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The Impact of the Secondhand Clothing Import Ban Policy on the Trade of Used Garments

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of the government's import ban on used clothing on the secondhand clothing trade. The research seeks to understand how the policy has influenced local trading activities, market dynamics, and consumer behavior. The primary objective of this study is to analyze and describe the socio-economic effects resulting from the implementation of the used clothing import ban, with a particular focus on shifts within the local second-hand clothing market. To achieve this, the study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. Data collection methods include direct field observations, unstructured interviews with traders and consumers, and literature reviews from relevant academic sources and policy documents. This methodological framework allows for an in-depth exploration of the issue from multiple perspectives. The results show that while the import ban has not fully halted secondhand clothing trade, it has contributed to a noticeable slowdown. There has been a gradual reduction in the number of active thrift traders, alongside a modest but growing consumer shift toward new, locally manufactured garments often viewed as more hygienic. Additionally, local garment producers have reported stable or increased demand during certain seasons. The policy has begun to influence market behavior, though its effectiveness remains partial and ongoing.

Keywords

Consumer Behavior, Import Policy, International Trade, Protectionism, Secondhand Clothing.

1. Introduction

International trade has long stemmed from the human need to acquire goods and services that are unavailable in one's immediate environment. Over time, especially following the Industrial Revolution, the scale and complexity of global trade have significantly increased, fueled by rapid advancements in technology and transportation (Krugman, 2008; Chistiano, 2013). Within this context, the trade of secondhand clothing has evolved from a minor commercial activity to a significant international phenomenon (Brooks, 2015). Initially exchanged as surplus or raw materials, used clothing has now become a highly debated commodity with implications spanning economic, social, environmental, and legal dimensions (Semendawai et al., 2024; Sarasi et al., 2024). On one hand, secondhand clothing offers cost-effective options for consumers, particularly in developing countries. On the other hand, its importation poses serious challenges, including threats to local textile industries and concerns over hygiene and health safety. These contrasting impacts have sparked controversy in many nations, including Indonesia, where secondhand clothing remains both prevalent and problematic.

Indonesia, as one of the significant destinations for imported secondhand clothing, finds itself at the center of this complex issue. The domestic market's high demand for affordable clothing, especially among lower-income communities, has contributed to the widespread consumption of these goods (Saputra, 2023a). While secondhand clothing helps meet the basic needs of vulnerable populations, it simultaneously undermines the competitiveness of local garment producers (Chang, 2002; Rodrik, 2012). In response, the Indonesian government has enacted a series of regulations to curb the importation of used apparel. Starting with Ministry of Trade Regulation Number 230 of 1977 and most recently updated through Regulation No. 40 of 2022, these policies aim to protect national economic interests, ensure product safety, and limit the environmental degradation associated with textile waste (Qodriyatun, 2023). Despite these regulatory efforts, the influx of used clothing has continued, suggesting that enforcement mechanisms may be insufficient and that underlying market demand remains strong (Meter & Horn, 1975; Grindle, 1980).

The spread of the secondhand clothing trade is especially noticeable in cities such as Samarinda. Strategically located and accessible to neighboring exporting countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, and Australia, Samarinda serves as a practical entry point for secondhand clothing, often transported via both formal import routes and informal, unregulated channels (Muliawan, 2019). In this local context, imported used clothing is preferred by many consumers due to its lower price point, diverse styles, and often better-perceived quality compared to domestically produced garments. The cultural shift towards "thrifting," where consumers, particularly the youth, seek unique, vintage, and branded items, has further accelerated the popularity of secondhand fashion (Brooks, 2015). What was once seen merely as an economic necessity has now become a lifestyle choice. As a result, Samarinda has witnessed a growing market for imported secondhand clothing, despite the national ban that officially prohibits its trade (Saputra, 2023b).

However, the persistent circulation of secondhand clothing in Samarinda underscores a critical gap between policy formulation and practical implementation (Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980; Nugroho, 2023). While the government continues to reinforce the prohibition of secondhand apparel to safeguard public health and industrial competitiveness, traders and consumers alike show resistance, driven by economic pressures and shifting cultural preferences (Wanto, 2021). This disconnect raises urgent questions about the policy's effectiveness, the readiness of stakeholders to comply, and the broader socio-economic implications for the region. Moreover, it reveals a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding how such regulations affect local livelihoods, especially for small-scale thrift sellers who argue they are only

“seeking an honest living”. Despite government regulations banning the import of secondhand clothing to protect local industries and public health, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how these policies are enforced and their actual socio-economic and environmental impacts at the local level, particularly in Samarinda. Existing studies have not sufficiently explored the disconnect between policy intentions and practical realities, nor the effects on local livelihoods and cultural shifts related to the secondhand clothing trade. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by investigating the impacts of the secondhand clothing import ban on trade practices in Samarinda. This study aims to investigate the impacts of the secondhand clothing import ban on trade practices in Samarinda, focusing on its economic, social, and environmental implications, and to provide strategic recommendations for creating more inclusive and effective policies that address local needs and realities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. International Trade

International trade encompasses the cross-border exchange of goods and services, aimed at enhancing production efficiency, broadening market access, and meeting the demand for products that are not available locally (Carolin et al., 2024). Classical economic thinkers such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo laid the foundation for understanding international trade dynamics. Smith's theory of absolute advantage, as outlined in 1776, emphasizes that countries benefit when they specialize in producing goods that they can create more efficiently than others. Ricardo's comparative advantage theory in 1821 further explains that even if a nation holds no absolute advantage, it can still gain by focusing on goods it produces relatively more efficiently. These foundational theories continue to underpin modern global trade patterns, including those involving unconventional commodities such as secondhand clothing. In the case of Samarinda, although local sellers do not engage directly in importing, the presence of secondhand clothing in local markets is linked to international trade flows. The global surplus of used apparel, often viewed as waste in donor countries, finds new economic value in developing nations, where consumer purchasing power is more limited.

The evolution of international trade theory has moved beyond classical models to include complex global value chains, networks of actors, and informal trade channels (Mondal, 2023). Secondhand clothing often enters Indonesia through major port cities via large-scale importers, after which it is distributed to regional markets by wholesalers and informal traders. This process reveals how trade mechanisms can operate outside official government-to-government transactions, involving both legal and informal actors in the supply chain. Such informal distribution channels, though often overlooked in trade statistics, significantly shape the local economy, especially in developing contexts.

From a critical perspective, dependency theory offers insight into how such trade flows may reinforce structural inequalities between nations (Treacy, 2022; Katz, 2022). Developing countries, such as Indonesia, frequently become the end-markets for surplus, outdated, or rejected goods from developed economies (Retnowati et al., 2022). The influx of secondhand clothing, in this sense, reflects broader global asymmetries where the economic value of a product is socially and geographically redefined. Despite existing import bans and trade regulations, these flows persist, demonstrating that formal trade restrictions often fail to address the deeper systemic imbalances that sustain such exchanges.

2.2. Protectionism

Protectionism refers to a strategic economic policy adopted by governments to shield domestic industries from external competition, often by imposing trade

barriers such as tariffs, import quotas, subsidies, and outright bans (Klimkeit et al., 2024). The core idea behind this approach is to provide a secure environment for local industries, particularly those that are still developing or vulnerable, allowing them to grow without being overwhelmed by more competitive, often cheaper, foreign products. In Indonesia, this philosophy is reflected in the government's ban on the importation of secondhand clothing (Amrullah et al., 2024). The policy is designed not only to protect the local textile and garment sectors from the influx of foreign used clothing but also to promote public health and reduce textile waste. Such objectives are rooted in classical protectionist thinking, which prioritizes national self-sufficiency and industrial resilience through regulatory control of imports.

Despite its rationale, protectionist policies in practice often face serious challenges, particularly when enforcement is weak or when they fail to account for the informal economic realities on the ground (Chen et al., 2022). This is evident in Samarinda, where the trade of imported secondhand clothing continues to be openly conducted despite the official ban. These goods enter through informal distribution channels that circumvent formal import controls, indicating a loophole in the current policy's implementation. The situation in Samarinda underscores a key limitation of rigid protectionism: the overemphasis on border control without sufficient oversight of internal market dynamics. Without a comprehensive regulatory strategy that also manages domestic distribution, the intended protective effect of the policy becomes diluted.

Moreover, strict protectionist policies can produce unintended socio-economic consequences. Restricting access to affordable imported goods may lead to higher prices for consumers, especially those from low-income groups, and can reduce product diversity (Arunachalam et al., 2020). Additionally, small traders and informal sector participants who rely on the secondhand clothing trade may suffer financially, potentially leading to new forms of economic inequality (Brooks, 2019; Silalahi et al., 2022; Persson & Hinton, 2023). To address these challenges, protectionist strategies must be supplemented by targeted policies such as small business empowerment, job retraining programs, and incentives for domestic textile production. In this way, protectionism can move beyond a short-term trade defense mechanism and evolve into a broader, more inclusive development strategy that balances industrial protection with social and economic equity.

2.3. Import Policy Implementation

The implementation of import policies plays a pivotal role in transforming national-level decisions into tangible outcomes within society (Carolin et al., 2024; Hati et al., 2025). It is during this phase that abstract political intentions are operationalized, and their real-world impact is determined. The effectiveness of such implementation relies not only on the policy's clarity and objectives but also on the administrative, technical, and political capabilities of local institutions tasked with enforcing it. In the context of Indonesia's ban on secondhand clothing imports, this challenge becomes particularly evident in regional cities like Samarinda (Saputra, 2023b). Although national regulations, such as those issued by the Ministry of Trade, clearly outline prohibitions, gaps in their execution remain evident. These gaps stem from a combination of insufficient oversight at local distribution points and limited enforcement capacities, which make it difficult for the policy to achieve its intended outcomes on the ground.

In Samarinda, the enforcement of the secondhand clothing import ban underscores the challenges of implementing a top-down policy model within a decentralized governance system. While central authorities may set strategic objectives, the burden of implementation often falls on regional administrations that may lack the technical guidelines, institutional support, or political will to fully enforce the policy (Retnandari, 2022). This has created a regulatory vacuum in which

illegal secondhand clothing markets continue to operate relatively unchecked. Moreover, the lack of detailed technical regulations from the municipal government or the regional trade office, coupled with weak communication channels between central and local stakeholders, has exacerbated the problem. As a result, policies designed to protect public health and support domestic industries are being undermined by informal market practices that are often more agile and responsive to local demand.

Furthermore, policy implementation in Samarinda has been weakened by the absence of strong inter-actor coordination and insufficient public legitimacy. Resistance from thrift traders and consumers who view secondhand clothing as a practical and affordable choice reveals a disconnect between policy intentions and social realities. This situation highlights the importance of engaging local stakeholders, enhancing institutional collaboration, and developing targeted, region-specific enforcement mechanisms. Without these elements, even well-formulated national policies are vulnerable to being diluted or overlooked. Therefore, to enhance the success of protective import policies, particularly in decentralized settings such as Samarinda, implementation strategies must be context-sensitive, inclusive, and supported by robust operational frameworks.

3. Methods

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to explore and understand the real-world implications of the secondhand clothing import ban policy on the secondhand clothing trade in Samarinda City. The choice of qualitative methodology was based on the need to uncover the complex and nuanced experiences of stakeholders directly affected by the policy, including traders, consumers, and distribution agents. Data collection was carried out through direct observation at key trading centers, such as local markets and thrift stalls, to observe how secondhand clothing is marketed, sold, and consumed in practice (Rahardjo, 2011).

This method allowed the researcher to gather contextual data about the market dynamics and consumer behavior. In-depth interviews formed the core of primary data collection. These were conducted with various stakeholders, including both online and offline traders from different sub-districts in Samarinda, consumers from diverse economic and social backgrounds, and several distribution agents involved in the logistics of secondhand clothing. To ensure a comprehensive range of perspectives, the study employed maximum variation sampling and snowball sampling techniques. These strategies allowed the researcher to identify participants with varying levels of involvement in the secondhand clothing trade, thus ensuring representation across different segments of the market.

For instance, online sellers targeting younger consumers and traditional stallholders serving local communities were both included in the analysis. In addition to primary data, secondary data were obtained from books, scholarly journals, government regulations, and previous research reports to provide a broader context for interpreting the field data. These sources helped in understanding the policy framework, historical trade patterns, and similar phenomena in other regions or countries. The collected data were analyzed through three stages: data reduction, descriptive presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. These steps allowed the researcher to filter relevant information, identify patterns and trends, and form coherent insights. This methodological approach aimed to reveal how the secondhand clothing import ban affects not only trade activities but also the social, economic, and cultural responses of the community in Samarinda.

4. Results

Despite the implementation of a national ban on the import of secondhand clothing through multiple regulations starting from earlier laws in 2015 and most recently reinforced by the Ministry of Trade Regulation Number 40 of 2022 the secondhand clothing trade in Samarinda City remains active. Field observations and interviews with traders confirm that the ban has not fully deterred the circulation and sale of used imported garments. Thrift markets, especially in areas like Pasar Pagi and along Jalan Lambung Mangkurat, still host numerous stalls offering secondhand apparel, often sourced through informal or gray channels. While customs authorities are working to intercept these illegal goods at entry points, many traders claim that their merchandise arrives through alternative, less regulated routes often transported overland from neighbouring regions or via small ports with minimal oversight.

However, it is essential to note a significant trend emerging from the field data: the number of secondhand clothing traders in Samarinda has gradually declined since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The pandemic disrupted global logistics and trade, impacting the inflow of used garments from exporting countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Japan. This disruption, coupled with tighter border controls and a greater public focus on hygiene, contributed to a decline in demand and supply. Many former thrift traders have pivoted to selling low-cost local clothing or diversified into unrelated small businesses to maintain their income.

From an economic theory standpoint, this import restriction represents a form of protectionist state intervention. Protectionism is aimed at shielding domestic industries in this case, the local textile and apparel manufacturing sectors from being undercut by cheap foreign goods. By curbing the availability of ultra-low-priced secondhand clothing, the government hopes to provide breathing room for local producers to gain market share and stimulate national economic growth. While such policy intentions are aligned with broader industrial development goals, their execution at the local level remains challenging. The resilience of informal markets and the adaptive strategies of traders have allowed the secondhand clothing trade to persist, albeit at a slightly reduced scale.

In summary, the policy has had a visible, yet limited impact. It has neither eliminated secondhand clothing trade in Samarinda nor fully deterred the inflow of banned goods. However, the reduction in the number of active traders suggests that the policy has created new barriers raising costs, increasing risks, and reducing accessibility to supply which collectively contribute to a slow contraction of the market.

Consumer preferences in Samarinda continue to play a pivotal role in sustaining the demand for secondhand clothing. The primary attraction remains economic: imported secondhand garments are priced 50–70% lower than brand-new local apparel, offering a wide variety of styles, including branded and vintage fashion options otherwise unaffordable for lower-income groups. Thrift shopping has also evolved beyond economic necessity, especially among youth, into a cultural and stylistic movement often associated with individuality and sustainability. The popularity of the “thrifting” trend is evident across social media and local youth communities.

However, the import ban has begun to alter this dynamic subtly. Field interviews and local price tracking show that the cost of secondhand clothing has increased by approximately 10–15% since the import restriction was last updated in 2022. This price hike, though still maintaining a significant affordability gap, has prompted some low- and middle-income consumers to reassess the value proposition of secondhand goods versus new, locally manufactured clothing. In addition, lingering concerns over health and hygiene amplified by pandemic-era awareness campaigns have started to influence consumer choices, albeit slowly.

A 2023 survey conducted by Greenpeace Indonesia in Samarinda sheds light on the underlying gap in public awareness. According to the findings, 64% of respondents were unaware of the potential health risks posed by secondhand clothing, such as skin infections, scabies, and dermatitis. Moreover, 71% of participants admitted to having never encountered government-led campaigns or programs designed to promote local textile products or discourage secondhand clothing consumption. This data highlights a critical weakness in policy implementation: the lack of comprehensive outreach and public education initiatives that inform citizens about the rationale behind the import ban and the benefits of supporting domestic industries.

Nevertheless, there are early signs of behavioral transition. Younger, more educated consumers particularly university students and early-career professionals are increasingly factoring in hygiene, sustainability, and national economic support when making purchasing decisions. Interviews with several young consumers in Samarinda suggest a growing preference for local brands that emphasize ethical production, recyclable materials, and environmental consciousness. Although this shift remains limited to a niche market segment, it signifies the beginning of a more informed and values-driven consumption pattern.

In conclusion, while the majority of Samarinda's population still views secondhand clothing as an essential economic option, changing attitudes among younger consumers and the rising cost of used garments may gradually weaken the market's appeal. However, this transition will remain slow unless accompanied by deliberate policy efforts to improve consumer education and enhance the competitiveness of local clothing alternatives.

The effectiveness of the secondhand clothing import ban policy in Samarinda is best described as partial and transitional. Although the number of active traders has decreased and some consumers are beginning to shift preferences, the overall trade in used clothing persists, highlighting the gap between policy design and practical enforcement. One of the key factors limiting policy impact is the lack of rigorous oversight of informal distribution channels. The current enforcement mechanisms are largely reactive, focusing on major port inspections and sporadic raids. This leaves open a wide array of entry points, including small inland ports, cargo from neighbouring provinces, and online trade networks that are difficult to monitor.

Another limitation lies in the absence of technical regulations and operational guidelines at the regional level. While national policies provide the legal framework for banning imports, local authorities often lack the resources, coordination, or detailed procedures to implement the ban effectively within their jurisdictions. Interviews with municipal officials in Samarinda suggest that there is no clear roadmap or inter-agency coordination mechanism to ensure sustained monitoring, penalization, and community engagement related to the ban.

Moreover, public outreach efforts remain insufficient. Without consistent and targeted public awareness campaigns, citizens continue to rely on informal sources of information or operate under misconceptions about the legality and risks of imported secondhand clothing. Educational institutions, local influencers, religious organizations, and community groups could be mobilized to amplify government messaging and reinforce the rationale behind the policy. This could include health risk education, environmental awareness, and the promotion of local textile initiatives.

From a broader strategic standpoint, the success of the import ban depends not only on restrictive measures but also on the simultaneous promotion of positive alternatives. Local governments, in partnership with the private sector and civil society, must invest in strengthening the domestic textile industry through improved access to raw materials, affordable credit, skill development programs, and digital marketing platforms. Building a strong ecosystem for local clothing brands

will offer viable substitutes to imported secondhand garments and create sustainable jobs in the creative economy.

Finally, policymakers must acknowledge the adaptive capacity of both traders and consumers. The secondhand clothing trade is remarkably resilient and quick to exploit policy loopholes. As such, the policy must be flexible, multi-dimensional, and informed by continuous stakeholder feedback. Regular impact assessments, inclusive policy dialogues, and transparent regulatory mechanisms are essential for ensuring that the policy evolves alongside changes in market behavior and societal needs.

In sum, the secondhand clothing import ban in Samarinda shows initial signs of progress but remains far from achieving its full potential. Its long-term success will depend on addressing informal trade routes, strengthening local enforcement capacity, increasing public awareness, and enhancing the attractiveness of local apparel alternatives. Only through an integrated and adaptive approach can this policy create lasting economic, health, and social benefits.

5. Discussion

The continued presence of secondhand clothing trade in Samarinda, despite regulatory bans, highlights a persistent challenge also identified in broader literature on trade policy and protectionism. As Brooks (2015) and Mondal (2023) explain, secondhand apparel often bypasses formal trade systems, moving through informal networks that operate beyond the reach of regulatory frameworks. This aligns closely with the field findings in Samarinda, where thrift traders continue sourcing garments through “gray markets” or small ports, effectively circumventing Ministry of Trade Regulation Number 40 of 2022. Similarly, Retnowati et al. (2022) and Treacy (2022) describe how developing countries frequently become end-markets for surplus goods, reinforcing global economic asymmetries. Although protectionist policies are theoretically grounded in domestic industrial safeguarding Klimkeit et al. (2024), the Samarinda case reaffirms the limitations of state interventions when informal economic realities are inadequately addressed. Meanwhile, Maulana et al. (2025) said that the sale of secondhand clothing in Indonesia actually poses several risks, especially consumer safety and climate sustainability. This suggests that, much like in other developing economies, policy enforcement alone, without structural changes in trade ecosystems, may yield only marginal results.

Consumer dynamics in Samarinda demonstrate a complex interplay between economic necessity, cultural trends, and emerging awareness. Consistent with the findings of Persson and Hinton (2023), consumers are primarily drawn to secondhand goods due to their affordability and stylistic variety. The trend of “thrifting,” particularly among young people, reflects Brooks’ (2019) observation that secondhand consumption is no longer solely about economic survival, but also about identity, sustainability, and aesthetics. However, the study’s finding that 64% of respondents are unaware of potential health risks echoes Greenpeace Indonesia’s 2023 national-level survey, suggesting that education campaigns have been ineffective. This weak alignment between policy goals and consumer knowledge mirrors Stansfield’s (2022) concern about public legitimacy in top-down policy implementation. Encouragingly, the gradual shift in preference among younger, more educated consumers towards hygienic and sustainable products signals a parallel with literature emphasizing the role of values-driven consumption (Chen et al., 2022). Nonetheless, the behavioral transition remains narrow and slow, underscoring the need for more targeted and sustained public outreach.

From a policy implementation perspective, Samarinda exemplifies the conceptual challenges highlighted by Meter and Horn (1975) and Sabatier and Mazmanian (1980), who argue that successful implementation requires clear communication, institutional capacity, and contextual adaptation. As shown in this study, the absence of technical guidelines, poor coordination among agencies, and reactive enforcement

tactics significantly undermine the effectiveness of the import ban. This aligns with findings by Carolin et al. (2024) and Hati et al. (2025), which note that local-level failure in implementing national policies often stems from insufficient institutional frameworks and inadequate resource mobilization. While Samarinda's municipal government supports the national ban in principle, it lacks the tools, partnerships, and stakeholder engagement strategies to make the policy actionable. This gap between intention and outcome echoes Grindle's (1980) emphasis on the political and administrative dimensions of policy execution, particularly in decentralized systems like Indonesia's.

Finally, the study underscores a broader critique of traditional protectionism by highlighting its unintended social and economic consequences. While the policy's intent to protect domestic industries is consistent with classical and modern protectionist thought (Amrullah et al. 2024), it mirrors Arunachalam et al. (2020)'s concern that such measures can inadvertently harm informal traders and low-income consumers. The limited availability and rising prices of secondhand clothing in Samarinda, coupled with stagnant development of local alternatives, illustrate the need for a more holistic strategy. As suggested by Brooks (2019) and Silalahi et al. (2022), import restrictions should be coupled with capacity-building programs for micro-enterprises, public subsidies, and investment in local textile innovation. The study thus supports Chang's (2002) and Rodrik's (2011) argument that developmental success requires not just shielding domestic markets, but actively enabling them. Future policies must therefore transcend restriction and integrate inclusive economic development tools to ensure that protectionism translates into sustainable and equitable outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals that, despite national bans implemented since 2015 and reinforced in 2022, the secondhand clothing trade in Samarinda remains widespread due to strong consumer demand and informal networks that circumvent enforcement. Local implementation lacks detailed regulations and coordination, while public awareness of health risks and policy goals is low. However, there is a slight decline in active traders, indicating the early effects of policy. To improve impact, Samarinda's government should develop clear regional rules, strengthen enforcement coordination, provide alternative livelihoods for traders, and intensify public education to support health and local textile industry goals.

This study is limited by its focus on Samarinda, which may not capture the full complexity of the secondhand clothing trade and enforcement challenges in other regions of Indonesia. The reliance on interviews and observations might also introduce some subjectivity and underreport informal trade activities. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that policymakers should strengthen enforcement by addressing informal trade routes and enhancing coordination among local agencies. Additionally, increasing public awareness through targeted education campaigns is crucial to shifting consumer behavior toward safer, locally produced clothing, thereby supporting public health and domestic industries. For future research, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies across different cities and to explore how consumer attitudes and market dynamics evolve in response to policy and awareness initiatives.

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Data Disclosure Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.



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