

Harnessing Photographic Techniques for Advocacy in Visualizing Domestic Violence Experiences in Kabale Municipality, Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This arts-based, practice-led research paper explored how photographic methodology can be adopted as an arts-based advocacy strategy to challenge domestic violence (DV) in Kabale Municipality, Southwestern Uganda. As one of the widespread manifestations of gender violence, DV affects 56% of women aged 15-49, who have ever been married in the country. Yet, existing awareness raising initiatives are text-intensive, therefore inaccessible to most Ugandans who have low literacy levels, and unable to evoke the complex feelings that victims experience. Borrowing from Visual Communication Theory (Sontag, 1977), the framework of studium and punctum (Barthes, 1980), and the Photovoice methodology (Wang & Burris, 1997), the study utilized qualitative research methodologies of in-depth interviews (n=34), observation, and community-centred photographic production. The research highlighted the regularity of DV in Kabale, its normalization, the culture of silence surrounding it, and the fear, social stigma and weak institutional support placed on survivors. It also identified the photographic artwork as having the greatest potential in that 94.1% of the participants experienced strong emotional reactions to the images, 91.2% were willing to assist victims, and 82.4% were willing to show the photographs in their communities. It concludes that photographic artwork can powerfully evoke emotion and action, incur broader community discourse, promote agency of the powerless, sit with local culture, and therefore, be adopted as a culturally-sensitive, arts-based advocacy strategy against domestic violence that crosses language and literacy differences. By offering preliminary research on the arts-based advocacy strategy in the Sub-Saharan regions, the study suggests practical utilizations for policy makers, development practice, NGOs, researchers, and communities.

Keywords: Photography. Domestic Violence. Visual Advocacy. Photovoice. Kabale Municipality, Uganda. Gender-Based Violence. Practice-Based Research.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Domestic violence (DV) is one of the most widespread yet least reported human rights violations which have dire physical, psychological and socio-economic implications on the survivors, their households and communities in general. In Uganda, domestic violence prevalence rates are very high with 56% of the women aged between 15-49 years, living with their husbands, having experienced physical and/or sexual violence from their husbands according to the Uganda bureau of Statistics (2021, cited in Ssevume Male et al., 2023). Duty to the statistics above, even where there are legal instruments (e.g., Domestic Violence Act (2010)), and

awareness raising campaigns, DV is highly normalized, ignored and under-reported especially in highly conservative areas of Kabale Municipality in South-Western Uganda.

Further, the problem is intensified by the presentation of advocacy interventions that are narrowly time- and language- bound and use respond-oriented, text and oral based presentation delivery means that do not effect survival in low literacy populations and do not technically express emotional trauma that survivors go through using domestic violence experience (Plam & Potelwa, 2024; Scribd Research Database, 2024). Moreover, the fact that domestic violence is viewed in some cultures as a “private family” (Ssevume Male et al., 2023) issue discourages survivors from reaching out to others for help, with only 33% of abused women disclosing to someone (Kisakye et al., 2022).

All visual approaches to advocacy through the medium of photography would continue the work of theorist such as Sontag (1977) who said within the mass quantity of photographs, ‘ethics of seeing,’ which can alter our relationship with the world’s human suffering and its facts.

Barthes (1980) in his theory of photographic illustrated the idea of presence with a photographic object which draws on the studium, the cultural significance of the photograph and the punctum, the emotionally prickling, ‘wounding’ detail within a photo that resonates and provokes compassion within the viewer. Based on the theorists above, the participatory Photovoice methodology created by Wang and Burris (1997) provides some basis of television as advocacy, community discussion and action.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Photography’s use in social justice advocacy has an established history. From poverty photographs taken by Jacob Riis in the 1890s (Leavitt, 1978), to Lewis Hine’s photographs of child labour which helped start legislative reform, photography has been used to document social injustices to influence public opinion (Levitt, 1978). Lu’s (2024) studies show that photographs of social movements elicit strong emotions in viewers, which increases the chance they participate in activism. Open Society Foundations’ Documentary Photography Project has documented human rights abuses in over 50 countries, forcing acknowledgement of previously ignored atrocities (Perry World House, 2025).

The use of the arts in the African region

In the African region visual art has been found to be a powerful means for addressing GBV. Plam and Potelwa (2024) identified therapeutic and advocacy functions of visual art works in Eastern Cape South Africa. They argued that therapeutic use of visual art allowed survivors ‘to express the trauma experienced and communicate what they cannot verbalise.’ Woollett et al (2023) reported that in rural South Africa arts-based approaches created safe, welcoming, and engaging environments for conversations about uncomfortable issues, helping dismantle barriers to disclosure and increasing understanding and empathy for stigmatized experiences.

Jui et al. (2021) revealed that the Spotlight Initiative project in Mozambique uses photography, and large-scale public art works are created to commemorate and agitate for awareness regarding GBV and bodily autonomy. They have been viewed by more than 900 000 people.

In Uganda, an investigation into how graphic design was used for domestic violence awareness campaigns (Scribd Research Database, 2024) revealed numerous shortcomings, such as the overuse of texts and little innovation in graphics, and failure to design specifically for low literacy users. Survivors claimed, “The symbolism in visual images speaks the pain and implications than just saying.”

Although all these studies showed promising results, none, systematic practice-based research has been conducted on photography to be used as an advocacy tool for domestic violence in Uganda, let alone, in Kabale Municipality. This study was to address these issues.

Purpose and Objectives

This study aimed at examining the use of a selected photographic technique in practice-based visual storytelling to increase awareness and campaign against domestic violence in Kabale Municipality, Uganda. The specific objectives were:

1. To investigate the main themes and experiences related to intimate partner violence in Kabale Municipality.
2. To establish photography techniques suitable for the visual representations of oppression and domestic violence
3. To create and exhibit photographic artwork as tools of campaigns to enhance awareness on domestic violence in Kabale Municipality.

The Value of this Research

The study thus makes a valuable contribution to the expanding knowledge on of practice-based visual arts research in Africa (Woollett et al., 2023; Plam & Potelwa, 2024) by drawing evidence from the Ugandan context and making the case for practice-based research to be recognized as a valid form of academic inquiry in arts and design education. The photographic works have also provided practical advocacy materials for NGOs, community-based organizations, health professionals and government agencies operating GBV awareness initiatives in Kabale Municipality, and elsewhere in the country, as the Gender-Based Violence Learning Network (2025) noted: Trauma- and violence-informed visual communication results in ‘more inclusive and safe experiences for participants, particularly survivors.’

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach and Design

The research methodology for this project involved a qualitative paradigm and practice-based research (PBR) approach. The use of a qualitative approach was relevant, in this study, due to the explorative nature of the research about the awareness and expression of the personal, contextual and emotional experiences of domestic violence, which cannot necessarily be quantifiably measured (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The PBR approach, where ‘Creative work is a form of research and produces research outputs’, as described by Smith and Dean (2009, p 45 (in ECU, 2024)) was utilized to evidence the photographs as a visual representation of the research outputs themselves. This is similar to arts-based research as described by Mc Niff (2018, p 18 (in Methods in Psychology, 2025)), with more emphasis placed here on the process of making art as the mode of research engagement.

It was an explorative and qualitative creative design inquiry, which is a method that was assigned as appropriate for this study because there was not so much existing literature about photographic advocacy to domestic violence in Uganda. A modified Photovoice approach (Wang & Burris, 1997) was used whereby the researcher engaged stakeholders in the process of designing photographic story which is in alignment with Gilbert community centred approach to photography (2018).

Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in three interrelated theoretical frameworks:

Visual Communication Theory: the work largely reflects Sontag (1977) On Photography, which argues that photographs “change and magnify our ideas about what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe...a language, and, even more significantly, an ethics of seeing.” Sontag foregrounded the evidentiary

value of photographs the ‘something...we hear about and doubt, becomes credible when we see its photograph’.

Barthes’ notion of **Studium and Punctum**: Studium refers to the general, cultural, political message contained within the photo; punctum is the “wounding” element of the image that “pricks” or emotionally touches the viewer. This helps account for the effectiveness of some photographs in conveying advocacy messages as opposed to others.

Social Documentary Photography and Advocacy Art: Levin (1978) recorded the role of photographers such as Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis who took images to aid social reform. Lu (2024) discovered emotional reactions to social movement images several times heightened intentions to become politically active. Photovoice(Wang & Burris,1997) offers a step-by-step framework for participatory visual advocacy, a melding of photo-taking and storytelling about lived experience targeted towards decision-makers.

Study Area and Population

The study area for this study was in Kabale Municipality, the administrative centre of Kabale District in South-Western Uganda, about 420KM from the capital city, Kampala. Kabale is a fertile highland landscape with a rich cultural heritage and an economy based on subsistence and commercial agriculture (Kuol et al., 2015). The studied population comprised: members of Kabale Municipality who had knowledge on domestic violence or who had experienced domestic violence including victims, witnesses and relatives of domestic violence victims; staff of services dealing with domestic violence (NGO run or community-based services, hospital personnel, police GBV desks, social workers); community and religious leaders believed to influence social attitudes to domestic violence.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was used to obtain participants with knowledge and experience. A sample of 36 participants was used; they were divided into the following three groups: residents (n=12), personnel working in domestic violence services (n=12), and community/religious leaders (n=12). This sample size was sufficient to reach data saturation where no new themes were gained from further inquiry. Participants were recruited from community members, local community agencies, and through third party referrals. Participants were ethically recruited.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through three complementary methods:

Detailed semi-structured interviews:34 interviews were conducted, 94.4% response rate. Each lasted for minutes. Interviews were conducted in Rukiga, Luganda or English, using a translator when necessary. The semi-structured interview guide collected data about knowledge and experience of domestic violence, cultural practices and perceptions and the role of visual arts for awareness raising.

View: Non-intrusive observation was used to record external and internal surroundings of Kabale Municipality and used it to prepare photographs. Observation of the internal and external environment, domestic and public settings, social association and culturally important features among others was recorded on research journal.

Visual Documentation

Photographers, with the aid of colleagues for onsite activity, documented the research environment in a systematic way, and this served as data as well as a work of early artistic research. In cases where a literal visual representation of violence was ethically problematic, images were symbolic, metaphorical and contextual.

Photographic Production Process

Photographic artworks were created following a five-step process of creative inquiry:

- Step 1. Theme Choosing- Thematic analysis of interview data was used to find out the different themes (such as separation, fear, injuries, finance exploited, hope) which can be used as the guides of photographic project design.
- Step 2: Concept Creation - The photographic concepts were based upon composition and lighting, symbolism, story. Mood boards, mock-up layouts, and community consultation.
- Step 3: Photographic Creation - taken in the form of environmental portraiture, symbolic still life of domestic objects, documentary Photography and metaphorical images.
- Step 4: Editing and presentation - Digital editing (Adobe Lightroom) improved presentation and communication of ideas without compromising documentary value.
- Step 5: Audience assessment photos were displayed in Kabale Municipality and audience feedback elicited through interview questionnaires and discussions to evaluate the impact of the advocacy.

Data Analysis

Qualitative interview data was subjected to Thematic Analysis, according to Braun and Clarkes (2006) six phases: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Measures taken to ensure trustworthiness included member checking, increased fieldwork, method triangulation and the use of a reflexive journal.

Ethical Considerations

Methodology of the research complied to the principles of Belmont Report by respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. Permission for the study was granted by the Bishop Stuart University Research Ethics Committee (BSU-REC) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST). Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants. Assistance was provided to illiterate participants through reading of consent forms. Confidentiality of the participants was guaranteed through use of pseudonyms, utilization of password-protected data and photographs' blind processing (using silhouettes, cropping, focus on details). Each respondent was paid 10,000 UGX. The trauma- informed interviewing protocol was followed and information about counselling and other services (UCASU) made available to victims of violence and share with researchers at any point the interview became too traumatic. Research was attached to the trauma- and violence- informed visual communications approach (GBV Learning Network, 2025).

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSION

Results

Demographic Characteristics

A total of 34 participants completed interviews, 34 (94.4%) response rate. the ages that were most represented were 18-24 years and 55+ years (each 26. 5%) and were the least represented ages being from 45-54 years (11.8%). The gender of participants consisted of 21 females (61.8%) and 13 males (38.2%). The females had more direct experience of domestic violence and were willing to discuss the issue, thus more were participants.

Objective One: Survivor Experiences of Domestic Violence

Findings identified that Domestic Violence in Kabale Municipality occur very frequently and could be expressed as physical violence, intimidation, psychological violence and neglect. Respondents also expressed that domestic violence is accepted and private issue. an informant said, “Physical violence because the children have burns” while no. said, “Domestic violence in this area is mainly intimidation and step-mother criticism.”

Major causes were identified as poverty, alcoholism and illiteracy as well as cultural factors that believed in polygamy and witchcraft. Community’s response to domestic violence was discouraging they responded unprofessionally and on an informal manner and the cases were not reported to the Police instead the solutions were reconciliation counselling and mediation. Willingness to report was also discouraging where fear, shame, and stigma and institutions betrayed women. The most risk groups were identified as women, children, orphans, the people living with disabilities by one of the respondents we are going to mention as follows “The so-called fornicator children living with the stepmothers are risking fire...” while another petitioner said, “People living with disabilities and women are the most risk groups”.

Thematic analysis identified four main themes: silence (psychological, physical or “private issue”), trauma (testimonies of physical and psychological abuse), resilience (survivors experiences of perseverance and community reconciliation activities), and hope (photography’s potential to change attitudes and generate action).

Objective Two Photographic Techniques for Advocacy

All participants agreed that photographs had the ability to portray feelings and communicate messages without using words. One participant said, “Yes, visual images can show pain and effects of domestic violence clearly.” Various photographic methods were successful:

Photojournalism conveyed the live force of violence. The author of that interview said that “the photo of a woman battered by her husband gave me the most impact,” that is in Barthes’ terms, the punctum.

Emotional Portraits invited the viewer into a more personal domain, through their close-ups of faces and expressions, which spoke of pain, resistance and silence. Of course, great sensitivity was needed here, one respondent warned, ‘Showing the faces of victims should not be done since it embarrasses them.’

This type of photography depicted ‘actual’ events and social interactions. Another person commented “Yes, since pictures speak for themselves” which agrees with Sontag’s description of photography as an ethics of seeing.

Visual Storytelling by sequencing and theme framing depicted domestic violence as a complex social problem. The sample claimed that photographs “encouraged the community to reconcile, accept one another and created awareness of domestic violence and its effects.”

Objective Three: Advocacy Outcomes

Photography as a form of advocacy was highly effective in increasing awareness, providing discussion and facilitating attitudinal change. “They made me feel sad but also aware that domestic violence is a serious problem which must stop” responded one participant. “The photographs are important and educative. They motivate the community to prevent domestic violence and help the victims” added another.

Quantitative questionnaire results confirmed these findings:

- Emotional response 52.9% strongly agreed and 41.2% agreed that photographs were emotionally powerful concerning domestic violence (94.1% altogether)

- Willing to be Supportive of Survivors: 44.1% strongly agreed and 47.1% agreed that they would be supportive of survivors (91.2%)
- Sharing Photographs with Communities: 44.1% of the respondents strongly agreed and 47.1% agreed that they would be willing to share images with members of their communities (91.2% altogether).



The photographs evoked sadness, empathy, and a desire to respond like what Barthes calls the punctum. In Runyankore-Rukiga, one participant stated, Ninyenda kubuza abantu obutanganguka (I want to stop domestic violence).

Figure 1.1: Visual Ethics of Suffering in Photography

Source: New York Times (2018).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study was underpinned by the conceptual framework below which articulates the connection between photographic practice and advocacy results

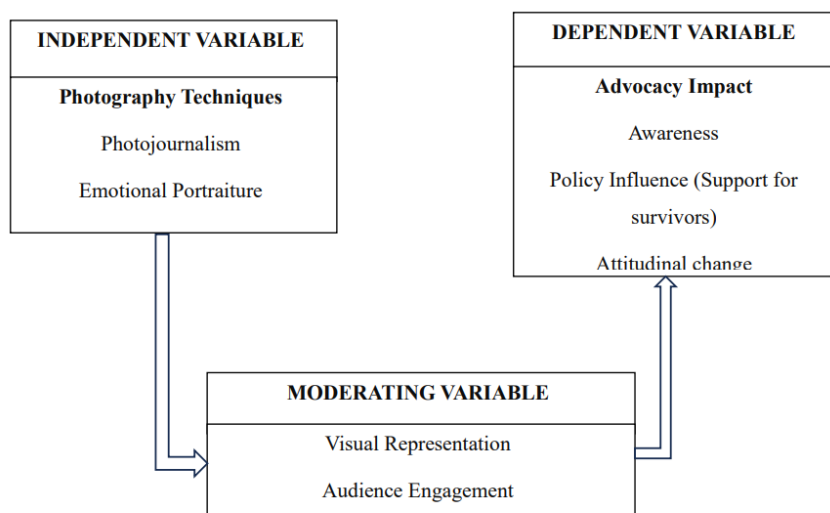


Figure 1.2: Conceptual Framework

DISCUSSION

The results once again proved that domestic violence in the Municipality of Kabale is a normalized, complex and culturally silenced phenomenon where there is a lack of proper institutional responses, as explained by

Kisakye et al. (2022) Ssevume Male et al. (2023) and Ndyabawe (2019). The fact that the dominant themes identified were silence, trauma, resilience and hope are in agreement with the conceptual framework where Sontag (1977), talks about photography as an “ethics of seeing” and Barthes (1980) identified as punctum the emotionally provoking and wounding detail in a photograph which makes the viewer empathetically relate.

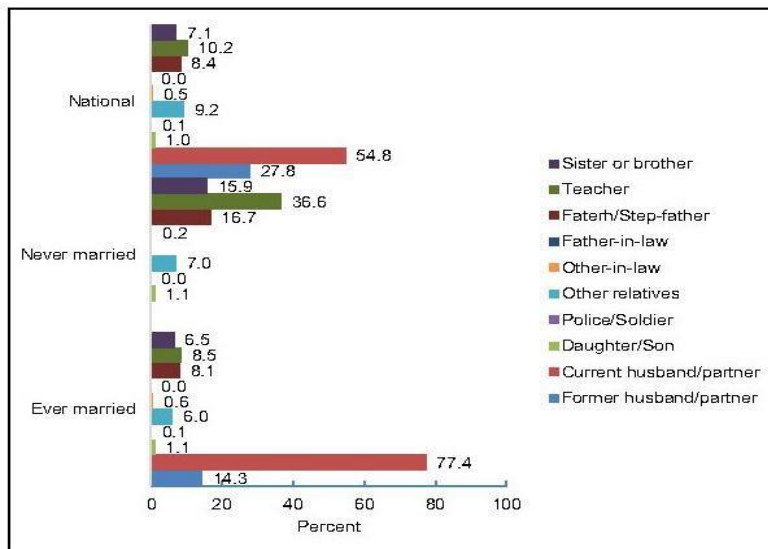


Figure 1.3: Perpetrators of physical violence against women

Source: Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UDHS) (2025)

The art of the photographic methods of photojournalism, emotional portraits, documentary imagery and visual stories are convincingly revealing their capability, as the research of Plam and Potelwa (2024) and Woollett et al. (2023) established in the power of visual arts for advocacy and recuperation. The insurmountable percentage of emotional reaction (94.1%), agreement in support of survivors (91.2%) and agreeing to share the photographs (82.4%) indicates that photography indeed can be used to defeat the culture of silence, evoke empathy and turn groups into action, based on the Photovoice method (Wang & Burris, 1997).



Figure 1.4 - Title: A fight between couples



Figure 1.5 - Sexual harassment.



Figure 1.6 -Emotional scene of a boy taking care of his young siblings, consequently after couple's fight/disagree and abandoning the kids.



Figure 1.7– Emotional scene of a boy worried while taking care of his young siblings. The abandoned children in such a situation like this struggle living in isolation and as destitutes

The ethical concerns expressed by participants, such as the caution needed in portraying survivors, reflect the advice given by Gilbert (2018) and Schwartz and van den Berg (2019) for the use of community-focused, trauma-sensitive photography. The use of metaphorical and symbolic images in the face of ethical obstacles in representing survivors created a desire to be sensitive toward the dignity and privacy of survivors:

LIMITATIONS

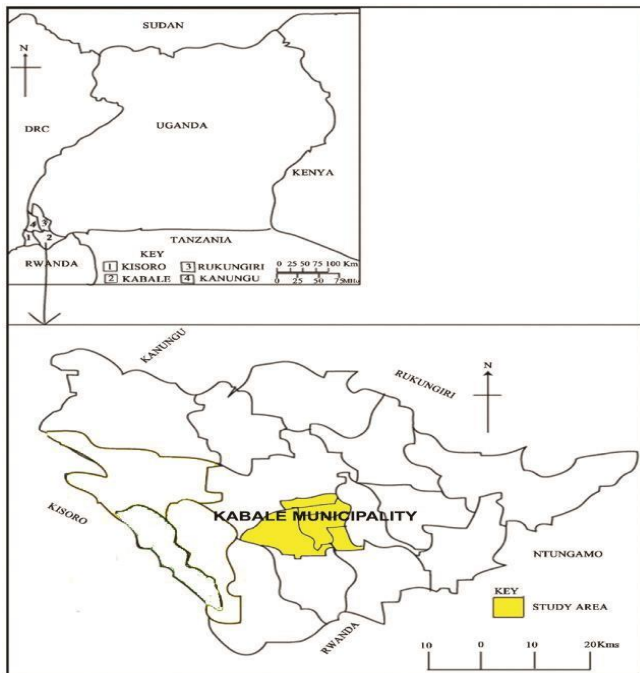
There following limitations were acknowledged: the restriction of the study to the Kabale Municipality setting, restricting the generalizations to other settings; the possibility of self-selection bias, determining the discussion content; recognition of the authors own subjectivity in practice-based photography; potential loss of meaning in translation due to language and culture differences; ethical restrictions, limiting photography of certain themes; resource and time limitations, restricting photo productions. These were addressed through reflexivity, member checking and triangulation of methods.

CONCLUSION

The results from this research provide conclusive evidence that photography can be a potent and culturally sensitive advocacy tool for addressing domestic violence in Kabale Municipality. The research emphasizes

that domestic violence is (a) a widespread, normalized, and silenced phenomenon, and that photography techniques such as photojournalism, emotional portraits, documentary photography, and visual narration induce empathy, create consciousness, and mobilize community participation in its prevention. The recorded 94.1% of participants who experienced emotional reactions, 91.2% who are willing to help violence survivors, and 82.4% who are comfortable with having photographs shared with others, constitute evidential proof that photography can dispel the cultural silence imposed on domestic violence.

Map : Location of Kabale District within Uganda



Source: Twagiramaria, et al. (2016)

This contribution is part of the expanding documentation on practice-based visual arts research within Africa (Woollett et al 2023; Plam & Potehla 2024) brought by this study to empirical documentation the Ugandan case. It shows empirically how photography can go beyond a literacy language and that of the image, communicate complex and sensitive emotional representations, and nurture sympathy and solidarity among those in the community. The research creates opportunity to test the theories of theorists such as Sontag (1977), Barthes (1980), and Wang and Burris (1997) and find empirically that intentional mission of a practice with a positive ethical ground could be used as an agent for advocacy.

Four key practice implications are as follows: that policymakers ground visual advocacy in national and local GBV strategies; that NGOs represent the use of participatory photography and Photovoice as a best practice; that researchers implement and adapt practice-based arts research methods; and that communities create Art & Dialogue spaces to challenge the silence around domestic violence.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings, future research should:

1. Conduct comparative studies in other regions of Uganda to understand contextual differences and learn to tailor visual advocacy approaches.
2. If possible, design and conduct longitudinal research to track the changes photographic advocacy engenders in attitudes, practices, and policies.

3. Consider different art forms mural painting, theatre, music, digital storytelling to include other audiences and provide different outlets for New Yorkers who have survived.
4. Build survivor-led visual research make survivor the lead researcher and decision-maker all along the way.
5. Carry out quantitative impact assessments to evaluate statistically the impact of visual appeal on help seeking, reporting, and landmark change.

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