their attitudes, motivations, obstacles to participation, and the program's effects on academic and career progress. Survey research was conducted with 215 students, and four focus groups were held with 50 students. The findings revealed, that participants' success in the "Erasmus+" program was associated with positive attitudes towards the program, students' motivations, effective preparation, and strong academic and language skills. A higher success rate was observed among female participants particularly within the age group of 23-29. These groups also expressed a desire to pursue further studies and apply for "Erasmus+". Participating in "Erasmus+" projects enhanced the social and academic skills of students, yet the direct impact on job prospects was uncertain. Non-participation primarily stems from barriers named by more than half of the surveyed students, such as a lack of information, inadequate support, and financial limitations. Previous experiences with mobility programs also influenced their preferences, as participants displayed a preference for further studies in EU countries, while non-applicants pursued educational opportunities in Georgia followed by EU countries.

Through by eliminating the aforementioned barriers, more young people would engage in the "Erasmus+" program, fostering their enhanced educational, professional, personal, and societal development.

Keywords: "Erasmus+", international mobility, student participation, attitudes, motives, barriers to participation.

Introduction

The ERASMUS (European et al. Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), established in 1987 by the European Commission, is one of the essential programs facilitating students' and staff mobility between European countries through co-financing. Students can study in a foreign country under bilateral agreements between host and home institutions (Patricio & Harden, 2010). The programme is divided into 6 sections; it covers 4 fields of education: Higher Education, Vocational Education, General Education, and Adult Education, as well as Youth and Sports sectors. As the "Erasmus+" programme has been successful since its introduction in 2014, it has been extended with a second phase between 2021 and 2027 when it has been allocated with a total budget of around 26 billion EUR.

Georgia, as a "Third Country" in the "Erasmus+" Program, is actively engaged in international collaborations facilitated by "Erasmus+" including capacity-building projects, mobility programs, and cooperative initiatives across various disciplines. Georgia has been recognized for its success within the "Erasmus+" program, ranking 6th out of 141 participating countries based on international CMSs, and has benefited from numerous scholarships and collaborative projects involving Georgian Higher Educational Institutes (HEIs). Close to 10,400 scholarships have been allocated for students and staff ("Erasmus+" national office, 2022).

Studies indicate that internationally mobile students exhibit distinct traits compared to their non-mobile peers, including differences in abilities, chosen fields of study, familial backgrounds, and other personal characteristics (Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Additionally, participants in programs like "Erasmus+" demonstrated superior academic performance both in secondary (Kratz and Netz, 2016) and tertiary education (Di Pietro, 2015; Teichler, 2012). Moreover, they frequently came from more affluent families or had parents who had gone to college (Kratz and Netz, 2016; Di Pietro, 2015). Empirical data suggests that women, younger students, and those in the Arts and Humanities fields are more inclined to engage in international study mobility (Kratz & Netz, 2016). To support inclusive participation nations are now implementing strategies like boosting resources for study abroad programs, enhancing students' understanding of its advantages, and fostering interaction among

local and international students, as well as between alumni and prospective participants (Perna et al., 2015).

Research on international student mobility emphasizes that "Erasmus+" participants tend to perform better academically and have higher career prospects. However, some research suggests that international study mobility may even delay access to initial employment opportunities (Wiers, Jenssen & Try, 2005; Rodriguez, 2013) as graduates develop international social and institutional ties that may discourage seeking employment in their home countries. It is noteworthy, however, that certain exceptions to this pattern have been observed. For instance, research has shown that Italian graduates who pursued studies abroad demonstrated high employment prospects three years after completing their studies (Di Pietro, 2015).

While existing literature widely explores the impact of international students' mobility on their personal and professional development, language proficiency, and intercultural competencies, limited attention has been given to students' perceptions of the "Erasmus+" program itself, particularly in the context of Georgia. Understanding the factors influencing student engagement in the program is fundamental for enhancing program effectiveness and inclusivity.

Using existing literature reviews and empirical research, this article aims to explore students' attitudes, motivations, and obstacles to participation in the "Erasmus+" program. By exploring these factors, the current research aims to provide insights into how institutions and policymakers can promote greater international experiences within the "Erasmus+" framework.

Problem statement

Participation in the "Erasmus+" program has multifaceted benefits for young people. To maximize the potential advantages of the program and foster widespread engagement in the initiative; it is imperative to understand the underlying determinants shaping individuals' decisions regarding program participation including attitudes, motivations, and potential obstacles influencing youth engagement.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1. Student engagement in the "Erasmus+" program is influenced not only by internal factors such as attitudes and motivations but also by external determinants.

H2. Active involvement in "Erasmus+" projects is related with students' professional advancement.

Method

The study utilized a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative survey research with qualitative focus group discussions. Following Creswell's emphasis on method triangulation, this design allowed for a comprehensive exploration of student experiences and perspectives by collecting both numerical data and rich, descriptive insights (Creswell, 2014).

The survey research involved 215 students and was designed to capture broad patterns, trends, and statistical relationships among various factors related to the study's objectives. This quantitative phase was structured using standardized questions, allowing for the effective analysis of frequency, trends, and potential correlations.

In addition, four focus group discussions with a total of 50 students were conducted, providing a deeper, more nuanced understanding of students' thoughts, feelings, and motivations. This qualitative component was crucial in capturing contextual details and personal narratives that could not be fully expressed through the survey alone. Creswell's approach highlights that focus groups are particularly useful for exploring complex topics where interaction among participants can stimulate richer data, as participants build on each other's responses.

Sample

The study applied a "convenient sampling" approach, where participating universities provided lists of their students. Questionnaires were administered to 820 students using Google Forms, and three reminders were sent to survey participants to increase the response rate. Of the 820 students, 215 completed the questionnaires (involving students, both participants and non-participants of "Erasmus+" projects); the response rate was 26%. The respondents were predominantly female (73% of the sample).

The study conducted two focus groups with participant students and two focus groups with non-participating students, totaling 50 participants (28 females and 22 males).

Instrument

The survey instrument was a questionnaire. It provided information about the project's objectives and sampling methodology and assured participants confidentiality. Implicit consent protocols were employed throughout the research process.

The survey instrument included structured questions covering various issues such as demographics, socioeconomic status, participation experiences, attitudes, motivations, future aspirations, and other relevant topics. The questionnaire included 52 questions, including Likert-type attitude scales and some open-ended questions.

A Focus Group guide was specifically developed for focus group sessions.

Data analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS 26, using applicable statistical methods. Focus group data was analyzed using "Content Analysis". The data analysis was performed considering different factors such as gender, age group, and prior experience with "Erasmus+" program whenever relevant.

Results

Background information

Three groups of students were identified in the research study: 61% were students who had never attended the "Erasmus+" program; 29% were students who had taken part in the "Erasmus+" program, and the lowest (10%) were students who were unsuccessful.

Demographic data for the participants is presented in Table 1. Female participants were predominant across all groups. The data revealed gender disparities in the participation in the "Erasmus+" program. In the group of successful applicants, women made up 62 % while men constitute a much smaller percentage, at 38% ($\chi^2 (2) = 26.86; p < .05$).

Table 1
Research Participants' Characteristics

Participants characteristics	Never %	Applied Participants %	Participants Applications were successful %	Whole Group %
Gender *				
Females	73	62	91	83
Males	27	38	9	17
Age *				
18-22	57	33	62	51
23-29	23	57	29	34
30+ and more	20	10	10	16
Education *				
Bachelor of Arts (BA)	61	28	11	54
Master of Arts (MA)	33	54	13	35
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)	71	29	0.0	11
Employment Status *				
Employed	53	76	90	63
Self-employed	3.0	3	19	3
Unemployed	44	21	10	34

Note. * differences by groups are statistically significant

Regarding age differences, the 23-29 age group demonstrated the highest participation rate among "Erasmus+" participants at 57%, whereas the 18-22 age group recorded 33%, and even lower figures were observed in the 30+ age group.

A majority of students who had never applied for "Erasmus+" projects, had attained a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education; In contrast, students who had participated in "Erasmus+" programs as well as those who were unsuccessful, were more likely to have obtained a master's degree.

Among the participants, the employment rate was higher among those whose applications were unsuccessful, followed by "Erasmus+" students.

Irrespective of the student cohort, 59 % of the surveyed students were employed domestically, while 4% were abroad and 3% were self-employed. Among the employed individuals, students who applied but were unsuccessful showed a higher prevalence compared to "Erasmus+" program participants. Statistical analysis revealed significant differences among the groups ($\chi^2(6)=16.862, p<.05$) (see Table 2).

Table 2
Employment Status

Student group	Employed in Georgia %	Employed abroad %	Self-employed %	Un-employed %
1 Students who had never submitted applications for "Erasmus+" programs.	53	0.0	3	44
Students who had participated in "Erasmus+" programs.	69	7	3	21
Students who had applied for "Erasmus+" programs but were unsuccessful in their applications.	71	19	0.0	10
Whole group	59	4	3	34

$\chi^2(6)=33.296, p<.05$

On the other hand, students who have never applied for the "Erasmus+" program were overrepresented among the unemployed students. These findings support Hypothesis 2, suggesting that participation in "Erasmus+" is associated with enhanced employment prospects. However, there is no evidence indicating a direct causality between employment status and studying abroad.

The analysis of salary distribution showed that students who did not apply for an Erasmus+ grant earned the lowest salary (up to 900 GEL), while participants in Erasmus+ projects earned 2001-2500 GEL or more. Students in the highest salary category (more than 2500 GEL) were mostly Erasmus participants. These results supported the hypothesis (H2) that participation in "Erasmus+" projects was positively related to career advancement.

The economic background of the surveyed participants was fairly homogeneous, as the category: – "Money is enough for food and clothes, but not enough for expensive durables like a refrigerator or washing machine" – was dominant among them (see Table 3).

Table 3
Economic Background by Group of Students

Student group	1	2	3	4
1 Students who had never submitted applications for "Erasmus+" programs.	3	7	82	8
2 Students who had participated in "Erasmus+" programs.	4	8	84	4

Students who had applied for "Erasmus+" programs but were unsuccessful in their applications.	3	10	83	7
Whole group	4	7	83	5

Note. 1- We can afford to buy anything we need

2 - We can afford to buy some expensive durables like a refrigerator or washing machine

3 Money is enough for food and clothes, but not enough for expensive durables like a refrigerator or washing machine

4 Money is enough for food only, but not for clothes

Looking at the differences among these three groups, it becomes clear, that what separates them are their levels of education, employment, and income.

Source of information and participation in the "Erasmus+" program

The cohort with no "Erasmus+" experience primarily accessed data through the official websites of their Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), as well as from fellow students and peers. Conversely, participants enrolled in the "Erasmus+" predominantly relied on information sourced from institutional websites, "Erasmus+" application guidelines, and fellow students. Furthermore, individuals who were unsuccessful in securing grants primarily obtained information from institutional websites and administrative personnel within their universities.

We asked research participants to self-assess their level of English language proficiency on a 7-point scale, with 1 representing the lowest level and 7 representing the highest. The "Erasmus +" participants showed the highest proficiency level ($M=6$; $SD=1.8$) followed by those students whose applications were unsuccessful ($M=4.5$; $SD=.9$). Non-participating students had an average proficiency level ($M=3.5$; $SD=.9$).

Attitudes and motivations towards participation in the "Erasmus +"

The participants were asked to express their attitudes towards international mobility based on various factors. The analysis presented in Table 4 suggests that participants had the most positive attitudes, while non-participants demonstrated the lowest level of positivity. However, it is noteworthy that the overall attitude of even non-participants was higher than the average.

Table 4
Attitude towards "Erasmus+" by Group of Students

	Internatio nal Mobility	Cultural curiosity	Openness to new experienc es	Average score
1.Students who never applied for "Erasmus+"	3.9	3.8	3.5	3.8
2.Students who participated in Erasmus+ projects	7	5	7	6.3
3Students who applied for "Erasmus+" but their applications were not successful	5	5	4.5	4.8
Whole group				
Average	4.8	3.5	4.4	4.97

"Erasmus +" applicants and individuals whose applications were unsuccessful were primarily driven by similar factors, such as a desire to enhance their expertise and competences in their fields, improve their language proficiency, and improve their social skills. Participating students reported higher levels of motivation than students whose application was not successful (see Table 5).

Table 5

Motivation for Applying for an "Erasmus+" Project

Selection criteria	Students participated Erasmus+ projects %	who in	Students whose applications were not successful %
1. Improving knowledge and competence in the field of study	6.6		5
2. Learning/improving a foreign language	5.5		5
3. Development of social skills (adaptability, communication, etc.)	5		4 3
4. Improve employability in Georgia or abroad	6		5
5. Gaining experience in different learning and teaching practices			3
	4.90		4.17

Comments from focus group participants:

„What especially helped me to be successful in „Erasmus +“ was a high academic performance, good command of English, and having information from previous participants (male, participant student).

"Erasmus+" is very good, but other countries, for example the United States, are no less interesting. The focus should be broader" (female, participant student).

The main reasons for not applying for the "Erasmus+" program are: a lack of information about the "Erasmus+" Program (60%); Insufficient support in the application process (11%) and financial difficulties (10%). It should be mentioned that "Erasmus+" Participants identified the following barriers to joining "Erasmus+": language (36%), lack of information from the home university (16%) and program compatibility (39%).

All of them can be considered barriers that confirm hypotheses (H1).

Comments from focus group participants:

"It is challenging to find information. Students who participated have more experience, that is why the same students participate several times; new students should be given some priority." (male, non-participant student)."

"This program gives young people excellent opportunities to improve their lives and knowledge. It should be open to many more students; they need good guidance " (male, participant student).

Each individual (100%) autonomously decided to participate in the „Erasmus +“ program and exclusively selected host countries within the European Union. The "Erasmus+" cohort, comprising 97% of students, selected EU member states, France, Germany, and Italy, alongside others. The selection criteria predominantly included geopolitical stability (70%), air travel accessibility (20%) and geographical proximity (10%).

In general, students assessed the "Erasmus+" program experience very positively, scoring higher than the average of 3.5 out of 5 in different areas, ranging from 3.6 to 4.6 (see Table 6). Particularly positive was the evaluation of the overall Erasmus+ experience followed by assistance received from the host institution, quality of teaching methods, and the expertise of academic staff at the host university.

Table 6

Evaluation of the Various Aspects of Participation in the "Erasmus+" Program (where 1 means very negative and 7 very positive evaluation)

Evaluation criteria	Score points (1-7 scale)	SD
1. Erasmus+ experience	4.6	.5

2. Home university's support for study abroad	4.1	.8
3. Host university's support for study abroad	4.3	.9
4. Social-cultural integration in the environment of the host university	4.2	1.1
5. Quality of teaching methods	4.3	.7
6. Quality of courses offered	4.1	.8
7. Academic staff qualifications at the host university	4.3	.7
8. Host university's support in finding housing	3.6	1.3
Average	4.2	

All "Erasmus+" students reported improved skills in working with people from different cultural backgrounds (100%). Additionally, almost everyone agreed that they improved their English proficiency (97%) and are more interested in new challenges (97%). Furthermore, participants had a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses (93%), were more confident in their abilities and roles, and gained a deeper understanding of Europe, the European Union, and European values (93%) (see Table 7).

Table 7
Self-evaluation of the Impact of the "Erasmus+" Program

Item	Agree %	Neutral %	Not agree %
1. I am more confident in my abilities and filed	93	7	
2. I know better my strengths and weaknesses	93	7	
3. I am more able to collaborate with people of other backgrounds and cultures	100.0		
4. I am more interested in new challenges	97	3	
5. I can better analyze information critically	89	17	
6. I learned more about Europe, the European Union and the European values	93	7	
7. I can better use digital technologies in learning or work	66	28	7
8. I believe that the chances of getting a new or better job have increased	76	17	7
9. I have a clear idea of my professional career aspirations and goals	86		14
10. I improved my English	97	3	

Focus group participants also positively evaluated participation:

"I am very happy that I had such a chance in my life: The teaching method and quality of the university were just excellent. The same can be said about the professors" (female, participant student).

"The program gave me a lot, except knowledge of social contact was very exciting for me; I had no chance before to meet people from so many different backgrounds; I try to keep in contact with them." (male, participant student).

Almost all students who participated in the "Erasmus+" Program mentioned that their employment status improved (93%), though less than one third (28%) confirmed that their income increased.

Future plans

The survey results revealed that more than half of the respondents (57 %) preferred to pursue further education in the EU. Following behind, 29 % of respondents preferred to pursue further education in Georgia. A smaller proportion of respondents, 9%, indicated a preference for other locations such as Turkey and Serbia. Additionally, only 5% of respondents reported that they do not have any plans for further education.

Students who had taken part in "Erasmus+" projects often express an interest in continuing their studies in European Union countries. In contrast, those who had not applied for "Erasmus+" opportunities are more likely to want to pursue their studies within Georgia. This suggests that previous experiences with mobility programs like "Erasmus+" influence students' aspirations and preferences regarding future academic endeavors.

A notably higher percentage of women expressed intentions to continue their studies compared to men. Specifically, 44 % of surveyed women indicated a desire to pursue further studies in Georgia. About 35% of surveyed women planned to continue their studies in the European Union, compared to 27% of men, while a minority of surveyed women (9%) and a more significant proportion of men (36%) did not plan to pursue further education ($\chi^2(3) = 8.894; p < .05$). In terms of age groups, a significant portion of the 18-22 age group expressed interest in continuing their studies (100%), compared to 71% in the 23-29 age group and 70% in the 30+ age group. This trend in Erasmus+ participation rates was evident, with 82% of participants in the 18-22 age group, 60% in the 23-29 age group, and 28% in the 30+ age group cohort ($\chi^2(2) = 16.725; p < .05$).

Considering the positive attitudes of respondents towards the "Erasmus+" project and the high level of satisfaction among the participating students, it is not surprising that approximately 78% of the respondents were eager to apply for "Erasmus+" projects. Notably, a significant portion of this group comprises students who have already participated (55%), followed by students who previously applied but were unsuccessful in the 'Erasmus+' program (35%). Interestingly, students who have never applied comprise 10%. This latter group is important in the study because their attitudes suggest that they could apply for "Erasmus+" projects if they do not encounter many barriers during the application process.

In terms of interest in the "Erasmus+" program, a significantly higher percentage of women, at 71 %, expressed their intentions to apply, compared to only 27 % of men ($\chi^2(1)=8.352; p<.05$). This discrepancy suggests a gender disparity in the tendency to participate in the "Erasmus+" program.

Correlation and Regression analysis

The correlation analysis identified several key findings about students' participation in Erasmus+ programs:

1. There is a strong and positive correlation ($r = 0.65, p < 0.01$) between students' attitudes towards "Erasmus+" and their participation.
2. A moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.45, p < 0.05$) indicates that students who experience fewer barriers, such as financial or logistical obstacles, were more likely to participate in Erasmus+. Reducing these barriers could encourage greater participation.
3. A positive correlation ($r = 0.40, p < 0.01$) shows that students involved in "Erasmus+" programs tend to report better career advancement. This highlights the program's potential benefits for students' long-term career outcomes.

Regression Analysis for Erasmus+ Participation

The regression analysis (Table 8) provides further insights into the factors that influence "Erasmus+" participation:

1. Positive attitudes are a significant predictor of participation, with a standardized coefficient ($\beta = 0.45, p < 0.01$).
2. The presence of barriers is a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -0.30, p < 0.05$), suggesting that as barriers increase, the likelihood of participation decreases. This underlines the importance of addressing and mitigating obstacles that prevent students from joining Erasmus+.
3. Students' motivations are also a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.35, p < 0.05$), with stronger motivational drivers correlating with higher participation. This finding suggests that fostering intrinsic motivations can encourage more students to take part in the program.

Table 8
Regression Analysis

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients (β)	Standard Error (SE)	Standardized Coefficients (β)	t-value	Significance (p value)
Attitudes toward Erasmus+	0.45	0.10	0.45	4.50	< 0.01
Barriers to Participation	-0.30	0.08	-0.30	-3.75	< 0.05
Motivational Drivers	0.35	0.09	0.35	3.89	< 0.05

The regression model explains 49% of the variance in Erasmus+ participation ($R^2 = 0.49$, $p < 0.01$). The model is a strong fit, as evidenced by an F-value of 16.35, indicating that these factors collectively play a substantial role in predicting participation in "Erasmus+".

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has shown that attitudes toward the "Erasmus +" program and motivations play a critical role in participation in the "Erasmus+" program, together with different social factors. Female participants in "Erasmus+" programs, especially those aged 23-29, showed more excellent success rates. Other research also confirmed that positive attitudes towards international mobility, such as cultural curiosity and openness to new experiences, significantly influence students' decisions to join the program (Souto-Otero et al., 2013). A more significant proportion of female participants, expressed interest in further studies and indicated a desire to apply for the "Erasmus+" program. Regarding age variances, the 23-29 age group was more engaged in the "Erasmus+" program, while those aged 18-22 displayed enthusiasm for pursuing further studies in a general context and specifically within "Erasmus+". These findings underscore the importance of addressing gender and age-specific factors and barriers in promoting equal opportunities for participation in mobility programs such as "Erasmus+".

"Erasmus+" participants were driven to enhance academic knowledge, social skills, and language proficiency. Many participants reported improvements in their analytical capabilities, cultural sensitivity, and interpersonal skills. Notably, the students expressed appreciation for the values of the European Union. Other research also demonstrated that participants become more open to diverse perspectives through their cross-cultural experience (European Commission, 2018).

Research has shown that non-participation in "Erasmus+" was primarily related to barriers rather than negative attitudes or lack of motives. The primary factors contributing to non-participation encompass a perceived deficit in comprehensive understanding of the "Erasmus+" initiative, inadequacies throughout the application phase, and financial impediments. Though participants displayed the positive attitudes and highest motivation, as hypothesized (H1), students' participation was not solely dependent on these factors, but external barriers also played a significant role. Previous studies conducted in Georgia highlighted a range of barriers both adults and young people face in accessing education (Kitiasvili & Tasker, 2016; Kitiashvili et al., 2018). Cross's Model (1981, 1992) such as situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational barriers, including financial constraints, time limitations, and transportation issues, are prevalent. Dispositional barriers, encompassing negative attitudes, beliefs, and low self-esteem, are within the individual's control to a greater extent. However, in the current research, there were no obstacles related to dispositional barriers, as the overall attitudes toward studying abroad were mostly positive.

Drawing from social psychology principles, attitudes significantly influence human behavior. The current study discovered that, despite having positive attitudes, many students were not participating in the program. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 2011) translating attitudes into behavior involves various factors. Key factors include intention, which encompasses motivation and readiness to act, and perceived behavioral control, which is the individual's subjective assessment of their ability to perform the behavior. Thus, it is crucial to overcome barriers to enhance perceived behavioral control and foster youth participation in the program.

While the direct link between studying abroad through the "Erasmus+" program and improved academic and employment outcomes may not be definitively established, the evidence suggests that such experiences can indeed contribute to students' personal and professional development. Furthermore, previous participation in the program influences students' preferences for future study destinations. Students who had participated in "Erasmus+" tend to express a desire to

continue their studies in European Union countries, while those who have never applied for "Erasmus+" opportunities were more motivated to pursue their studies within Georgia.

By addressing the aforementioned external barriers and encouraging positive attitudes especially towards participation among students who have never applied for "Erasmus+", it's possible to increase participation of students in "Erasmus+". There is a growing recognition of the importance of supporting more students' participation in study abroad programs. Governments and educational institutions worldwide are implementing various measures to support study abroad. These efforts aim to enhance educational outcomes, promote global citizenship, and prepare students for success in a fast-changing world.

It's important to recognize some limitations of the study like a small group of participants being involved and the chance that only people who really like the "Erasmus+" program participated. This might mean that the results cannot be applied to everyone in the country.

Though, this study represents a pioneering effort to investigate Georgian students' attitudes toward participation in "Erasmus+" initiatives, elucidate the factors influencing participation, and identify barriers. Future research should aim to include larger and more diverse cohorts, employ a wide range of methodological approaches, conduct international comparative analysis, and incorporate longitudinal studies.

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