



Taboo Language, Masculinity, and Social Transgression in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*

Helvika Nur Fadhilah¹, Wiwit Sariasih²

¹helvikafadhilah@gmail.com

²dosen01268@unpam.ac.id

^{1,2} Universitas Pamulang

Abstract

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*This study examines how Nick Dunne, portrayed as a socially transgressive figure, employs taboo language and engages in taboo behavior toward Amy and within his broader public environment in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* (2014). Although numerous studies have explored characterization and gender in the novel, limited attention has been given to the sociolinguistic dimensions of taboo language and behavior as reflections of masculine anxiety. This research adopts a qualitative descriptive method. Data were collected through close reading and systematic analysis of Nick's utterances and actions throughout the novel. The theoretical framework integrates Battistella's (2005) classification of taboo words (epithets, profanity, vulgarity, and obscenity), Jay's (2009) categorization of profanity and obscenity, Wardhaugh et al.'s (2014) functions of taboo language, Fershtman et al.'s (2011) perspective on taboo behavior in social interaction, and Connell's (2014) theory of masculinity and gender-based taboos. The findings reveal two principal results. First, obscenity emerges as the most dominant type of taboo language, primarily functioning to express emotional intensity. Second, there is a significant connection between Nick's violation of male gender taboos and broader social taboos.*

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✉ Corresponding author:

B3 Building, Kampus Viktor, Pamulang, Tangerang Selatan
Indonesia 50229 E-mail: ¹helvikafadhilah@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Language serves not only as a medium for conveying information but also as a vital instrument for expressing emotions, attitudes, and social identities. In various communicative contexts, speakers may deliberately employ strong or offensive expressions to convey anger, frustration, or disappointment, even when such language contravenes prevailing social norms. This phenomenon underscores the persistent presence of taboo language in everyday interaction and its potential to generate misunderstanding and social discomfort.

Taboo terms are typically characterized as impolite or prohibited expressions that conflict with cultural and societal values. According to Yule (2019), taboo language refers to words or expressions subject to social restriction due to their association with prohibited behaviors, religious doctrine, or moral norms. Importantly, however, the offensiveness of such language is not inherent in the lexical items themselves, but is instead highly contingent upon contextual factors. Allan and Burridge (2006) contend that the meaning and impact of taboo expressions are mediated by situational and cultural variables, which determine whether such language is sanctioned or deemed offensive in a given context.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, taboo language reflects broader social and cultural dynamics. Although taboo words are typically avoided in polite discourse (Fromkin, 2003), they may serve specific interpersonal and affective functions. Jay (2009) observes that taboo words, despite their perceived inappropriateness, can function as vehicles for the expression of intense emotion and may, under certain conditions, foster solidarity or intimacy within particular social groups. This suggests that taboo language operates at the intersection of linguistic choice, social norms, and cultural expectations.

Beyond its prevalence in daily communication, taboo language is also extensively represented in literary works, which frequently mirror social realities and illuminate latent tensions in human relationships (Matthews, 2013). Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl* offers a salient example, portraying the complexities of contemporary marriage through the perspective of the protagonist, Nick Dunne. The novel reveals how social pressure, emotional conflict, and personal frustration shape Nick's use of taboo expressions and behaviors that deviate from socially sanctioned norms, particularly within the context of matrimony.

In *Gone Girl*, Nick Dunne is depicted as a character struggling to preserve the façade of a harmonious marriage while grappling with betrayal and emotional instability. His employment of taboo language and engagement in taboo-related behavior index suppressed affect and underscore the capacity of language to articulate dissatisfaction, manipulation, and resistance to social expectations. These linguistic choices illuminate the more sinister dimensions of his character and demonstrate how taboo language may intersect with issues of identity, power, and normative social structures.

In light of these considerations, this study investigates the use of taboo language in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, with particular focus on the protagonist, Nick Dunne. The research aims to identify the types and functions of taboo words, as well as behaviors construed as taboo within the sociolinguistic framework of marital relationships. By examining taboo language in literary

discourse, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how linguistic practices reflect and negotiate social norms, emotional tension, and interpersonal dynamics.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to analyze the use of taboo words in Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl*. A qualitative method was considered appropriate because the data consisted of words, phrases, and behaviors that require contextual interpretation rather than numerical measurement. This approach allowed an in-depth examination of how taboo language is used by the main character, Nick Dunne, to express emotions, attitudes, and social positioning within the narrative. As stated by Creswell (2014), qualitative research focuses on understanding meaning in social or human phenomena from the participants' perspectives.

The primary data source of this study was the novel *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, published in 2012. The data were taken from utterances and narrative descriptions related to taboo words and behaviors produced by the main character, Nick Dunne. The focus of the analysis was limited to identifying the types and functions of taboo words as well as behaviors considered taboo within the sociolinguistic context of marital relationships.

Data collection was conducted through document analysis. The researcher carefully read the novel to identify and collect instances of taboo words and taboo-related behaviors expressed by Nick Dunne. The selected data were documented, classified, and recorded based on their relevance to the research objectives. This method enabled the researcher to systematically capture linguistic expressions that reflected emotional expression and social norms within the narrative.

The data analysis was conducted by applying theories of taboo language proposed by Battistella (2005) and Jay (2009) to classify the types of taboo words, as well as theories by Wardhaugh et al. (2014) and Jay (2009) to analyze their functions. In addition, theories related to taboo behavior proposed by Fershtman et al. (2011) and Connell (2014) were used to interpret behaviors considered socially unacceptable. The analysis followed three main stages: familiarizing with the data through repeated reading, coding and categorizing the data based on types, functions, and behaviors, and interpreting the findings to reveal patterns and sociolinguistic meanings within the narrative. The results were then presented descriptively and supported by relevant theories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the qualitative content analysis of Nick Dunne's character in the novel *Gone Girl*. The analysis focuses on three main aspects: types of taboo words, functions of taboo words, and behaviors considered taboo. A total of 22 instances of taboo language and behavior were identified from the text. The frequency of these findings is summarized in the table of types, functions, and behaviors of taboo words.

In general, the analysis reveals that obscenity and profanity are the most frequent types of taboo words used by Nick Dunne, primarily serving to express emotional intensity. Then, the behavior most frequently categorized as taboo is related to social taboos, such as those

concerning marriage and societal expectations. The detailed results for each category are presented in the following sections.

Table of Types of taboo words, functions of taboo words, and behavior considered taboo in The Novel *Gone Girl*

No	Types	Functions	Frequency	Behaviors	Frequency
1.	Obscenity	To Show Contempt	3	Social Taboo	4
		Emotional Intensity	11	Male Gender Taboo	10
2.	Profanity	Emotional Intensity	4	Social Taboo	2
		-	0	Male Gender Taboo	2
3.2	Epithets	To be Aggression	2	Male Gender Taboo	2
4.	Vulgarity	To Show Contempt	1	Male Gender Taboo	2
		Emotional Intensity	1	-	0
Total			22		22

In general, the analysis reveals that Obscenity, totaling 14 occurrences, is the dominant type of taboo word. Its dominant function is Emotional Intensity, found in 11 occurrences, followed by To Show Contempt, found in 3 occurrences. Profanity follows as the second most frequent type, occurring 4 times, with its function being Emotional Intensity, found in 4 occurrences. Epithets, occurring 2 times, have the function of To be Aggression, found in 2 occurrences. Vulgarity, occurring 2 times, displays the functions of To Show Contempt, found in 1 occurrence, and Emotional Intensity, found in 1 occurrence.

Moreover, the analysis shows two types of behavior that are considered taboo. Male

Gender Taboo is the most frequent, found in 16 occurrences. This category includes behaviors that defy conventional gender roles and expectations, such as being passive or failing to be in control. Social Taboo follows with 6 occurrences. These behaviors relate to actions that violate societal expectations and norms, particularly concerning the institution of marriage, public image, and grief. The detailed results for each category are presented in the following sections.

Obscenity

According to Battistella (2005) obscenity refers to words related to sexual acts, sexual organs, or excretory functions that are considered vulgar and offensive, such as shit and fuck. These words are typically deemed inappropriate for public use as they are seen as crude and contrary to social norms. Nick Dunne primarily uses obscenity to express intense emotions such as disgust, anger, and shock. This aligns with the function of emotional intensity, contempt, and aggression as identified in the data.

Excerpt 1

Margo was lighting a cigarette, her thoughts still on Amy. "I mean, isn't there someone we can go talk to?" she asked. "Something we can do?"

"Jesus, Go! You really need me to feel more fucking impotent than I do right now?" I snapped. I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing. There's no 'When Your Wife Goes Missing 101.' The police told me I could leave. I left. I'm just doing what they tell me. (Flynn, 2012, p. 66)

In this dialogue excerpt, the word "fucking" is classified as obscenity, which is related to sexual activity and used to express negative emotions such as frustration, which functions to increase emotional intensity. Nick emphasizes his feelings of helplessness (impotence) by adding the word "fucking," which explains that he really cannot do anything about the situation with Amy, his wife, who suddenly disappeared. This word shows Nick's frustration and despair in response to a question from Margo, his twin sister. "Moreover, Nick's behavior demonstrated a violation of the Male Gender Taboo norms prevalent in American patriarchal culture, as evidenced by his excuse, 'I'm just doing what they tell me.' This situation highlights the societal expectation for men to be strong, think rationally, and take decisive responsibility, rather than merely following the commands of others, particularly during the crisis he was experiencing.

Excerpt 2

"Okay so far?" Go said, squeezing me with one arm, the dude hug. The Dunne kids don't perform hugs well. Go's thumb landed on my right nipple. "I wish Mom was here," she whispered, which was what I'd been thinking. "No news?" she asked when she pulled away. "Nothing, fucking nothing—"

"You look like you feel awful."

"I feel like fucking shit." I was about to say what an idiot I was, not listening to her about the booze. (Flynn, 2012, p. 77)

In this narrative fragment, the phrases "fucking nothing" and "fucking shit" is used by Nick Dunne. Both "fucking" and "shit" are classified as obscenities related to sexual activity. This

shows that Nick feels disgusted and frustrated with himself and the situation he is facing, thereby heightening the emotional intensity. Nick's repeated use of the word "fucking" shows his unstable emotional state. This identifies that the use of these words refers to personal emotions rather than directly attacking others. Moreover, Nick's behavior demonstrated a violation of the Male Gender Taboo norms regarding the failure to control negative feelings. Nick expressed this failure by confirming there was no progress ('fucking nothing') and by admitting his frustrated state ('I feel like fucking shit'). He used the taboo words to vent his feelings and reveal his emotional vulnerability. Subsequently, he acknowledged his failure to take responsibility for his foolish actions and for not listening to his sister, Margo, thinking, "what an idiot I was, not listening to her about the booze". This represents his failure to take control of his life, which contradicts the dominant role of a man to make wise decisions.

Profanity

According to Battistella (2005), profanity is a term that causes disgust by its irreverent use of sacred religious terms. Then, according to Jay (2009), profanity is a taboo word related to religion that is used to express emotions outside of a religious context. This shows that words such as "God" or things that are considered sacred are used as profanity to express emotions outside of a religious context. In the novel *Gone Girl*, Nick uses profanity to express his frustration and sense of being overwhelmed without directly insulting someone.

Excerpt 3

The Elliotts nodded in tandem but said nothing, watching. When the spot was done, Rand broke the silence: "I feel sick."

"I know," Marybeth said.

"How are you holding up, Nick?" Rand asked, hunched over, hands on both knees, as if he were preparing to get up from the sofa but couldn't quite do it.

"I'm a goddamn mess, to tell the truth. I feel so useless." (Flynn, 2012, p. 93)

In this passage, the word "goddamn" is used by Nick Dunne. This example is classified as profanity due to its irreverent use of religious terms, and its function is to express emotional intensity. Nick uses this taboo word to emphasize that he is in a bad state, showing feelings of helplessness and despair, so that Nick feels depressed in the situation he is facing in the search for Amy's disappearance. Moreover, Nick's behavior demonstrated a violation of the Male Gender Taboo when he admitted to his in-laws how useless he felt as a husband. Nick said, "I'm a goddamn mess, to tell the truth. I feel so useless." He is using taboo language in their presence. This illustrates Nick's failure to maintain the image of a responsible husband. On the other hand, men are expected to be stoic and think rationally by not demonstrating emotional powerlessness.

Excerpt 4

I found Go in the living room, sitting with a cup of cold coffee at my mother's card table. She turned toward me just enough to show she knew I was there, but she didn't let me see her face. "Why do you keep lying, Nick?" she asked. "The Elliotts are not your enemy. Shouldn't you at least tell them that it was you who didn't want kids? Why make Amy look like the bad guy?"

I swallowed the rage again. My stomach was hot with it. "I'm exhausted. Go. Goddamn. We gotta do this now?"

"We're gonna and a time that's better?"

"I did want kids. We tried for a while, no luck. We even started looking into fertility treatments. But then Amy decided she didn't want kids."

"You told me you didn't."

"I was trying to put a good face on it."

"Oh, awesome, another lie," Go said. (Flynn, 2012, p. 226)

As illustrated in this section, Nick Dunne uses the word "goddamn." This example is classified as profanity due to its irreverent use of religious terms and its function of expressing emotional intensity. Nick uses this taboo word to respond to Margo's pressing questions. He is not only venting his exhaustion, frustration, and feeling of being cornered as he faces confrontation when he is powerless, but also indicating that he has reached an emotional breaking point. This word is not intended to hurt Margo, but rather to express Nick's emotions. Moreover, Nick's behavior demonstrated a Social Taboo violation, as he repeatedly lied about his reasons for not wanting children, even to his sister. He used taboo language to avoid confrontation and to make excuses. This illustrates how Nick, in his social environment, attempted to manipulate or lie to others about himself to maintain a favorable image amid the problem of his wife's sudden disappearance.

Epithets

According to Battistella (2005), An epithet is an offensive name or term of abuse, often directed at a particular person or group. The purpose of an epithet is to demean, insult, and provoke, such as "bitch". In the novel *Gone Girl*, Nick uses epithets to direct his anger and contempt at Amy; they appear 2 times, as presented below.

Excerpt 5

The cameras were blasting us, the reporters closing in with microphones, everyone yelling Amy's name, screaming, literally screaming. So, I did the right thing, I held her to me and howled her name right back: "Amy! My God! My God! My darling!" and buried my face in her neck, my arms wrapped tight around her, and let the cameras get their fifteen seconds, and I whispered deep inside her ear, "You fucking bitch." Then I stroked her hair, I cupped her face in my two loving hands, and I yanked her inside. (Flynn, 2012, p. 408)

At this point in the story, the phrase "fucking bitch" is used by Nick Dunne, which is classified as an epithet. This is a combined example of an obscenity (fucking) functioning as an intensifier, a word used to insult. The primary function of this phrase is to express aggression. These taboo words are directed at Amy, showing extreme anger and resentment. Nick vents his pent-up hatred with the words he whispers to Amy, while at the same time acting in front of the camera as a loving husband. Moreover, this excerpt demonstrates the duality of Nick's behavior as a Male Gender Taboo, oscillating between his public image and a reality full of resentment. He chose to use the taboo word as an insult to attack Amy in secret rather than in public, while

simultaneously having to conceal this attack from the public eye. This illustrates how he had manipulated the public to maintain his image as a devoted husband.

Excerpt 6

“I don’t want to be married to a woman like you. I want to be married to a normal person.” Nick said.

“I see. You want to revert to your lame, limp loser self? You want to just walk away? No! You don’t get to go be some boring-ass middle American with some boring-ass girl next door. You tried it already—remember, baby? Even if you wanted to, you couldn’t do that now. You’ll be known as the philandering asshole who left his kidnapped, raped wife. You think any nice woman will touch you? You’ll only get—” Amy said.

“Psychos? Crazy psycho bitches?” He’s pointing at me, jabbing the air.

“Don’t call me that.”

“Psycho bitch?”

It’d be so easy, for him to write me that way. He’d love that, to be able to dismiss me so simply.

“Everything I do, I do for a reason, Nick,” I say. “Everything I do takes planning and precision, and discipline.”

“You are a petty, selfish, manipulative, disciplined psycho bitch—” (Flynn, 2012, p. 434)

In this part of the novel *Gone Girl*, the phrase “psycho bitch” is used by Nick Dunne. This example is classified as an epithet because it functions as a derogatory and insulting term directed at someone. This word is usually directed at women with negative connotations. Its function is to show aggression, he feels very angry and humiliated by Amy's manipulation. The word “bitch” is a form of expression of hatred. The use of the word “psycho” serves as an intensifier, showing Nick's anger and insult towards Amy. He vents his emotions of pain and hatred in the most degrading way possible. Nick's use of taboo words is a tool to retaliate and strike back at everything Amy has done, including faking her own kidnapping. Moreover, this confrontation demonstrates Nick's violation of the Male Gender Taboo, as Nick used taboo words to verbally retaliate against Amy when facing conflict. The angry reaction Nick directed toward Amy shows Nick's masculine failure under pressure and violates the Male Gender Taboo norm, which is rooted in his inability to remain calm and assert his role as a husband, positioning him instead as a dominated man.

Vulgarity

According to Battistella (2005), Vulgarity is a word or phrase that is crude, lacking in taste, or unrefined. It is often used to express strong feelings or disrespect informally. In the novel *Gone Girl*, Nick uses vulgarity to express contempt and self-deprecation. Vulgarity appears 2 times, as presented below.

Excerpt 7

“So, now, help me put this all together,” Tanner said.

“Amy finds out you’re cheating. She fakes her death. She makes the supposed crime scene look just shy enough to raise eyebrows. She’s screwed you over with the credit cards and the life insurance and your little man cave situation out back ...”

Nick: “She picks an argument with me the night before she goes missing, and she does it standing near an open window so our neighbor will hear.”

Tanner: “What was the argument?”

Nick: “I am a selfish asshole. Basically, the same one we always have. What our neighbor doesn’t hear is Amy apologizing later—because Amy doesn’t want her to hear that. I mean, I remember being astonished, because it was the quickest makeup we’ve ever had. By the morning, she was freakin’ making me crepes, for crying out loud.” (Flynn, 2012, p. 284)

As seen in this passage, the word “asshole” is used by Nick Dunne. This example is classified as vulgarity due to its crude and offensive nature. Its function is a form of contempt, specifically self-contempt, where Nick uses a taboo word to refer to himself, which reflects Amy’s perspective of him, which he acknowledges. This taboo word reflects feelings of frustration and regret because he realizes that he has been trapped in a scheme created by Amy. On the other hand, there is the word “freakin” which is also used by Nick to express the emotional intensity of his frustration and functions as an intensifier. This highlights Amy’s unreasonable perspective of Nick, showing how powerless Nick feels in this situation. Moreover, this excerpt demonstrates Nick’s violation of the Male Gender Taboo, as Nick failed to fulfill the role of a good, unselfish, and responsible husband. His admission failed to assert control over the situation, violating his masculine role of being in control, which made him vulnerable and easily manipulated by Amy’s scheme.

Excerpt 8

Nick: “You’re crazy, you’re literally crazy if you think I’m going to stay. You killed a man,” I said. I turned my back to her, and then I pictured her with a knife in her hand and her mouth growing tight as I disobeyed her. I turned back around. Yes, my wife must always be faced.

Amy: “To escape him.”

Nick: “You killed Desi so you had a new story, so you could come back and be beloved Amy and not ever have to take the blame for what you did. Don’t you get it, Amy, the irony? It’s what you always hated about me—that I never dealt with the consequences of my actions, right? Well, my ass has been well and duly consequenced. So, what about you? You murdered a man, a man I assume loved you and was helping you, and now you want me to step in his place and love you and help you, and ... I can’t. I cannot do it. I won’t do it.”

Amy: “Nick, I think you’ve gotten some bad information,” she said. “It doesn’t surprise me, all the rumors that are going about. But we need to forget all that. If we are to go forward. And we will go forward. All of America wants us to go forward. It’s the story the world needs right now. Us. Desi’s the bad guy. No one wants two bad guys. They want to like you, Nick. The only way you can be loved again is to stay with me. It’s the only way”. (Flynn, 2012, p. 425)

In this scene, Nick Dunne uses the word “Ass.” This example is classified as vulgarity, referring to a part of the body that is considered inappropriate or crude but has no sexual or religious connotations. Its function is to express emotional intensity. Nick uses “ass” to emphasize the feelings that burden him as a result of his own actions. This word is Nick's way of expressing his frustration and indirectly acknowledging that his stupidity has put him in this painful situation. This shows that Nick tends to use coarse language to describe his emotional state of regret, especially when he compares his condition to Amy's. Moreover, Nick demonstrated a violation of the Male Gender Taboo when he felt utterly defeated and punished by Amy's scheme, leading to extreme frustration. He should have decisively rejected and left Amy after learning she had committed murder. However, he was unable to confront the threat of social taboo regarding his public reputation. He ultimately became a passive figure who could not assert writerly over his own life.

The significance of this study is to determine the causal reason underlying the manifestation of the types and functions of taboo words, as well as the behaviors deemed taboo, expressed by the character Nick Dunne. This analysis is conducted to prove that Masculine Precarity is the primary causal factor behind the series of taboo actions committed by Nick, both verbally and behaviorally. Furthermore, Masculine Precarity is fueled by the existence of the Male Gender Taboo, which fundamentally triggers intense emotionality, ultimately leading to the occurrence of taboo words, such as the use of Obscenity expressed by Nick. The Male Gender Taboo and this emotional pressure steer the character to adopt a different perspective toward himself and public social norms, becoming a trigger for deviant action aimed at restoring his social status as a good husband. Subsequently, the data supports the writer when it is found that Social Taboo violations, which are based on lying and media manipulation, are the most dominant, where these actions are driven by deep-seated shame resulting from Nick's failure as a husband who should provide and be a leader in the marriage; this refers to the Male Gender Taboo carried out by Nick's actions as a husband.

Moreover, this study is also in line with the sociolinguistic studies conducted by Haroon & Arslan (2024) and Syahputri et al. (2024), which also found that taboo word types like Profanity are the most dominant in fictional discourse. The implicature of this similarity is that every emotional release through taboo words becomes a consistent phenomenon used by fictional characters in critical situations to depict the depth of their emotion. However, this study also has a unique critical contribution that links it to Connell's (2014) theory, which highlights the theory of Masculine Precarity. This study implies that the existence of taboo behaviors such as lying and manipulation is a sociological consequence of the failure of gender roles, especially for men, which triggers the actions deemed the Male Gender Taboo. All these deviant actions are generally undertaken by Nick in the form of an attempt to manipulate his public image to show false remorse, aiming to hurt Amy and provoke public sympathy to restore his masculine identity as a husband.

On the other hand, this study presents a contradiction that extends the scope of the studies by Haroon & Arslan (2024) and Syahputri et al. (2024), which tend to focus on the linguistic classification of the types, functions, and translation of taboo words. However, this study justifies that the primary implicature of the entire manifestation of taboo (both the types and functions of taboo words, as well as taboo behavior) committed by Nick originates from the violation of the Male Gender Taboo. This becomes a determining factor that influences the study results and differentiates it critically. Behavior deemed taboo does not occur in a vacuum but is a sociological consequence of the failure of the male gender role.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzes the use of taboo words and taboo behaviors performed by the main character, Nick Dunne, in Gillian Flynn's novel *Gone Girl*. Set within the context of a modern marriage under intense social and media scrutiny, the novel portrays how linguistic and behavioral taboos emerge as a response to psychological pressure and gender expectations. Drawing on sociolinguistic theories of taboo language and gender norms, the analysis reveals that obscenity is the most dominant type of taboo word used by Nick Dunne, primarily functioning to express emotional intensity, frustration, and helplessness.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that Nick's use of taboo language is closely linked to violations of gender-based norms, particularly the Male Gender Taboo. Nick's failure to fulfill traditional masculine roles as a financial provider and authoritative husband leads to feelings of vulnerability and identity crisis. As a result, he engages in various Social Taboo behaviors, including dishonesty, manipulation, and false emotional performance, as strategies to maintain his public image and restore his masculine identity. Thus, the findings suggest that taboo language and taboo behavior in the novel are not merely expressions of impoliteness, but sociolinguistic reflections of masculine precarity and the pressure of rigid gender expectations.

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