

Research in Context

Title: Question 5: From the **FUTURE WORLD** research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

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The topic I have decided to write about is minimalism, specifically how it is used as a method of graphic design and focusing on how it is applied to various platforms and media. I will further explain how minimalism is a progression into the future with far more simplistic designs and simple ways of deconstructing messages whilst maintaining the hierarchy of information and creating something visually pleasing and engaging at the same time. Minimal design has been a widely discussed topic amongst graphic designers as well as other designers across the board. It is important to highlight the benefits of minimal design and the reason for its existence and increasing popularity. The consumerist world at present is full of multi minimalist technology, minimal devices and products, in addition to homes being filled with simplistic designs and open spaces. Within this essay I will be debating the whole purpose of minimal design and its benefits, providing an explanation on why I strongly believe in this movement, comparing and contrasting my own opinions against those of others. There are many design agencies that I do admire such as Stockholm Design Lab (SDL) and Strategic Design Agency (BVD); many of their views regarding minimalism or referencing minimalist design will be used to support my views and arguments within this essay.

Minimalism is a simplistic design process concentrating on key elements such as clean lines, functionality and practicality. Emerging in the 1950s, minimalism is a movement defined as “a style in art, design, and theater that uses the smallest range of materials and colours possible, and only very simple shapes or forms” (Cambridge Dictionary,

2022). Simplistic forms and shapes with minimal colours form the basic concept of minimalism. “Less is more may sound like a cliché, but with the [minimalist design trend](#), that’s the essence of this school of design” (Schenker, 2021). An increasing desire for people to declutter their lives has led to the movement growing in popularity as consumers require a simpler way of living with clutter free rooms, sleek design and elegance. “Minimalism—in all its various forms—has come to the forefront of mainstream consumer culture, with masses of consumers embracing notions of reduced consumption, sparse aesthetics, and decluttering” (Wilson and Bellezza, 2022, p.796). Attractive design is being associated with minimalistic design as fewer possessions has become more idealistic.

Minimalism within design broadens the term through encompassing more elements. “Minimalist design can be identified by a framework that is simple in nature. Only necessary elements for functionality are included in the design” (Cousins, 2019). To create a minimalist design a large process is involved, separated into various categories such as: surrounding space, use of text, colour, tones, grid structure and 2D elements making it simple and effective to read (Cousins, 2019). The use of white space is to show what aspect of the design is more important, and additional designs would add clutter and confusion contradicting the minimalistic design movement. “In its most stripped-down definition, minimalism is about designers expressing only the most essential and necessary elements of a product or subject by getting rid of any excessive and, therefore, unnecessary components and features” (Schenker, 2018). The addition of design elements such as simple text would be appropriate for minimal design rather than overwhelming people with designs that are not important; keeping it simple and having the message displayed quickly.

Minimal design is used across a wide range of platforms from social media to websites to brand identities, with a number of well-known designers and companies adopting this method to create timeless designs. A movement evolving since the 1960s and 70s, it has gained a wider reputation in more recent years through its use across a wide range of sophisticated brands and well known retailer furniture companies such as Ikea (Schenker, 2018). Minimalism in design is often broken down and simplified making it easier and more of an effective way to communicate a message across quickly, making it ideal for graphic designers.

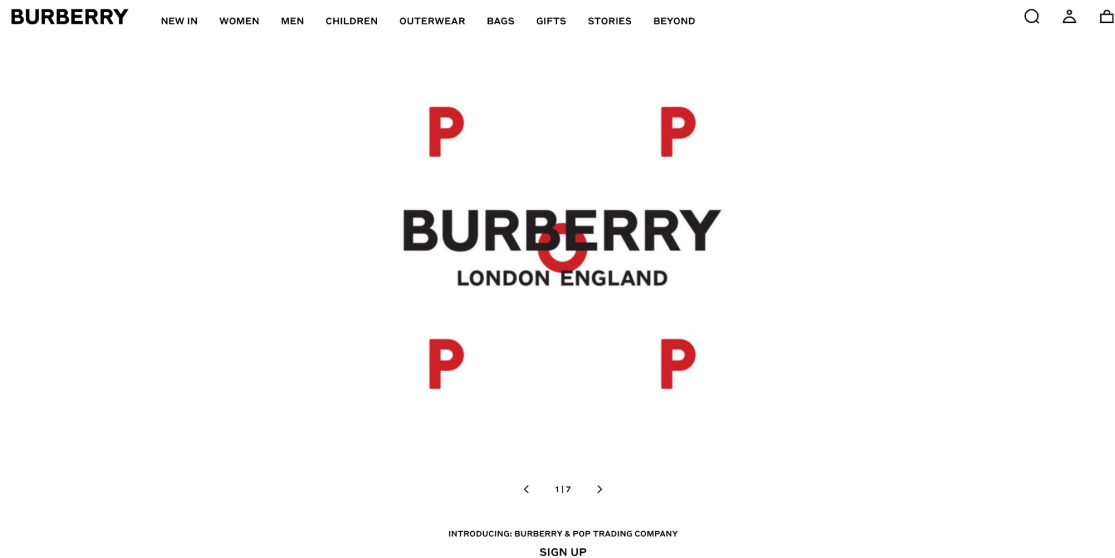


Fig.1: *Burberry website 'home page'.*

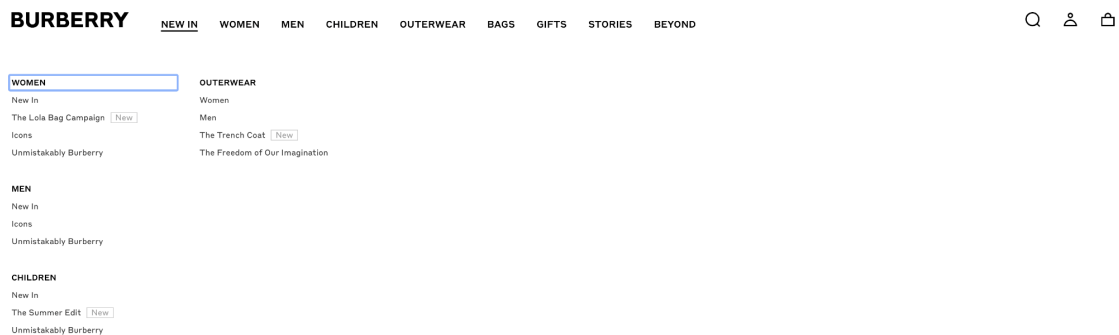


Fig.2: *Burberry website 'New In'.*

Figure 1 and 2 are screenshots taken from the website Burberry; both images are simple, clean, elegant, and not overpowering which fits into the minimalism design category. The website incorporates the use of clean elements in addition to white space. The use of white space is important for legibility as well as using it for high end retailers such as Burberry as it instantly makes the website welcoming and not overpowering, creating a more pleasant user experience which is an essential part of UX design.

Minimal design is not confined to flat design as evidenced in the Burberry images however but is instead a “design philosophy” (Duvall, 2018). Flat design is about complexity and the way elements are balanced out, and although it looks simple, to make it minimal a large hierarchy of information must first be condensed. Websites utilising a minimalist philosophy are arguably easier to use and more customer friendly due to information being displayed clearly, however this is not applicable to all businesses; Amazon has become a very popular and highly trafficked website but adopts a non-minimalistic approach proving that ‘less is not always more’ (Duvall, 2018). A company’s design ethos must reflect their customer base and product market making minimalism not suitable for everything.

As Mark Schenker (2018) explains, minimal design is a design trend, focusing on less is more and breaking down information to the necessary hierarchy of information. He explains also how minimal design is used across a wide variety of platforms from websites, apps to packaging design, Ikea and other minimalist websites and retailers. Minimalism in terms of graphic design is evident everywhere; “you can see it anywhere from the user interface of your favorite website or app to the [package design](#) of your latest gift and the design on the cup of your favorite cup of coffee” (Schenker, 2021). There is an element of minimalism in each person's life; this could be from lifestyle, technology, fashion, and home accessories (Becker, 2021).

Minimalism often is seen as flat design and very raw. There is hardly any rendering with minimalist design, whereas with 3D design there is texture, depth, shadow, color, CGI, most minimalist design is black and white with a limited color palette. It is about keeping it simple, natural, and timeless. Ikea for example has all graphics in 2D design, from text to icons, as this is the cleanest way of communicating through visual communication and it is easily understood by everyone. It is also about keeping customers satisfied.

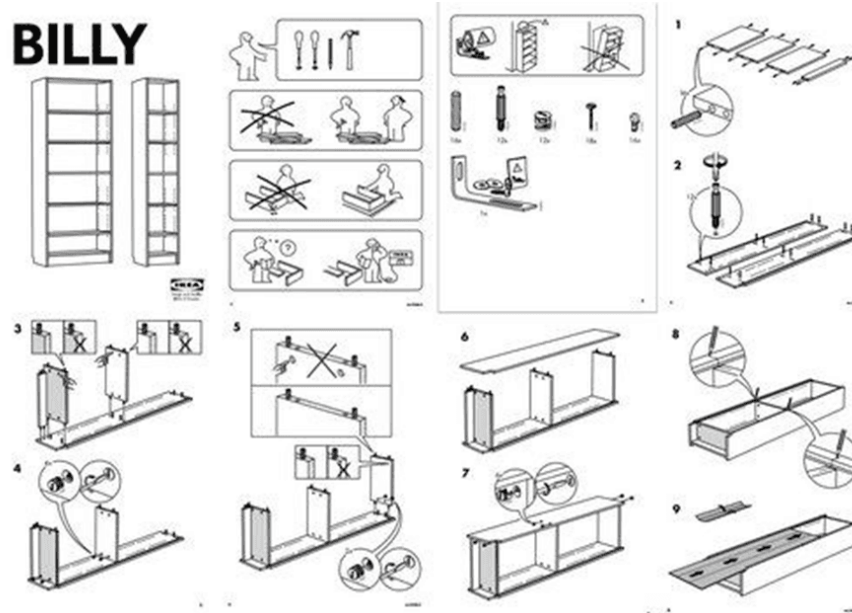


Fig.3: *Intellectual Furnishings.*

Ikea has also demonstrated their minimal design through the step-by-step guide leaflets that come with every packaged product (see figure 3). The flat pack instruction guide is beneficial and very practical when it comes to setting up IKEA furniture; it utilises minimal design with little detail and no colour making it easy and quick to read. Flat or almost flat design schemes are a perfect starter for minimal projects. Both design concepts emphasize a lack of additional ornamentation and when a person thinks flat, a minimal concept will arrive naturally.



Fig.4: *We Ain't Plastic* website [Screenshot].

White space is an essential element when it comes to minimalism. Using plenty of space helps create a sense of peace and creates a visual focal point in the design. The remaining space must have no clutter, instead utilising distinct, visual messaging and single visual focus. *We Ain't Plastic* does just this with a super simple design that exemplifies the height of minimalism (see figure 4). There's almost nothing to look at on the homepage design, which forces the user to see the elements that the designer wants to be front and centre. As seen above the image is simple, clean and structured so that the viewer can directly see the hierarchy of information presented.

SAINT LAURENT

SHOP WOMEN
SHOP MEN
GIFTS

COLLECTIONS
LA MAISON
SAINT LAURENT SELF
STORE LOCATOR

■ RIVE DROITE



BAG
MY ACCOUNT
CLIENT SERVICE
SUSTAINABILITY

Fig.5: Yve Saint Laurent website homepage.

Minimalism in graphic design is arguably a progressive step forward and has been since the 1950s. Not only is this method of design elegant and sophisticated, but it breaks the design elements down to their basic core. It is about highlighting the hierarchy of information that is often accompanied by negative space; this could include websites such as YSL. The Yves Saint Laurent website has a big hero slider in white text emblazoned across the model in the centre of the homepage (figure 1). Although the model is dressed in black the white text provides a poor contrast in relation to the monochrome colours used. By doing this the text almost vanishes with the surrounding white space firstly around the model and then around the photo of the model, which makes visibility more challenging and not practical for consumers to access categories efficiently. The links to access the collections are black text on white background however this is a very small font and disappears against the expansive white background.

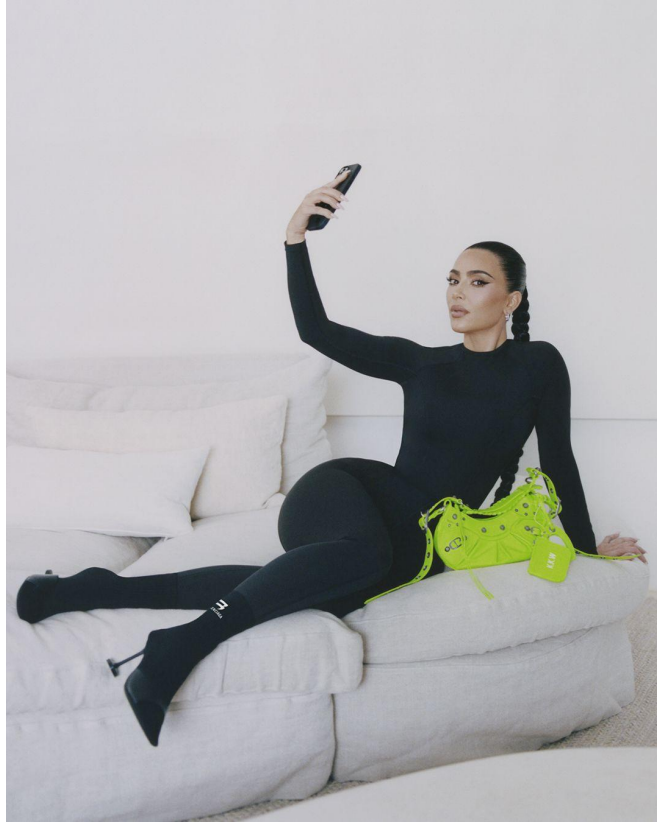


Fig.6: *Balenciaga homepage 1.*

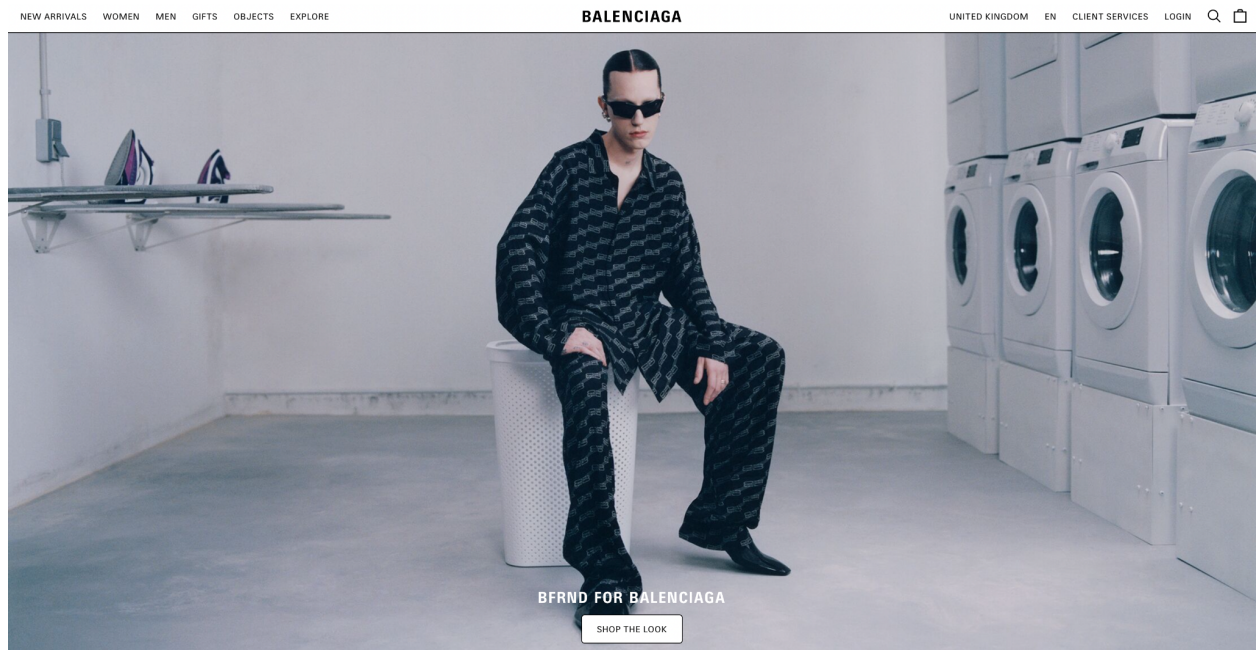


Fig.7: *Balenciaga homepage 2.*

The homepage on the Balenciaga website in April (figure 6) had a focal picture of Kim Kardashian posing for a selfie on a bed however her eye contact is fixed on the screen, at the viewer, not at the phone she is holding, presumably to gain the attention of the viewer/ consumer. The predominant colours used on the Balenciaga homepage are monochrome; Kim Kardashian wears all black and is situated on a cream bed with a luminous green Balenciaga bag situated next to her. The bag becomes the focal point of the image as it stands out against the monochrome background, perfect for the consumer. There is minimal text on the page and an enormous, big hero image; the balance of this is almost 80-20 with Kim Kardashian being the focal point with the fluorescent green bag. By advertising the brand this way it attracts consumers almost immediately and is straight to the point. This is what we sell, 'this is Balenciaga' kind of attitude, so it is big and bold and gets the message across quickly and efficiently. In terms of minimalist design this is highly effective, using muted colours and a room with nothing in other than Kim and a bed that disappears into the background; the bag becomes the only item the viewer is drawn to. The text used for the website however is arguably too small, keeping in mind that some people may find it challenging to read the text. This image has since been replaced with a big hero image of a man wearing Balenciaga in a laundry (see figure 7). The minimalist style is still the same with a white background contrasting against the black outfit the figure is wearing. Each image is direct and vocal in its minimalist nature.

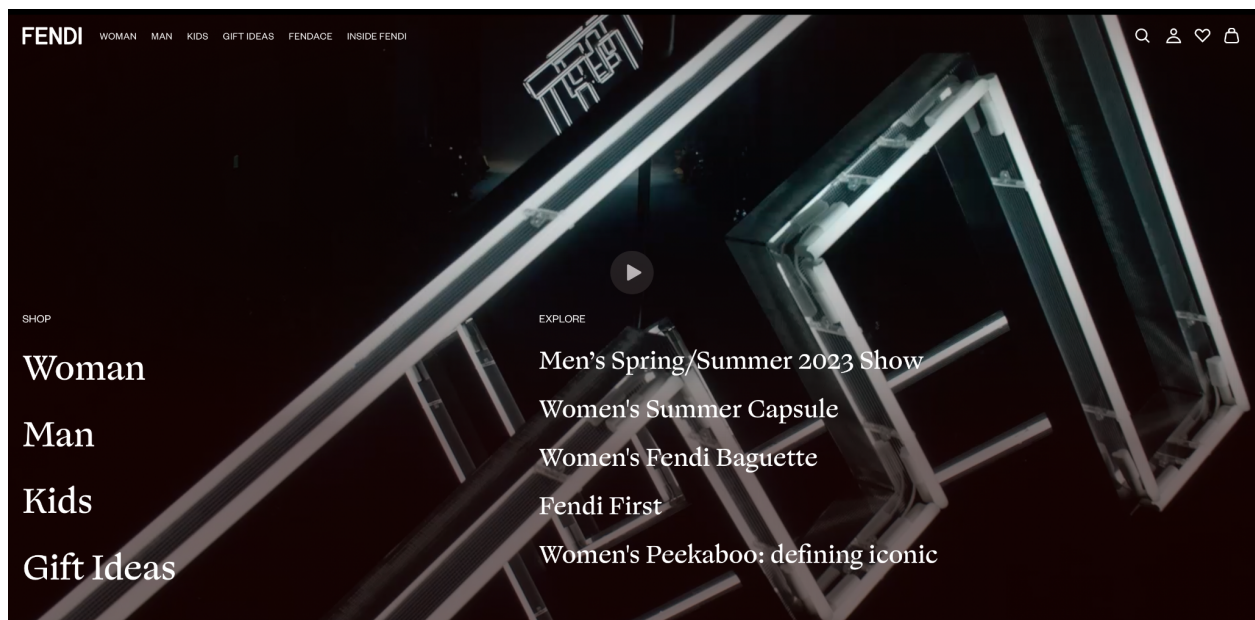


Fig.8: Fendi website 'homepage'

In contrast to the Balenciaga homepage, the Fendi website could be considered overwhelming. The homepage screen opens with a video of a catwalk show with a large metal Fendi sign turning in the air; the video alternates between concentrating on the models and on the large Fendi sign. Experience of opening this page shows it to lag and sometimes the video will not play at all. The website includes multiple videos on the home page each attached to the subheadings however there is no consistency with some showing videos and others simply stills of models.

The inclusion of “excessive” elements on this website arguably makes it overpowering for the viewer. There seems to be a number of elements on the FENDI website that are not at all consistent with the webpage which can make the website look and feel lower end. The use of text varies with each heading differing in size lacking consistency. ‘shop’ and ‘explore’ are very small despite being directions to the lists below them. Both lists are then in different sizes to the other despite being in parallel columns meaning the viewer’s eyes are drawn to both. The website appears unprofessional as a result and arguably lacks the clear contrast that the minimalist approach can provide. The video created by FENDI is overpowering and rather distracting in some respects, drawing the consumer’s attention away from shopping which isn’t a great way of creating a good user experience. In comparison to the YSL website the aesthetics differ with YSL being a lot more airy, subtle and elegant whereas the FENDI is more overpowering and rather heavy.

Many graphic designers opt for the minimalist route due to the timeless nature of the design process and the sense of clarity it provides for the consumer; minimalist design provides the consumer with confidence that the product is well made due to its simplistic style. This is also a contributing factor for consumers choosing large organisations as well as banking companies and so forth. Software additionally provides knowledge and understanding of combining essential elements together such as composition, colour, size, hierarchy of information and the aesthetics of the brand itself.

Minimal design is like peeling back paint on a canvas to reveal hidden details; by simplifying the design and solely focusing on the most crucial elements, it arguably reveals what really matters.



Figure 9: *Stockholm Design Lab 'Askul packaging'.*

Stockholm Design Lab (SDL) is one of the biggest design agencies in Sweden, designing for prestigious brands such as Adidas, Polestar and Poc & Forth. They have also designed for one of the biggest flat pack furniture retailers, IKEA. They have and still do create minimal design on all packaging from icons to food and so forth that is associated with IKEA. SDL's approach to minimal design is about keeping it simple yet understandable. As a company they always look at the past, present as well as the future providing them with a clearer picture of what the client wants.



Fig.10: *Stockholm Design Lab 'Ikea packaging'.*

BVD is a design agency also based in Stockholm, Sweden, who have designed for many high-profile clients such as, Nonuform, Kosta Boda, Bla Blar and Behrer. The company has also designed for IKEA. They took more of a sustainable approach with their IKEA packaging by creating something environmentally friendly which not only has simple clean design but also utilises recycled components.

As a company their ethos is to create a better future through visual communication; as the slogan says, “Simplify to Clarify” (BVD, 2022). Through only incorporating the essential information, BVD argue that people can be engaged with on a much larger scale rather than overwhelmed with too much information. Their utilisation of the minimalist movement arguably creates ‘clever design’, a simpler and more effective way of communicating information and persuading consumers.

Having looked in detail about these design companies, what is becoming more apparent is that the preponderance of designers are adopting the minimalist method of design and pursuing this movement. As a graphic designer, I am intrigued by minimalism.

Although it is a simplified design process it does take a degree of skill to put a minimal design together. There are a number of factors, elements, and structures which need to be considered and carefully planned out before designing. Many people might think minimal design is a two second job but it can take hours to weeks even months to produce something that works whilst remaining practical, noticeable, and unforgettable.

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Figure 3: Pinterest (2022) *Intellectual Furnishings*. Available at: <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/567031409312236670/> (Accessed: 10 May 2022).

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Figure 5: Yves Saint Laurent Website (2022) *Yves Saint Laurent website 'homepage'* [screenshot]. Available at: https://www.ysl.com/en-gb?ad=standard&&targetid=kwd-68616711&location=1007413&gclid=CjwKCAjwzeqVBhAoEiwAOrEmzZd6dQNPdFw6hhZBc_0pwyxPe5vvlhFe5uOYUhcGdFVeULL_2VTj6hoCw8gQAvD_BwE&gclidsrc=aw.ds (Accessed: 12 May 2022)

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