NIAGATRA
Journal of Business, Economics, and Policy

Niagatra: Journal of Business, Economics, and Policy
Vol. 1, No. 1, 2026
E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX
punggawajournal.com/niagatra

The Marketplace Trap: Sales Growth, Platform Dependence, and Strategic Control among Indonesian SMEs

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Article Info

Article history:
Received July 15th, 2026
Revised July 25th, 2026
Accepted July 29th, 2026

Keyword:
Digital platforms; E-commerce; Indonesia; Platform dependence; SMEs; Strategic control.

ABSTRACT

Digital marketplaces can raise sales and market reach for Indonesian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) while making those gains more dependent on infrastructure the firm does not control. This article develops the concept of dependent growth as a dynamic mechanism rather than a label for platform dependence. Dependent growth occurs when marketplace-enabled expansion increases the value of platform-controlled resources faster than the SME develops workable alternatives to them. The study uses qualitative documentary analysis. Indonesian SME evidence from BPS and an OJK working paper is read together with current seller-facing documents from Tokopedia/TikTok Shop, Shopee, and Lazada, then interpreted against peer-reviewed journal articles. Three recurring dimensions of strategic control are examined: continuity of customer access, dependence on platform-mediated visibility, and seller discretion under platform rules. The evidence does not show that marketplace use necessarily reduces SME performance. It shows why successful participation can make later platform changes more consequential to the firm. Strategic control is therefore better understood as the ability to keep commercially usable alternatives open while continuing to benefit from marketplace scale.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's marketplace economy now matters to ordinary small-business growth, not only to firms that were digital from the beginning. BPS reports that businesses using marketplaces tend to record higher revenue than non-users, although the comparison does not establish that marketplace adoption itself caused the difference (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2025a). The 2024 national e-commerce statistics also show a broad base of firms conducting online transactions (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2025b). Earlier OJK research, based on 739 Indonesian MSME entrepreneurs across ten provinces, likewise linked e-commerce adoption with sales growth and other performance measures, while warning about the limits of causal interpretation in post-adoption analysis (Yusgiantoro et al., 2020). The commercial attraction is not difficult to explain. A marketplace lets a small seller reach demand, receive payment, and use transaction infrastructure without first building those systems independently. The evidence is also useful because it separates the question of whether SMEs benefit from e-commerce from the later question of what happens when the channel becomes difficult to substitute. Growth is therefore treated here as the starting condition for a dependence mechanism, not as an outcome estimated by this study.

The same transaction can improve sales while leaving the firm more exposed to decisions made elsewhere. A seller may control the product and inventory but still depend on the platform to remain visible, retain account access, and reach the next buyer. Current Indonesian platform documents make this distinction unusually concrete. Shopee's terms reserve broad authority over services, automated processes, and account access; its marketing programs place campaign visibility inside platform-designed services. TikTok/Tokopedia similarly organizes product discovery through seller tools and paid placements, while Lazada markets seller support, traffic tools, and differentiated visibility inside its own ecosystem (Shopee, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; TikTok for Business, 2026a; Lazada Seller Center, n.d.-a). These arrangements are ordinary features of platform commerce. Their strategic importance rises when a business comes to rely on them. That distinction becomes sharper when several platforms are read together. Their seller documents differ in detail, but each places some commercially important resources inside an environment whose operating conditions can be changed centrally.

Platform research already explains why such dependence appears. Digital platforms coordinate interactions at scale but retain authority over important parts of the architecture through which outside firms participate (Gawer, 2021, 2022). Complementors gain access to valuable resources without acquiring equivalent control over the system. Cutolo and Kenney (2021) describe the resulting power asymmetry among platform-dependent entrepreneurs, while Yu and Sekiguchi (2024) show that entrepreneurship through platforms combines new opportunities with exposure to precarity and dependence. Recent SME research makes the point more directly. Wang et al. (2026), drawing on resource dependence theory, describe an empowerment-dependence paradox in digital platform ecosystems: platforms expand opportunities while simultaneously shaping governance choices because firms rely on resources they cannot easily replace.

Resource dependence gives the argument a stricter business meaning. Dependence is not simply frequent platform use, nor is it the psychological feeling that a platform is important. It becomes strategically relevant when a resource contributes materially to the firm's goals, an equivalent substitute is difficult or costly to obtain, and another organization controls important conditions of access. That logic fits marketplaces well. Customer traffic can be valuable before an SME has developed its own demand. Ranking and promotional systems can become central before the firm has built a recognizable brand. Once orders, reviews, staff routines, and advertising budgets accumulate around the same channel, the practical cost of moving activity elsewhere can rise even if the marketplace continues to perform well.

Most SME digitalization research understandably emphasizes the upside. Digital platforms can support business-model innovation and capability reconfiguration (Xie et al., 2022), innovation speed (Wu et al., 2022), and broader innovation performance (Jiang et al., 2023; Hassan et al., 2024). Indonesian studies also associate e-commerce use with performance and supply-chain improvements (Kilay et al., 2022; Wijaya et al., 2025). Those findings are not challenged here. They create the puzzle. If marketplace use is commercially useful, a successful SME has a reason to invest more deeply in it. The investment may improve current performance while making the external platform harder to replace later.

Dependent growth names that sequence. It is not another word for lock-in and it is not a claim that platform participation is harmful. The concept refers to a process in which commercial expansion raises the value of platform-controlled resources faster than the firm develops viable alternatives to those resources. A weak seller can be dependent, but so can a growing seller. In the latter case, success itself increases exposure because more revenue, operating attention, and channel-specific routines become tied to the relationship. The mechanism is therefore dynamic. What matters is not only how much the marketplace contributes today, but how costly a change in platform conditions would become tomorrow.

The article asks how marketplace-enabled growth can deepen strategic dependence among Indonesian SMEs and where control becomes most exposed as that dependence develops. The analysis does not estimate a firm-level causal effect and does not infer that all marketplace users follow the same path. It traces a mechanism across Indonesian SME evidence and current seller-facing platform rules. Three recurring dimensions organize the comparison: continuity of customer access, visibility within the platform, and seller discretion when platform rules change. The central claim is deliberately narrower than the title's metaphor. The marketplace becomes a trap only when growing through it reduces the firm's usable alternatives faster than the business recognizes that loss of room to act.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study uses qualitative documentary analysis with a business-mechanism focus. The document, reviewed through 2026, was assembled from two evidence layers. The first comprises Indonesian evidence on SME participation in digital marketplaces, including BPS E-Commerce Statistics 2024, the BPS statistical data story on marketplace benefits and risks, the Indonesia e-Conomy SEA 2025 report, and an OJK working paper based on 739 MSME entrepreneurs across ten provinces.

These sources were used to establish the Indonesian market context and prior evidence on marketplace adoption, sales, and marketing outcomes. The second layer consists of current seller-facing documents from Tokopedia/TikTok Shop, Shopee, and Lazada, including advertising guidance, seller terms, campaign conditions, account and data provisions, and seller-program pages. Using several platforms reduced the risk of generalizing from a single marketplace. The unit of analysis was a strategic-control mechanism, defined as a situation in which an external platform resource could support SME growth while conditions governing continued access to that resource remained partly outside the seller's control. Coding focused on three recurring dimensions: customer access, platform-mediated visibility, and seller discretion under platform rules. Other resources, including payment, logistics, and reputation systems, were considered only when they clarified these control problems.

Coding proceeded in two passes. The first identified the business resource or benefit available to sellers, while the second traced whether practical control over its continued use rested mainly with the seller, was shared, or was largely determined by platform rules and systems. A mechanism was treated as supported when documentary evidence and peer-reviewed platform research converged, while contradictory findings were retained when they changed the interpretation. Multihoming, for example, was treated as a possible alternative channel rather than an automatic solution because it may also increase managerial adaptation costs (Chen et al., 2022). Peer-reviewed literature published through 2026 provided the theoretical and comparative base, with resource dependence used to distinguish access to useful external resources from strategically significant dependence and platform-governance research used to explain how such dependence is structured.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Growth Can Deepen Dependence

Marketplace participation solves a real resource problem for small firms. A seller can enter an established demand environment rather than financing the entire route to market. The platform already has buyer traffic, familiar transaction routines, payment connections, and seller tools. Cennamo (2021) explains why this arrangement can be powerful: platforms coordinate several market sides and increase participation value through scale. The interface through which the seller joins that system is equally important. Gawer (2021) shows that digital platform boundaries are partly constituted through those interfaces. For an SME, the boundary appears in ordinary business practice. The firm is inside the market enough to sell, yet outside the organization that controls much of the market infrastructure.

Indonesian evidence supports the growth side of this relationship. BPS finds higher revenue among marketplace users, while the OJK study associates e-commerce adoption with sales growth and other performance indicators among MSMEs (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2025a; Yusgiantoro et al., 2020). Food-sector evidence likewise links a broader scope of e-commerce use with innovation capability and performance (Wijaya et al., 2025). These findings do not prove that a marketplace caused growth for a particular seller. They do show why participation can become commercially important enough to shape business routines. A channel that consistently brings orders will attract staff attention, inventory planning, and promotional spending.

Platform use can then move from distribution into the business model. Xie et al. (2022) show that digital platforms contribute to SME business-model innovation when firms reconfigure capabilities around them. Similar work connects platform capability with innovation performance and open innovation (Jiang et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). The change is usually gradual. Product descriptions are rewritten for marketplace search. Inventory is timed around campaign demand. Staff learn seller dashboards. Fulfilment is reorganized to meet service expectations. None of these adjustments is inherently problematic. They are often evidence that digitalization is working. Marzi et al. (2023) report a similar mixture of access benefits and organizational pitfalls in SME platform adoption. The important transition occurs when the routines built for participation cease to be easily portable to another channel.

Dependence develops when those adjustments become valuable mainly because the platform relationship remains available. Resource dependence theory is useful here because it separates external sourcing from strategic exposure. Firms routinely use resources they do not own. The problem grows when an important resource has few workable substitutes and another organization can change its conditions. Wang et al. (2026) locate precisely this empowerment-dependence tension in SME platform governance. Cutolo and Kenney (2021) reach the same structural problem from entrepreneurship: the platform provides opportunity, but the entrepreneur's risk increases because the platform occupies a stronger position over critical market access. Dependence can therefore grow even without coercion or conflict. A platform may remain commercially attractive while the seller's substitution options become progressively weaker.

This is why dependent growth should be treated as a process rather than a category. The first marketplace sale may add little dependence. A year of successful sales can do much more. Reviews accumulate on the platform. Advertising data become platform-specific. Staff become quicker at one seller interface. The share of revenue coming through that marketplace rises, so changing channels now threatens a larger part of the business. Each choice may be rational on its own. Their combined effect is to increase the cost of substitution. Reviews, seller ratings, and platform-specific performance histories reinforce the same effect because they accumulate where the transactions occur rather than following the firm automatically to a new marketplace.

Engagement research fits this sequence. Engert et al. (2022) show how platform boundary resources influence complementor engagement, and their later work treats engagement as a trajectory rather than a fixed state (Engert et al., 2023). Gastaldi et al. (2024) likewise find that platform-complementor relationships can change as ecosystems evolve. A seller can therefore enter under conditions that feel mutually beneficial and later discover that the relationship has become much harder to replace. Nothing in that argument requires opportunistic conduct by the platform. Dependence can deepen through ordinary success and accumulated specialization.

The distinction matters for how SME performance is interpreted. Sales and transaction volume show whether the channel is producing commercial value. They do not show whether that value is portable. Sagala and Ori (2024) treat digital transformation as a broader organizational process, while Romero and Mammadov (2025) emphasize its character as an innovation process rather than a one-off adoption decision. A firm that becomes very good at operating inside one marketplace may be digitally capable in one sense and strategically exposed in another. Dependent growth occurs when the second condition is hidden by the first.

2. Strategic Control Does Not Move All at Once

Customer access is the clearest place to see the difference between commercial reach and strategic control. Marketplaces give sellers access to buyers, but the interface through which the relationship is formed remains heavily platform-mediated. BPS identifies limited customer-data access as part of the power asymmetry facing marketplace businesses (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2025a). Shopee's current terms go further in showing how data sit inside the relationship: user information is processed within the platform framework, and the terms place restrictions on third-party access and use (Shopee, n.d.-a). The point is not that sellers receive no customer information. It is that customer acquisition does not automatically produce an equally portable customer relationship.

A sale can therefore add revenue without creating the same future contact capability that an independently managed channel might create. The seller may learn that a product performs well while remaining dependent on the marketplace interface for the next transaction. This does not eliminate branding or repeat purchase. It changes the infrastructure through which repeat purchase is organized. For SMEs, that difference becomes more important when paid traffic grows expensive or account conditions change. Customer continuity, rather than customer "ownership," is the more precise strategic issue.

Visibility produces another form of dependence because a listing has little economic value if buyers rarely encounter it. Tokopedia and ShopTokopedia seller guidance makes paid discovery observable. Product Shopping Ads can appear in search and recommendation placements, and campaign tools allow sellers to optimize for specified outcomes (TikTok for Business, 2026a, 2026b). Shopee's Seller Marketing Service similarly bundles platform-provided marketing activities that can include ads, campaign packages, live content, and promotional features, with participation governed by program terms that Shopee may change (Shopee, n.d.-b). Lazada advertises seller tools, traffic support, and, for LazMall, differentiated search visibility and campaign opportunities (Lazada Seller Center, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Across platforms, visibility is not merely a property of the product. It is partly a service organized by the marketplace. The effect is especially important for small sellers because a high return on marketplace advertising can encourage further concentration rather than diversification. When each additional rupiah of platform spending appears efficient, shifting budget to an unproven channel can look irrational in the short run. Dependent growth can therefore be reinforced by sensible performance management.

That arrangement can still be profitable. A seller may willingly pay for discovery because the resulting margin is attractive. Strategic exposure appears when growth makes the business unable to distinguish between demand for the product and demand produced by platform visibility. The practical question is not whether advertising exists. It is whether a significant fall in paid or algorithmic exposure could be replaced without a major disruption in sales. Teh (2022) treats platform governance as the design of participation incentives and constraints, which is a better description of this problem than the familiar complaint that algorithms are opaque. Even a transparent ranking system remains a ranking system controlled by the infrastructure owner. Zhang et al. (2022) show that platform gatekeeping also affects complementor behavior beyond simple access, which reinforces the point that governance shapes the commercial environment rather than merely policing misconduct.

Table 1 Growth Resources and Strategic-Control Exposure in Marketplace Participation

Control dimension	**Platform-mediated resource**	**Immediate business value**	**Strategic exposure**
Customer continuity	Marketplace audience and transaction interface	Higher reach and repeat transaction potential	Platform-mediated data/interface; continuity may be hard to carry elsewhere
Visibility	Search, recommendation, ads, campaign tools	Discoverability and faster acquisition	Placement and paid-discovery environment remain platform-governed
Seller discretion	Account access, eligibility, service and campaign rules	Coordinated market participation	Commercial choices remain conditional on platform terms and account status

Shopee's current terms are instructive because they reserve the right to modify automated methods and processes associated with its services, including advertising-related systems (Shopee, n.d.-a). The terms also allow service changes and, under specified conditions, account restriction or suspension. TikTok/Tokopedia and Lazada use different governance language, but the business mechanism is similar: seller participation occurs inside an operating environment whose rules are not negotiated individually. This evidence does not show unfair treatment. It shows where final authority over the environment resides.

Seller discretion under platform rules is therefore narrower than ordinary managerial freedom. An SME still chooses what to sell and how much inventory to hold. It can decide whether to buy advertising, join a campaign, or accept a marketplace's promotional conditions. Yet those choices take their commercial meaning from platform-defined eligibility, placement, fees, account status, and service rules. Shopee's campaign terms, for example, state that campaign conditions can be updated and that sellers pay for platform-provided promotion under the applicable offer (Shopee, n.d.-c). Lazada's seller materials likewise tie seller benefits to program eligibility and platform compliance. The issue is not that the seller has no choices. It is that the feasible set of choices is partly constructed outside the firm.

This point becomes more visible at the boundary of account access. Shopee's terms allow suspension or termination under specified circumstances and permit changes to services; Lazada's seller onboarding materials also describe account deactivation after serious or accumulated non-compliance (Shopee, n.d.-a; Lazada Seller Center, n.d.-a). A firm can own its inventory, brand, and production capability while losing access to an important sales channel. Account enforcement is an extreme case, but it clarifies the resource relationship. The vulnerable asset is continued access to the market interface, not ownership of the goods.

Platform scholarship helps explain why moving elsewhere is not always a quick substitute. Chen et al. (2022) show that governance design affects complementors' multihoming decisions because different platform requirements create adaptation costs. Kretschmer et al. (2022) describe platform ecosystems as meta-organizations in which autonomous firms are nevertheless coordinated by an organizing structure. The phrase is technically useful, but the SME problem is simpler: a second marketplace is not automatically a second equivalent channel. Staff must learn another system, promotional routines differ, reviews do not necessarily travel, and the source of demand may still be concentrated in one place.

Cenamor (2021) makes a related strategic point: complementor advantage depends on decisions made within a platform context, not merely on being present. When most demand is generated inside one ecosystem, multihoming can remain superficial. The seller may list products elsewhere while continuing to allocate most advertising, attention, and inventory to the dominant channel. Dependent growth is reduced only if alternatives are commercially usable. A nominal second account provides little protection when it cannot absorb meaningful volume. The three control dimensions therefore interact without collapsing into the same problem. Weak customer continuity makes the firm more reliant on fresh acquisition. Reliance on platform-mediated visibility raises the value of ranking and paid discovery. As those systems contribute more revenue, seller decisions become increasingly sensitive to platform rules. The feedback is what matters. Dependence deepens not because control shifts in one dramatic event, but because several ordinary business decisions begin to reinforce the same external relationship.

A growing video-commerce market can accelerate the process. The Indonesia e-Conomy SEA 2025 report records rapid expansion in video-commerce sellers and transaction volume (Google, Temasek, & Bain & Company, 2025). Fast growth gives SMEs a rational reason to prioritize speed. Waiting to build an independent channel can mean missing demand that is already visible on the platform. The strategic cost appears later, when the firm discovers that part of what looked like internal market capability was actually access to a system controlled by another organization. The finding is consistent with research showing that complementor autonomy remains conditional on platform governance and affordances (Shim, 2024).

The mechanism can be summarized without claiming prevalence. Marketplace growth becomes strategically fragile when an SME's revenue rises through resources that are important, hard to substitute, and governed externally. This is narrower than saying that platforms always extract value from sellers. It also explains why more seller tools do not necessarily mean more strategic control. A firm can receive better analytics and finer campaign options while its dependence on the environment that supplies those tools continues to increase.

3. Preserving Strategic Control as Dependence Deepens

An SME does not need to leave marketplaces to reduce the risk described above. Doing so would sacrifice the very resource advantage that makes platform participation useful. The relevant business question is whether the firm retains a practical alternative when one channel becomes less attractive. Strategic optionality is therefore not independence. It is the ability to redirect enough activity that a platform change remains a business problem rather than an existential one. Multihoming contributes only when the additional channel is genuinely usable. Chen et al. (2022) show that ecosystem differences can make multihoming costly, and Da Rocha et al. (2024) find that small firms using digital platforms for internationalization still face the problem of building advantages that are not confined to one platform relationship. For an Indonesian SME, listing the same products on two marketplaces may be a useful start, but it does not create much optionality if one channel still supplies most demand or if staff cannot shift fulfilment and promotional effort quickly. The relevant capability is reallocation, not account count.

Internal capability changes the same calculation. Platform resources are less constraining when firms learn something that remains useful outside the platform. Xie et al. (2022) place capability reconfiguration between platform participation and business-model innovation. Jiang et al. (2023) and Wang et al. (2023) also show that firms can translate platform capability into wider innovation outcomes. For a small seller, the transferable part may be modest: better demand forecasting, more disciplined digital content, faster order handling, or clearer product positioning. The point is not to build every system internally. It is to prevent the marketplace from becoming the only place where the firm's market capability exists. The portability test is straightforward in principle even if it is difficult to measure precisely: if a capability remains useful after the firm changes marketplace, it strengthens the organization; if it works only because one platform continues to supply the surrounding system, it also deepens dependence. This distinction keeps the argument close to business capability rather than turning optionality into a generic recommendation to diversify.

Customer continuity is part of that capability, but owned channels should not be romanticized. An independent website with no traffic is not strategic autonomy. A social-media following that never converts does not replace marketplace demand. What matters is whether some relationship with customers can survive a change in platform access. A recognizable brand can help because buyers who deliberately search for the firm are less dependent on incidental ranking. The same is true of consent-based customer communication where law and platform rules permit it. These alternatives can be small and still matter if they reduce the cost of redirecting demand. This matters especially when platform demand moves sharply across campaign periods.

Competitive differentiation works in a similar way. A seller competing mainly through placement beside near-identical products is highly exposed to ranking and price pressure. A seller with clearer differentiation may still depend on marketplace discovery, but the platform has less influence over the reason the buyer chooses that firm. Wu et al. (2022) and Hassan et al. (2024) both show that organizational conditions shape whether digital resources become innovation advantages. Marketplace strategy therefore cannot substitute for competitive strategy. The platform can help a product be found; it cannot fully determine whether the firm has built something worth searching for by name.

Adaptation to platform rules remains necessary. Nzembayie et al. (2024) show how platform-dependent entrepreneurs respond through adaptive strategies, and Shim (2024) emphasizes the continuing tension between platform affordances and complementor autonomy. The danger is not adaptation itself. It appears when every improvement is highly ecosystem-specific. A seller can become exceptionally efficient at one dashboard and still have little ability to transfer that efficiency elsewhere. Dependent growth is reduced when learning remains portable. Cenamor (2021) helps clarify the distinction: durable complementor advantage depends on strategic choices that create value beyond simple platform presence. Optionality is therefore not a defensive add-on. It is part of how the SME prevents present access from becoming future constraint.

Performance metrics should reflect that distinction. Sales, margin, and return on advertising spend answer whether the platform relationship is valuable now. They do not show how exposed the business has become. An SME also needs to know whether a large share of demand comes from one platform, whether visibility increasingly requires paid discovery, and whether moving meaningful volume elsewhere would take weeks or months. This article does not propose a standardized score or threshold. The analytical point is simpler: current performance and freedom to adapt are different outcomes.

The Indonesian context makes the tension difficult to avoid because marketplace and video-commerce growth continue to create real opportunities. Refusing platform infrastructure can be costly, particularly for firms that cannot finance customer acquisition independently. Better strategy therefore does not mean reducing marketplace use whenever sales rise. It means allowing internal capability and alternative channels to develop before dependence becomes difficult to reverse. The platform remains a source of growth, but the firm does not allow one relationship to become the only commercially credible route to market.

Platform asymmetry will not disappear through firm strategy alone. Regulation can limit abusive conduct, and current Indonesian policy increasingly treats large marketplaces as important institutional actors. Yet platform governance necessarily involves centralized rules for coordinating large numbers of participants (Teh, 2022; Chen et al., 2021). SME strategy must work within that reality. Strategic control is preserved less by demanding symmetrical power than by keeping enough options usable that external rule changes do not determine the firm's future by themselves.

CONCLUSION

Indonesian marketplace participation offers SMEs a credible route to sales growth because it supplies resources that small firms would otherwise have to build slowly or purchase separately. BPS and prior OJK evidence support the commercial case for e-commerce adoption, while recent market data show that the opportunity continues to expand. The same resource structure explains the exposure. Customer relationships remain partly mediated, visibility is organized through platform systems, and seller discretion operates inside rules the firm does not set. Dependent growth captures the dynamic part of that relationship. It occurs when marketplace-enabled expansion increases the business value of platform-controlled resources faster than the SME develops workable substitutes. The mechanism can emerge through success rather than failure. More orders justify deeper platform-specific routines, and deeper routines make later changes more consequential. The concept therefore adds something narrower to the platform-dependence literature: it explains how growth itself can increase dependence over time.

The study does not measure firm-level dependence or identify a sales threshold at which platform reliance becomes harmful. Its evidence is documentary and secondary, and current platform terms may change. Those limits prevent prevalence and causal claims. They do not remove the strategic implication. Marketplace performance should be evaluated alongside the firm's ability to redirect demand, transfer capability, and keep customer access commercially viable when platform conditions shift. For SMEs, the central issue is not whether the marketplace helps them grow. It is whether that growth leaves enough room to act after the marketplace becomes important.

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