

**Sexual violence as a form of abuse in men's experiences of female perpetrated intimate partner violence**

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## **Abstract**

The issue of men's sexual victimisation in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV) where the perpetrator is female has received minimal attention. This article brings together and analyses data from two empirical studies conducted in the UK - one exploring men's experiences of being forced-to-penetrate women, and another investigating men's experiences of female perpetrated IPV. Analysis of the data found that men experienced sexual violence alongside a range of other abusive behaviours, but that there was a clear relationship between the sexual violence and physical violence/ force, and coercive and controlling behaviours that they experienced. These novel insights improve our understanding about men's sexual and domestic violence victimisation, as well as challenge gender and sex-role stereotypes around men and masculinity and the (im)possibility of them experiencing sexual and domestic abuse from a female partner.

## **Introduction**

Sexual violence within intimate relationships is an issue that has received a substantial amount of attention within existing academic literature (e.g., see Frieze, 1983; Martin, Taft & Resick, 2007). This is particularly the case in feminist scholarship, where the experiences of women at the hands of abusive male partners have been extensively explored (e.g., Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006; Bonomi, Anderson, Rivara & Thompson, 2007). Whilst men's experiences of intimate partner violence (IPV) within heterosexual relationships have been considered (e.g., see Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007; Archer, 2000), the scope of this research is much more limited, with very little attention given to men's experiences of sexual violence within this context. This article adds to the research on men's experiences of IPV perpetrated by women by bringing together and analysing data gathered from two empirical studies in the UK – one exploring men's experiences of being forced-to-penetrate (FTP) women (Weare 2018a; 2018b), and another investigating men's experiences of female perpetrated IPV (Bates, 2019a; 2019b). Drawing upon and analysing the data from these studies, this article explores links between sexual violence and other forms of abuse experienced by men in heterosexual IPV relationships. In doing so it explores the importance of recognising the potential for men to experience sexual violence perpetrated by their female partners, and explores the wider abusive context in which this behaviour might exist. Understanding men's experiences of sexual violence within abusive relationships and how this links to other abuse experienced within the relationship is important to challenge stereotypes around men's victimisation. It also has implications for practitioners who engage with and support male survivors of sexual and domestic violence.

## **Literature Review**

There is a wealth of academic scholarship exploring sexual violence as a form of domestic abuse where women are the victims and men the perpetrators. This scholarship is both welcomed and important in the context of prevalence data which demonstrates that women make up a majority of victims of both sexual and domestic violence (see e.g., HM Government 2019; Smith et al., 2018). However, the

body of scholarship around men's experiences of IPV in heterosexual relationships is much less developed, particularly where this explores sexual violence as a form of domestic abuse. Existing research has demonstrated that men can experience significant verbal and physical aggression, and coercive and controlling behaviour (also known as emotional or psychological abuse, see discussion by Bates, 2019a; Carney & Barner, 2012). It has also shown how such violence impacts on men's physical and mental health (e.g., Hines & Douglas, 2010; Tsui, 2014), impacts on their relationships with their children (e.g., Harman, Kruk & Hines, 2018), and can also continue post-separation (e.g., Bates, 2019c). What is less understood, however, is men's experiences of sexual violence within abusive relationships where the perpetrator is a woman.

Prevalence data from population-based surveys suggests that men can, and indeed do, experience sexual violence within relationships. For example, in the most recent National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey in the USA, 8.2% of men experienced 'contact sexual violence' (a term which includes rape, forced-to-penetrate cases, sexual coercion, and/or unwanted sexual contact) from an intimate partner during their lifetime (Smith et al., 2018, p.9). In England and Wales, analysis of data collected in the Crime Survey combining the three survey years ending March 2015 to March 2017, found that 39% of men reported experiencing rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) from a partner or ex-partner (Office for National Statistics, 2018, Table 12). In terms of academic research, the majority of studies have explored men's sexual victimisation in the context of same-sex relationships (see, e.g. Waldner-Haugrud, 1999). However, what is currently missing from the literature is research exploring men's experiences of sexual violence within an intimate relationship where the perpetrator is female. One of the only studies to have specifically explored the experiences of men who have been subjected to sexual aggression from a female partner within an abusive relationship originates in the United States. Hines and Douglas (2016) found that over half of the men in their sample of 611 had experienced some form of sexual aggression within their relationship, with 28% having experienced what the authors described as "severe" sexual aggression (e.g., threats or

force to engage in vaginal, oral and/or anal sex). This article therefore makes an original contribution to knowledge by considering sexual violence as a form of domestic abuse in men's experiences of female perpetrated IPV. In doing so it draws upon novel empirical data to explore men's experiences.

## **Methodology**

As noted in the introduction, data from two separate studies were brought together for analysis. Study 1 (see Bates, 2019a; 2019b) qualitatively explored men's experiences of domestic abuse perpetrated by their female partners, specifically recruiting a non-help-seeking sample (i.e. participants were not recruited through a help-seeking service). Participants were asked to complete an online survey about their experiences of abuse, aggression, and control from a female partner using open questions. These included but were not limited to questions about physical and verbal aggression, and about controlling personal freedom and relationships with friends/family, children and finances. Participants were able to disclose any and all experiences of abuse they had experienced from their female partners. The survey ran for four months from March until the end of July 2017 with 161 participants completing the survey.

Study 2 (see Weare 2018a; 2018b) focused on male participants' most recent experience of being FTP a woman. The term FTP is used here to describe a man being forced-to-penetrate, with his penis and without his consent, a woman's vagina, anus, or mouth. This term is used because under UK laws, this form of sexual violence is not recognised as rape (see e.g. The Sexual Offences Act 2003, s.1 in England and Wales). Participants were asked to complete an online survey involving a series of closed and open ended questions, including about the contexts within which they experienced this form of sexual violence, the impacts it had on them both physically and mentally, and their engagement with the police and criminal justice process. The survey ran for two months between December 2016 and the end of January 2017. 154 participants provided useable responses.

A key theme that emerged from both studies was men reporting sexual violence as being one form of abuse they experienced from their female partners, alongside, for example, physical violence, financial and emotional abuse, and coercive control. It was this overlap in findings that prompted the researchers to bring together the data-sets in an effort to develop increased understanding of men's experiences of sexual violence within abusive relationships.

Whilst the focus of the studies were different, there were substantial similarities, not only in the key themes that emerged, but also in research design, ethical considerations, and scope of questioning. Both studies used online surveys for data collection (Study 1 used Online Surveys and Study 2 used Survey Monkey); both surveys were run over similar time periods (end of 2016 to mid 2017) and for similar lengths of time (approximately two-four months); and both had a similar number of participants (Study 1 had 161 participants, and Study 2 had 154). Moreover, there was broad overlap in the type of questions asked in both studies, with the focus being on gathering data in relation to men's experiences of violence and abuse perpetrated by women. In both studies participants did not have to answer any questions they were uncomfortable with, they could remain anonymous whilst completing the surveys, and they were able to withdraw from the studies. Ethical approval was granted for both studies from the researchers' respective institutions, and participants were signposted to support services before and after completing both surveys. Male specific support services were involved in supporting both studies; in Study 1 this was mainly ManKind Initiative and in Study 2 it was Survivors Manchester. Participants in both studies were self-selected and recruited using similar methods; for example through the use of social media, particularly Twitter and publicising the study via news media.

As the studies were designed and conducted separately there were some notable, and expected, differences between them. Study 1 was much broader in its remit in that it explored men's experiences of domestic abuse from their female partners. This included the full range of abusive

behaviours (e.g. financial, physical, sexual, and emotional) and men were able to discuss any and all of the experiences they wished to. Participants were not restricted by geographical location and could come from anywhere in the world, although the majority were from the UK. In contrast, Study 2 was much narrower in scope, specifically exploring men's experiences of being FTP a woman. Participants were restricted to the UK, and the survey questions focused on men's most recent experiences of this form of sexual violence. There were also differences in some of the questions that were asked of participants. These differences may lead to undercounting of instances of sexual violence within an IPV context across both studies, as will be expanded upon below.

Whilst many responses from both surveys were relevant to the focus of this article (i.e. sexual violence as one form of domestic abuse perpetrated by women against men), this was not true of all of them. Therefore both data sets were reviewed and cleansed by the researcher who had conducted the original study to ensure that the relevant responses were analysed. For the data gathered from Study 1, the researcher drew out all responses where the participant had indicated that non-consensual sexual activity had been involved in the domestic abuse they experienced. This resulted in 13 of the 161 survey responses being selected for analysis. In relation to Study 2, the researcher first drew out all responses where the female perpetrator was identified as being in an intimate relationship with the participant at the time of the FTP incident. These responses were then further sifted to keep those where participants indicated they had experienced other forms of abuse and/or that the relationship itself had been abusive. This resulted in 28 of the 154 responses being drawn out for analysis. In total 41 responses from the two studies were analysed (from a possible combined total of 315). However, as FTP was not the focus of Study 1, and IPV was not the focus of Study 2, it is possible that instances of FTP occurring within an IPV context may have been missed in both studies.

Thematic analysis was used on the extracted data to identify key themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with a specific focus on men's experiences of sexual violence within the context of IPV. The combined

dataset was analysed separately by both researchers and then compared, to enhance inter-reliability and to ensure cross-validation of findings (Reid, Flowers, and Larkin 2005, p.23). Only themes that emerged in both datasets were included in the analysis. If a theme was found, for example, only in the data from Study 1 and not Study 2, it was excluded.

Whilst there are limitations associated with both of these studies, and therefore also with the amalgamated dataset that was analysed for this paper, the similar data collection methods (online surveys) used in both studies were chosen with the principal justification of maximising participation and engagement with research topics that are hidden, i.e. male domestic and sexual victimisation. Participants were self-selected in both studies, meaning that the participant group is not representative of all men who experience sexual violence within their abusive relationships, and it is recognised that the use of an anonymous online survey raises issues of data subjectivity, reliability, and validity. It is also important to note that because these surveys were conducted over a similar time period, and the subject matter was similar, it is possible that some participants took part in both studies. Therefore, it is not possible to be certain that there is no duplication of data, especially as the majority of participants in both studies took part anonymously. Whilst these are important limitations, the aim of the findings presented in this paper are not for them to be generalisable, but rather for them to evidence the issue of male sexual victimisation in the context of IPV perpetrated by women. The findings also aim to highlight the importance of recognising and understanding men's experiences in order to challenge stereotypes around men's victimisation, and to ensure that practitioners can respond appropriately.

## **Research findings**

In reporting our findings, we have incorporated anonymised quotes from participants from both studies. We have indicated which study each quote is from, and have provided each participant with a numerical identifier. As noted earlier, 41 responses from a possible combined total of 315 across the



two studies were analysed because they indicated that they had experienced multiple types of abuse from their female partner, and that this included sexual violence. Experiencing sexual violence alongside other forms of abuse therefore occurred for thirteen per cent of the 315 men who responded to both surveys.

Analysis of these 41 responses highlighted the full range of abuse experienced by men in IPV relationships where women were the perpetrators. Indeed, men who experienced sexual violence also reported experiencing physical violence and abuse, emotional and financial abuse, and coercive and controlling behaviours. The relationships between these different forms of abuse varied. Some participants indicated that the different types of abuse occurred in isolation to one another. For some, physical violence was not accompanied by sexual violence;

She was prone to sudden outbursts of sustained and uncontrollable violence which did not usually seem to have any obvious or specific trigger – Study 1, 118.

Concussions were an everyday thing, bruises to the body and wrists, loads of scratches from nails all over ... - Study 2, 972.

For others, coercive and controlling behaviour occurred independently of other forms of abuse. Some men reported that they experienced persistent denigration and derision:

Putting me down in demeaning ways very common ... Names, jealousy, leaving for chunks of time with no idea where also occurred on occasion – Study 1, 001.

Others described the way their partner policed and monitored both their behaviour and their contact with others outside the relationship.

She went through my mobile without my knowledge and took my work colleagues numbers and then would call without leaving a message. This would often happen if I had not come home on time - Study 1, 079.

Whilst as noted above, for some participants the different forms of abuse seemed to occur in isolation, we saw two areas where there were clear links between the sexual violence being experienced and other forms of abuse; these were physical violence/ force, and coercive and controlling behaviours. Indeed, for several men, there was an intimate relationship between the physical and sexual violence they experienced, with physical violence and force being used by their female partners immediately preceding, or during, the sexual violence.

I'm a Catholic, who kept his virginity for marriage. She took it by beating me till I gave in then played with me till I got hard – Study 1, 147.

She started trying to have sex with me and I told her I did not want to as I was drunk and very tired and felt sick. She didn't take that as an answer and started hurting me, forcing herself on me, hands around my neck, telling me I would do it or she would kill me – Study 2, 997.

Men also reported being physically restrained or pinned down by their partners as a way by which sexual violence was perpetrated.

I was subjected to several sustained sexual assaults after being handcuffed to the bedframe while asleep – Study 1, 118.

My ex-girlfriend pinned me down on the bed whilst on top of me – Study 2, 207.

For some men, if they did not comply with the demand for sex then physical violence would follow.

I got physically abused if I didn't comply – Study 1, 950.

Participants in both studies also described incidents where their female partners forced them to have sex when they were vulnerable and unable to physically resist. In such situations the amount of physical force used was often reduced because of the men's vulnerable state. For example, participants reported being FTP their female partner whilst they were asleep:

I went to bed early telling her I was going to take a sleeping tablet while she stayed up and drank, then about 2am, I woke, she was on top of me, raping me. After that I was destroyed. I didn't go home unless I could avoid it, I was scared – Study 1, 134.

I woke up to find she had penetrated herself [with my penis] while I was asleep. This was a regular occurrence even though I told her I didn't like it – Study 2, 218.

Men also reported being FTP their female partners whilst they were under the influence of alcohol and/ or drugs and thus unable to physically stop what was happening, or to provide consent.

This was a normal occurrence throughout the relationship. Wife would ply me with alcohol then demand sexual favours whilst I did not and could not consent. Effectively rape ... many hundreds ... of times – Study 2, 379.

Coercive and controlling behaviours were also intimately linked to the sexual violence experienced by some participants. Indeed, despite sexual violence, and in particular forced sex, being a physical act, men in both studies reported that they viewed their experiences of sexual victimisation as being directly linked to their female partners' desire to control them.

Sex used as a form of abuse and control – Study 1, 022.

This was just part of the controlling behaviour I experienced forming part of the abuse – Study 2, 442.

Participants reported the relationship between sex and control taking a variety of forms. For example:

She also was in complete control of our sex life - she decided if, when, and how we had sex - including demanding it outdoors (she would get turned on by the possibility of being seen) and in public buildings. She also controlled when/if I was allowed to orgasm, and would be violent if I didn't comply - Study 1, 118.

She used repeated threats of suicide as well as insults and degrading comments to force me into a position where I felt I had to have sex – Study 2, 530.

A further aspect of victimisation in this context involved control and manipulation around the use of contraception, including forcing men to have unprotected sex.

Several times she manipulated me to have unprotected sex. I didn't want to – Study 1, 088.

My ex-girlfriend pinned me down on the bed while on top of me. She covered my face with a pillow and choked me. She removed the condom and continued then at the point of orgasm didn't move. She did this every time we had sex until she became pregnant – Study 2, 207.

As alluded to in the quote above, several participants believed that the goal of this behaviour was for the female perpetrator to become pregnant, sometimes against the man's wishes.

At a work meeting I opened my diary and she had placed a letter in it stating that she was pregnant and had come off the pill deliberately...I felt totally violated - Study 1, 059.

The relationship between sexual violence and control also extended outside of the intimate relationship itself, directly into men's relationships with their children.

The mother of my son (ex-partner) would cause me difficulty with my relationship with my son if she was unhappy about my attitude or something I had done. In order for me to stop the arguments or fighting was for me to initiate letting her give me oral. Although it wasn't exactly involuntary I certainly didn't always want it but felt it was the easiest way to stop fighting for the sake of my son - Study 2, 823.

## **Discussion**

In bringing together these two data sets within the current analysis, the aim was to evidence that men experience sexual violence within the context of abusive relationships (and so alongside other forms of abuse), as well as demonstrating the way in which different forms of IPV can occur and interrelate with sexual violence. The findings highlight first that sexual violence does occur in female-to-male IPV relationships, and second the range of abusive behaviours experienced by men in these relationships. As noted above, for some men the different forms of abuse occurred quite disparately, whilst for others their experiences of sexual violence were often occurring in conjunction with, and were intimately linked to, patterns of physical abuse and coercive control. These findings are important in order to challenge pervasive myths and stereotypes around the possibility of men's sexual and

domestic violence victimisation. The findings also have implications for practice in terms of improving practitioner responses to male survivors of female perpetrated domestic and sexual violence, for example, police officers, counsellors, and health-care professionals.

### ***Challenging stereotypes and improving understanding of men's sexual and domestic violence victimisation***

The findings presented in this article contribute to a body of research that explores men's experiences of sexual and domestic victimisation perpetrated by women (see e.g. Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1998; Fisher & Pina, 2013; Weare, 2018a; Bates 2019). In particular this article has contributed further evidence to challenge pervasive stereotypes around male victimisation, particularly the (im)possibility of men being sexually victimised by women, including being forced to have sex against their will. Indeed, as Davies (2013, p.93-94) notes, 'the traditional belief [is] that a woman cannot force a man to have sex'. Such beliefs are underpinned and informed by gender stereotypes around both men and masculinity and women and femininity, which 'exclude the image of women as sexual aggressors, initiating sex with men...and, at times, coercing their partners to engage in unwanted sexual activities ... [as well as excluding] the image of men as sexually reluctant or as victims of sexual coercion' (Byers & O'Sullivan, 1998, p.146). Similar stereotypes exist around female-to-male domestic abuse as more broadly conceived (see, e.g. Hine, 2019). The perceptions around both sexual violence and IPV are that men's strength and size should mean they are able to defend themselves because they are socialised to be able to successfully respond to physical threats (Mezey & King, 1989). More broadly, gender stereotypes posit men as "strong, tough, self-sufficient and impenetrable" (Weiss, 2010, p.277), which makes it difficult for many to believe that a man could be forced to have sex against his will, or experience other forms of abuse and violence from women.

The findings also demonstrate that men can experience sexual violence alongside multiple types of abuse from their female intimate partner. As highlighted in the extracts taken from participants

stories, the sexual violence experienced could be severe (forced sex), and all forms of abuse could be experienced frequently during the relationship. Moreover, the findings provide further detail on the contexts within which female-on-male sexual violence can occur. Indeed, some men within this sample described the use of physical violence and coercive and controlling behaviours as part of the sexual victimisation they experienced, but also as part of a wider pattern of abuse within the intimate relationship. Thus whilst sexual violence within abusive relationships is well recognised within existing literature in the context of male-on-female IPV, the findings presented here highlight this as also being an issue where the sexes are reversed.

Insights have also been provided into the full range of abusive behaviours that men can experience within IPV relationships, and the relationships between these behaviours and sexual violence. This is important in order to fully understand and respond to men's lived experiences. Indeed, much of the existing literature around men's victimisation has focused on women's use of physical violence within the relationship, (e.g., Hines & Douglas, 2010), as well as highlighting women's use of coercive and controlling behaviours (Bates & Graham-Kevan, 2016; Bates, Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2014). However, only a small body of scholarship has explored the range of abuse experienced by men (see Hines, Brown & Dunning, 2007), and very little has considered the possibility of sexual violence occurring in this context (see, e.g. Hines & Douglas, 2016; Weare & Hulley 2019). The analysis here points to relationships existing between the different forms of abuse experienced by men. It also provides evidence of other forms of abuse forming part of men's sexual victimisation, as well as being independent of this but forming part of a wider pattern of abuse within the relationship. Whilst the literature on sexual violence and rape within relationships, particularly where women are the victims, does include evidence of its overlap with other types of IPV, including psychological or emotional abuse (e.g., Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006), a discussion on these nuances has traditionally been overlooked where men are victims in favour of a focus on one 'type' of abuse, typically physical violence. However, it is only by addressing the nuances and complexities of men's experiences of IPV

perpetrated by women that a deeper understanding can be reached, something that is particularly important for practitioners engaging with male survivors.

### ***Implications for practice and future research***

Despite the relatively small sample, the depth and richness of the data analysed provides evidence of the severity of men's victimisation and the way in which sexual violence can be one part of a multifaceted experience of abuse in an intimate relationship. By integrating these two data sets, it has allowed us to see where and how sexual violence occurs within the context of IPV. This is important for practitioners working with male survivors of sexual and domestic violence, for example police officers, health-care professionals, and third sector support services, who need to be able to recognise and respond to this sort of abuse when engaging with men. For example, asking male survivors of domestic abuse about whether they have experienced sexual violence as part of the abuse.

As noted in the discussion above, there are a number of myths and stereotypes around men's victimisation, particularly where the perpetrator is a woman. Thus it is possible that these stereotypes prevent practitioners from asking the men that they engage with about all forms of abuse that could be experienced. Similarly, these stereotypes may create barriers for men, who may not disclose all aspects of their victimisation for fear of disbelief, embarrassment, or distress. Indeed, the reluctance of male victims to disclose their abuse, in particular sexual violence perpetrated by a woman, has been noted within existing research (Weare & Hulley, 2019). Put simply, for both practitioners and male survivors, the thought may be; "men cannot/ or do not experience sexual violence from women, so why discuss this (even if other forms of domestic abuse are present)." Therefore, it is essential that practitioners understand all forms of abuse men can experience as well as the importance of asking men about every potential aspect of their victimisation, including sexual violence. Providing opportunities for male survivors to fully disclose all aspects of their abuse is important to ensure that they are able to access and receive the most appropriate support. Organisations working with male

victims (e.g., see ManKind Initiative) support the need for men to be asked directly about these experiences as they often experience difficulties in recognising their own victimisation due to the pervasiveness of gender and sex role stereotypes within society.

Evidencing sexual violence as one form of abuse experienced by men in heterosexual IPV relationships is important for police and prosecutors. The problems and challenges associated with policing and successfully prosecuting cases of domestic and sexual violence are well recognised (see, e.g. Hohl & Stanko 2015; HMICFRS 2019). However, being able to provide evidence of the victim experiencing a range of abusive behaviours from the female perpetrator, or to be able charge her with multiple offences may be likely to increase the chances of a successful case outcome. This is particularly important in the context of the pervasive myths and stereotypes that exist around the impossibility or unlikelihood of male domestic and sexual victimisation perpetrated by a woman. Indeed, it may be easier, for example, for a jury to conceive of a man being FTP his female partner if they are also presented with evidence of, or charges relating to, physical abuse and coercive control.

The findings here also have important implications for future research. As discussed earlier in the article, there are a number of limitations associated with bringing together two data-sets for analysis in the way that has been done here. However, the findings presented above clearly highlight the fact that men can, and indeed do, experience sexual violence alongside other forms of abuse in IPV relationships, where women are the perpetrators. Therefore, future research must avoid stereotypes and misconceptions around male sexual victimisation, and must explore the issue of men's victimisation by female perpetrators in its broadest sense. Indeed, future empirical research exploring men's experiences of domestic abuse should incorporate questions around their experiences of sexual violence in this context to help to develop a larger evidence base around this issue. Similarly, any empirical research conducted with female perpetrators of sexual or domestic violence should recognise and reflect the possibility of, and links between, different types of abuse. Questions should



be included to this effect, such as covering the contexts within which their offending took place, and the types of abuse involved. A wider literature base that helps us understand this topic will lead to more evidence informed policy and practice, and will help to continue to dispel societal myths about men's experiences of sexual and domestic violence perpetrated by women.

### **Concluding thoughts**

As Hines and Douglas (2016, p1149) explain “assessing for and validating sexual aggression experiences among male physical IPV victims are extremely important because these experiences are associated with more violent and abusive relationships, and with poorer mental and physical health in the men and their children”. The findings discussed in this article evidence men's experiences of sexual violence within an IPV relationship where the perpetrator is female. They address the pervasive stereotypes around men and masculinity in relation to sexual and domestic violence victimisation, demonstrating the ways that men can experience multiple forms of victimisation, and the relationships between sexual violence and other forms of abuse. Evidencing and validating men's experiences is important in improving practitioner responses to male victims, as well as going some way towards helping men overcome barriers they experience to help-seeking. As discussed above, further research is needed in relation to men's experiences of female-perpetrated sexual victimisation within IPV relationships to continue to develop understanding of this under-researched and under-discussed issue. In turn, this will help to develop an evidence base that should enhance policy and practitioner responses to men who experience this form of abuse.

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