

## ACCREDITATION OF FASHION DESIGN PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE EVALUATION IN TERMS OF CRITERIA AND SECTORAL ALIGNMENT

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### ABSTRACT

The accreditation of fashion design programs in higher education is a critical mechanism for ensuring educational quality assurance, reinforcing alignment with industry expectations, integrating technological innovation and advancing sustainability. Beyond enhancing graduates' employability, accreditation facilitates the continuous improvement of pedagogical practices and ensures that vocational education responds more effectively to the contemporary requirements of the fashion industry. This study aimed to examine the similarities and differences among international accreditation agencies that evaluate fashion design programs in higher education and assess the extent to which their accreditation criteria reflect and accommodate current developments within the fashion sector. A qualitative research design was adopted, employing document analysis. The sample comprised three accreditation organizations from different countries that accredit higher-education programs in fashion design. Documents published on the official websites of these agencies, including general accreditation standards, program specific criteria for fashion design, and detailed information on accreditation procedures, were analyzed.

Through a comparative analysis, the alignment of the accreditation standards with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) was examined. Similarities and differences among accreditation frameworks were identified in relation to student-centred approaches, teaching and learning processes, program design, academic staff qualifications and standards concerning infrastructure and financial resources. The findings were discussed in terms of the capacity of existing accreditation frameworks to respond to the evolving industrial and societal demands of the global fashion industry. By making areas of convergence and divergence visible, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions on quality assurance and accreditation in fashion design education.

**Keywords:** Accreditation, Fashion Design Education, Accreditation Criteria, Fashion Industry

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Across the world, ensuring sustainable development through high-quality higher education in order to meet the needs of the twenty-first century and beyond has become a fundamental goal of educational institutions and stakeholders. Stakeholders express concern that higher education has not yet sufficiently enabled the transformation of knowledge, values, behaviors and lifestyles required to overcome contemporary challenges. Since the 1990s, quality and quality assurance have become central themes in higher education worldwide. Concerns regarding the outputs of higher education institutions are frequently voiced. Although conditions vary from country to country, certain general trends have increased interest in establishing mechanisms to assure quality in higher education. This century has witnessed a new relationship between knowledge and the economy. A country's capacity to produce high-quality knowledge and the qualified human resources supporting it is increasingly associated with its capacity to generate prosperity. This is only possible through a well-developed education system with assured quality. As technological advances transcend geographical boundaries, expectations of the educational process have also changed (Adotey et al., 2016).

Among the initiatives undertaken to meet these expectations, the "Academic Accreditation System" which aims to evaluate and improve university performance, stands out. Accreditation systems have become a global trend widely adopted across various fields and a necessity arising from transformations in contemporary life. Accreditation is a modern concept that emerged as a result of the widespread use of quality principles in educational institutions (Hendy et al., 2021). According to the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), accreditation is a systematic evaluation process that ensures higher education programs comply with defined academic and professional standards and aims to monitor and enhance quality (ENQA, 2015).

Accreditation in higher education is implemented in two main forms: institutional accreditation, which covers the entire higher education institution and program accreditation, which covers a specific program. Program accreditation refers to the evaluation of whether a program meets standards established usually at the national level by a professionally competent body that sometimes holds legal or statutory authority. It is a mark of quality assurance indicating that a program meets recognized standards and has achieved the required quality level. A key aspect is that accreditation is carried out by an independent professional body (Dowlen, 2019). Accreditation processes play an important role in improving the educational process and increasing its effectiveness (Sabeena Salam, 2015).

Program accreditation is important for all stakeholders involved in a program. For students and prospective students, an accredited program provides assurance that course content and standards meet required criteria and facilitates post-graduation employment. For academic staff, it offers an environment for professional development and learning. For universities delivering the programs, accreditation provides clear evidence that institutions meet and maintain effective quality standards. This external validation also serves as an important promotional and marketing tool. For employers who hire graduates and students, it guarantees that they can employ individuals who meet expected standards. Additionally, it provides multiple benefits for other stakeholders such as professional bodies and government institutions (Dowlen, 2019).

In recent years, the global fashion industry has undergone a significant transformation driven by sustainability pressures, digitalization, fast-consumption models and changing consumer expectations. While the environmental and ethical problems caused by fast fashion have become increasingly visible, circular economy practices, ethical production approaches and responsible supply chain management have emerged as defining elements in the sector (Niinimäki et al., 2020). At the same time, digital design software, three-dimensional prototyping and virtual fashion applications are fundamentally transforming design and production processes (Bertola & Teunissen, 2018). This transformation requires fashion professionals to possess not only creative and aesthetic skills but also sustainability knowledge, technological competence and the ability to analyze global market dynamics (McKinsey & Company, 2023). Therefore, the fashion sector presents a structure that integrates multidisciplinary knowledge and skills, is continuously evolving and demands high adaptability.

Fashion design education holds a distinctive position within higher education as it combines creative disciplines with commercial requirements, technological innovations and global supply chain dynamics. As the fashion industry undergoes a transformative process shaped by sustainability concerns, digital technologies and changing consumer behaviors, educational institutions face increasing pressure to ensure that their programs are aligned with sectoral needs, academically robust and responsive to change (Cuffee & Su, 2024). Fashion design education evolves in response to sectoral transformation, technological innovations and societal imperatives, leading to significant implications for accreditation criteria and processes.

The structure of accreditation for fashion design programs varies considerably across different national and institutional contexts in terms of criteria, processes and effectiveness. While some regions have strong accreditation bodies with clear and established standards, others operate with fragmented or still-developing quality assurance systems (Kumaravelu & Suresh, 2021). This heterogeneous landscape raises critical questions regarding the comparability of fashion design degrees, the extent to which accreditation criteria reflect current sector requirements and the capacity of existing frameworks to ensure continuous improvement in educational quality.

The relationship between fashion design education and industry practice has long been recognized as both indispensable and problematic. Employers frequently emphasize significant gaps between graduate competencies and workplace requirements, particularly in areas such as teamwork, professional practice skills, digital competence, and sustainability literacy (Erkarlsan & Aykul, 2018). These mismatches generate costs both for graduates struggling in the transition to employment and for employers who must invest in additional training. In principle, accreditation systems are expected to function as mechanisms that ensure alignment between curricula and industry needs. However, the extent to which current accreditation criteria effectively define and enforce this alignment has not yet been sufficiently examined.

Recent research has begun to question the specific dimensions of sectoral alignment that accreditation systems should address. These dimensions include establishing a balance between creative development and commercial competencies, integrating emerging technologies into education, fostering collaborative and entrepreneurial skills and embedding sustainability principles throughout the curriculum (Williams, 2018). As fundamental quality assurance mechanisms in fashion design higher education, accreditation systems define standards, evaluate institutional compliance and demonstrate program quality to students, employers and other stakeholders. However,

the effectiveness of accreditation in assuring educational quality, promoting industry alignment and enabling continuous improvement depends on the appropriateness and rigor of criteria, the validity of evaluation processes, and the capacity of standards to adapt to changing educational and sectoral contexts.

Understanding how different accreditation frameworks approach these dimensions and how effectively they implement them is critically important for improving existing systems and for developing new approaches in contexts where quality assurance mechanisms are weak or absent. Therefore, this study aims to identify similarities and differences among international accreditation bodies that evaluate fashion design programs in higher education and to assess the extent to which their accreditation criteria reflect and address current developments in the fashion industry.

## 2. METHOD

This study employed document analysis, one of the qualitative research methods. Document analysis is a data collection and analysis method based on the systematic examination of written, visual, or digital documents related to the research topic. In this method, the researcher uses existing documents as data sources and analyzes the information contained in these documents according to specific themes, categories, or conceptual frameworks (Bowen, 2009).

In this research, the standards and procedural documents of organizations accrediting fashion design programs were comparatively examined to identify similarities and differences in terms of student-centered approaches, teaching and learning processes, program design, faculty qualifications, and standards related to infrastructure and financial resources.

Within the scope of the study, an extensive review was conducted to identify institutions and organizations that accredit fashion design programs at the international level. Among the identified accreditation bodies, three organizations from different countries were selected for comparison. The selection criterion was that these organizations widely accredit fashion design programs operating in higher education. In addition, examples from the United States, Europe, and Türkiye were chosen to ensure regional representation and to reflect contextual differences.

Accordingly, the Design, Planning and Accreditation Board (TAPLAK), the National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) and the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCÉRES) were selected for comparative analysis.

TAPLAK, based in Türkiye, manages accreditation processes for various architecture and design programs. Within this framework, it has developed specific standards for undergraduate programs in Fashion Design, Textile Design, and Textile and Fashion Design.

NASAD, based in the United States, provides a general framework of standards for all professional undergraduate programs in art and design, as well as specific standards for the field of Fashion Design. These field-specific standards are supported by the general standards.

HCÉRES, based in France, evaluates fashion design programs applying for accreditation not through field-specific standards but through a general evaluation framework based on the ESG. In this sense, HCÉRES standards are universal and discipline-independent. Distinctiveness in the fashion field emerges in the way these criteria are interpreted. The evaluation team develops flexible and context-specific assessment approaches by considering the context in which the program operates.

## 3. FINDINGS

In this section, the accreditation bodies included in the sample were first compared at the level of core domains, and the alignment of their accreditation standards with the ESG was analyzed. The accreditation standards were compared within four main frameworks: 'Student-Centered Standards', 'Teaching-Learning and Program Standards', 'Faculty Standards' and 'Infrastructure and Financial Resource Standards'.

Table 1 presents a comparison of the accreditation bodies at the core domain level.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Accreditation Bodies at the Core Domain Level

Accreditation Bodies	Core Domain
<b>TAPLAK</b>	1. Program Mission, Objectives, and Educational Goals
	2. Program Learning Outcomes and Curriculum
	3. Students
	4. Academic Staff
	5. Graduates
	6. Continuous Improvement
	7. Physical Facilities and Resources
	8. Administration and Financial Resources
	9. Community Engagement
<b>NASAD</b>	1. Curricular Structure
	2. Recommendations for General Studies
	3. Essential Competencies, Experiences, and Opportunities
	4. Essential Resource-Based Opportunities
<b>HCÉRES</b>	1. Teaching Policy and Characterization of the Study Program
	2. Pedagogical Organization of the Study Program
	3. Students' Pathway
	4. Management and Continuous Improvement of The Study Program

Across all three accreditation bodies, it is evident that a multidimensional approach is adopted in determining program quality. Programs are subjected to a holistic evaluation from academic, institutional, societal, and pedagogical perspectives. This type of evaluation approach indicates that the organizations consider educational programs not as static structures but as dynamic and multi-layered systems. TAPLAK demonstrates the most comprehensive structure in terms of core domains. NASAD focuses its core domains on evaluating content, skills, and material resources specific to the design field. HCÉRES, on the other hand, presents a more managerial and process-oriented framework in its core domains.

Table 2 presents the alignment of the accreditation standards examined in this study with the ESG.

**Table 2.** Alignment of Accreditation Standards with the ESG

ESG Standard	TAPLAK	NASAD	HCÉRES
1. Policy for quality assurance	Standard 1, 6, 8	General criteria (III.N)	Standard 15
2. Design and approval of programs.	Standard 1, 2	Rules of Practice and Procedure Fashion Design-1	Standard 1, 5
3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	Standard 2, 6	General criteria (II.L) Fashion Design-3 (VIII.B.1)	Standard 5, 6
4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	Standard 3	General criteria (V; II.H)	Standard 5, 7, 15
5. Teaching staff	Standard 4, 6	General criteria (II.E) Fashion Design-4 (X.B.5)	Standard 12, 13
6. Learning resources and student support	Standard 3,7,8	General criteria (II.F; II.G; IV.B.1) Fashion Design-3 (j, k)	Standard 13, 3, 6
7. Information management	Standard 1, 3, 5, 6	General criteria (XXI. 2.a)	Standard 9, 10, 11
8. Public information	Standard 1, 2, 9	General criteria (II.I)	Standard 4, 5, 10, 11, 15
9. Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programs.	Standard 1,2,5,6	General criteria (II.L)	Standard 4, 14
10. Cyclical external quality assurance	Standard 1, 6	It is not formally articulated within the standards; instead, it is embedded in and operates in parallel with NASAD's accreditation procedures.	Standard 14

Based on Table 2, it can be stated that the ESG functions as an overarching and inclusive framework for accreditation bodies. TAPLAK’s standards adapt the general framework of the ESG to the nature of fashion and textile design, characterized by practice-based education, studio culture, and industry collaboration. In particular, the ESG principle of “Student-Centered Learning, Teaching and Assessment” is concretized in TAPLAK through concepts such as the “Emphasis on Studio/Workshop Courses” and the “Creative Classroom,” while “Learning Resources and Student Support” are elaborated in relation to the technical equipment requirements specific to the field. TAPLAK fully meets the core requirements of the ESG and further expands them by making them more explicit in areas such as relations with graduates and society. This alignment demonstrates that TAPLAK accreditation is strongly consistent with the ESG.

NASAD aligns with some principles through its general standards, and with others through both general and field-specific standards. This situation stems from the comprehensive structure of NASAD’s standards developed for all undergraduate programs in art and design. Some ESG principles are embedded within broader processes and practices and are implemented as part of program evaluation mechanisms. For example, the principle of “Student-Centered Learning, Teaching, and Assessment” is not presented as a standalone central theme in NASAD standards but represents an underlying philosophy across multiple standards. Similarly, the principle of “Cyclical Quality Assurance” directly parallels NASAD’s accreditation procedures. A program’s application to NASAD for evaluation indicates its inclusion in a periodic external quality assurance process. This principle is similarly reflected in the other two accreditation bodies; however, they explicitly state it within their written standards.

HCÉRES is a system based on the ESG that incorporates strong and detailed additional standards addressing research, integration with the socio-economic environment, and internationalization. Both sets of standards fully overlap in terms of quality assurance principles and guidelines. This is explicitly emphasized in the document “Evaluation Standards for International Study Programs” published by the institution.

Within the scope of the study, accreditation criteria were compared across four main areas: “student,” “teaching–learning and program,” “faculty,” and “infrastructure and financial resources.” Table 3 presents the domains used for comparing the accreditation criteria.

**Table 3.** Comparison Domains of Accreditation Criteria

Comparison Domain	Quality Dimension	Focus Area
1. Student-Centered Standards	Output Quality	Student achievement, satisfaction, and quality of learning experience
2. Teaching–Learning and Program Standards	Process Quality	Curriculum design and pedagogical processes
3. Faculty Standards	Input Quality	Number and qualifications of academic staff
4. Infrastructure and Financial Resource Standards	Supporting Resource Quality	Facilities and funding ensuring program operation and sustainability

### Student-Centered Standards

It is observed that all three organizations share common criteria within the framework of student-centered standards in the following areas:

- Clear criteria and policies for student admission.
- Systematic monitoring of student achievement and the use of these data for program improvement.
- Establishing a link between graduates’ outcomes and program objectives.

Table 4 presents the comparison of accreditation bodies in terms of student-centered standards.

**Table 4.** Comparison of Student-Centered Standards

Student-Centered Standards		
TAPLAK	NASAD	HCÉRES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a significant focus on the learning outcomes specific to fashion and textile programs, as well as on the interaction between graduates and these programs.</li> <li>• Student satisfaction is assessed indirectly, primarily through evaluations of faculty and feedback from graduates.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offers a comprehensive framework that encompasses the entire student lifecycle, placing special emphasis on ethics, fairness, and safeguarding student rights.</li> <li>• Guarantees the quality of the student experience by establishing a specific standard for "Student Services."</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By aligning with ESG principles, student achievement and satisfaction are supported through a triad of data analytics, public transparency, and student involvement.</li> <li>• The "Students' Pathway" field offers a well-defined, student-centered framework that encompasses the full journey from recruitment and guidance to academic success and professional integration.</li> <li>• Notably, the requirement for mandatory public disclosure of achievement rates and graduate data sets this approach apart from other accreditation bodies.</li> </ul>

It can be stated that HCÉRES addresses student-centered quality assurance in a comprehensive manner due to its data-driven monitoring of student achievement, public disclosure of performance data, direct use of student evaluation results as input for program development, student participation in quality processes, and the ESG-aligned "Students Pathway" domain. On the other hand, NASAD stands out in terms of student support services, including psychological, social, financial and housing support.

**Teaching–Learning and Program Standards**

It is observed that all three organizations share common criteria within the framework of teaching–learning and program standards in the following areas:

- Designing the curriculum in alignment with clearly defined objectives, learning outcomes, and qualifications.
- Structuring the curriculum in a balanced and coherent manner aligned with professional requirements.
- Regular review and continuous improvement of the program.
- Ensuring that assessment and evaluation processes are aligned with learning outcomes.
- Employing pedagogical methods aimed at enhancing the quality of the learning experience.

Table 5 presents the comparison of accreditation bodies in terms of teaching–learning and program standards.

**Table 5.** Comparison of Teaching–Learning and Program Standards

Teaching–Learning and Program Standards		
TAPLAK	NASAD	HCÉRES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structured in accordance with the national qualifications framework.</li> <li>• Clearly defined proportions within the curriculum.</li> <li>• Assessment processes are directly connected to the learning outcomes of programs and courses.</li> <li>• The curriculum showcases a cohesive structure specifically tailored to the fashion and textile field.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serves as one of the leading models of studio-centered pedagogy in international art and design education.</li> <li>• Features a structure that is rooted in design, production, creativity, and the development of practice-based skills.</li> <li>• Provides the most comprehensive curriculum with respect to proportional structure and learning experiences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A curriculum approach that is fully aligned with ESG principles, emphasizing a data-driven, flexible model focused on learning pathways.</li> <li>• Mandates the incorporation of pedagogical diversity and modern teaching methods.</li> <li>• Treats labor market and employability connections as essential components within the program structure.</li> <li>• Exhibits robust integration of quality cycles, feedback mechanisms, and external evaluations in line with relevant standards.</li> </ul>

It can be stated that HCÉRES addresses teaching–learning and program-oriented quality assurance in a comprehensive manner due to its strong pedagogical standards, fully ESG-aligned international framework, holistic approach to program design, and emphasis on links with the labor market. On the other hand, NASAD stands out in terms of pedagogy specific to art and design.

**Faculty Standards**

It is observed that all three organizations share common criteria within the framework of faculty standards in the following areas:

- Ensuring that faculty qualifications are sufficient to support the aims of the program.
- Requiring the combination of academic competence and field-specific expertise.
- Clearly defining roles and responsibilities.
- Supporting the professional development of faculty members.
- Maintaining an appropriate faculty-to-student ratio.

Table 6 presents the comparison of accreditation bodies in terms of faculty standards.

**Table 6.** Comparison of Faculty Standards

Faculty Standards		
TAPLAK	NASAD	HCÉRES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty qualifications, including education, expertise, and experience, are clearly delineated.</li> <li>• The quantity and distribution of faculty are anticipated to be adequate to support the program effectively.</li> <li>• Balancing workload and monitoring performance are deemed essential components.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detailed specifications are provided for qualification and rank requirements.</li> <li>• Specialized expertise and experience are essential for studio-based courses.</li> <li>• Teaching load, class size, and capacity limits are clearly outlined.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Faculty are assessed based on their qualifications and diversity.</li> <li>• A clear definition of roles and responsibilities is necessary.</li> <li>• There is a strong emphasis on pedagogical development, internationalization, and establishing a sustainable staffing structure.</li> </ul>

It can be stated that NASAD addresses faculty-oriented quality assurance in a comprehensive manner due to having the most detailed standards for faculty qualifications, defining clear technical criteria for faculty numbers and distribution, treating professional development as a mandatory requirement, and directly linking program quality to faculty competence.

**Infrastructure and Financial Resource Standards**

It is observed that all three organizations share common criteria within the framework of standards related to infrastructure and financial resources in the following areas:

- Adequate physical infrastructure to support the objectives of the program.
- Ensuring that resources are accessible, safe, and aligned with student numbers.
- Providing sufficient financial resources to ensure program sustainability.
- Regular monitoring and improvement of physical and financial resources.

Table 7 presents the comparison of accreditation bodies in terms of infrastructure and financial resource standards.

**Table 7.** Comparison of Standards Related to Infrastructure and Financial Resources

Infrastructure and Financial Resource Standards		
TAPLAK	NASAD	HCÉRES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The essential infrastructure needed for the program is clearly outlined.</li> <li>• Resources are anticipated to be aligned with the number of students.</li> <li>• Financial resources must guarantee the sustainability of the program.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Features the most comprehensive standards for infrastructure and equipment.</li> <li>• Establishes clear requirements for safety, capacity, and equipment within studios and workshops.</li> <li>• Resources to meet high-cost technical needs are essential.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical, digital, and financial resources are assessed as a cohesive whole.</li> <li>• Resources must align with program objectives and ensure sustainability.</li> <li>• Regular monitoring of resources is a fundamental aspect of quality assurance.</li> </ul>

It can be stated that NASAD addresses infrastructure and financial resource-oriented quality assurance in a comprehensive manner, as it has the most detailed physical infrastructure standards, sets clear technical limits based on capacity and student numbers, requires high cost equipment and technical facilities as mandatory, and directly treats infrastructure as a primary indicator of program quality.

## CONCLUSION

Accreditation in higher education provides several significant benefits, including ensuring quality assurance, enhancing the quality of program outcomes, embedding continuous improvement as a fundamental principle of institutional culture, increasing transparency, and strengthening national and international alignment. While offering prospective students a reliable indicator of educational quality, it also enhances graduate employability and diploma recognition after graduation. In an increasingly competitive higher education environment, accreditation further contributes to institutional reputation.

Accreditation in higher education is an evaluation process conducted at either the institutional or program level. During the research process, it was observed that many accreditation bodies use general criteria in program evaluation, while only a limited number have field-specific assessment criteria. Fashion design education is a teaching field in which practical skills accompany theoretical knowledge pedagogically, and studio-based learning environments play a central role in terms of infrastructure. Therefore, the accreditation of fashion design programs requires either field-specific criteria or the interpretation of general criteria in ways appropriate to the characteristics of the field. At the international level NASAD and at the national level, TAPLAK have emerged as two key accreditation bodies that have developed specific criteria for fashion design programs. HCÉRES, in turn, has conducted accreditation processes for numerous fashion design programs by adapting its program evaluation criteria to the distinctive nature of the field.

The findings indicate that all three organizations share fundamental quality principles such as student-centered approaches, ethical principles, transparency, continuous improvement, and the definition of learning outcomes. The accreditation criteria examined show a high degree of alignment with the ESG.

While HCÉRES provides a more comprehensive framework in student-centered approaches and standards related to teaching–learning and program structure, NASAD offers the most detailed and directive standards regarding faculty qualifications and technical requirements related to infrastructure and financial resources.

Although TAPLAK and NASAD present technical and practice-oriented competency frameworks that address the core professional requirements of the fashion industry, they remain more limited in offering a standard set that directly incorporates current developments in the fashion sector. All three organizations define explicit and clear standards regarding “sustainability,” which is one of the key priorities of the industry. HCÉRES, although not including field-specific technical standards, provides a flexible framework that actively supports the integration of digital and environmental transformations required by the fashion industry into academic programs. In this respect, it can be stated that existing accreditation criteria require reconsideration to enhance their capacity to respond to the rapidly evolving needs of the global fashion industry.

The cases of NASAD, TAPLAK, and HCÉRES demonstrate that, alongside shared core principles, evaluation approaches specialized at different levels can play a complementary role in ensuring quality assurance and sustainable development in fashion design programs. This situation clearly indicates the need for a balanced evaluation approach in the accreditation of fashion design programs that simultaneously considers field-specific characteristics and alignment with international quality standards.

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