

**Reclaiming Identity in the Digital Age: A Critical Analysis of Postcolonial Representation
in Netflix's Series *Never Have I Ever***

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ABSTRACT

*This research explores the role of digital media in postcolonial identity and representation through the case study of the TV show *Never Have I Ever* on Netflix. It examines the representation of Indian Americans on the show, particularly the role of digital media in identity and representation. Drawing on the work of postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, the research examines how digital media platforms like social media amplify the voices of marginalised groups, contest dominant narratives and offer new opportunities for cultural representation. The study uses qualitative methods to examine the dualities between cultural tradition and contemporary living, personal and collective identities, and past and present. It seeks to showcase how *Never Have I Ever* presents the empowerment and challenges of digital media in postcolonial identity construction. It offers insights into how representation in digital media aids in redefining identities and social connections in multimodal societies. The research concludes that digital media not only amplifies the voices of the marginalised but also helps to rebuild postcolonial identities, and support cultural diversity and social justice in digital media.*

Keywords: Digital Activism, Postcolonial Identity, Social Justice, Digital Media

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In the digital era, television streaming services like Netflix have led to a revolution in the representation of cultural identities. They have provided a platform for marginalised voices and international viewers to discover new stories. For instance, the Netflix show *Never Have I Ever* stars Devi Vishwakumar, an Indian American teenager navigating the complexities of high school, family dynamics and cultural identity. The series, created by Mindy Kaling and Lang Fisher, portrays Devi's experiences with school rivalries, friendships, and her desire to fit in, while embracing her Indian heritage.

Postcolonial identity a term that emerges out of the legacies of colonialism and the subsequent evolvment of identity is key to these narratives. Through the analysis of Frantz Fanon, this research examines representations of the psychological and social challenges of identity development in a multi-cultural setting in *Never Have I Ever*. Fanon's ideas about race, culture and identity allow us to understand how the series represents these struggles and the process of coming to terms with oneself within a dominant Western culture (Fanon, 1952).

The study explores the portrayal of the Indian American experience in *Never Have I Ever*, and how these stories are mediated through digital media. It explores how the television show negotiates both old and new

cultural norms and how social media platforms can enable people to speak out about cultural identity. In this way, it highlights the complexities of traditional and contemporary cultures, and the role of digital media in empowerment and cultural representation (El Shakry, 2024). In conclusion, this research suggests that the TV series *Never Have I Ever* is more than a cultural representation it is a cultural platform for postcolonial identity. The program's representation of an Indian American adolescent being "of two worlds" speaks to the need for digital representation and diversity. Through an examination of this series, the study helps us understand the role of digital media in reconstructing postcolonial identity and promoting inclusion, diversity and social justice (Guha, 2024).

Research Statement

This research explores the interactions between digital media, postcolonial identity and cultural representation, taking the example of *Never Have I Ever*. It examines how Indian American youth are represented, and how the series reflects the tensions between the traditional and the modern in a diaspora. Drawing on the work of Frantz Fanon, the research examines the role digital media play in empowering cultural voices and offering representation. The aim of this is to demonstrate the importance of inclusive digital representation in the creation of narratives of postcolonial identity (Villet, 2024).

Research Objectives

- To examine the depiction of Indian American identity in *Never Have I Ever* and the complexities of postcolonial identity making.
- To explore the impact of digital media on cultural story-telling and how digital platforms are used by *Never Have I Ever* to amplify underrepresented voices.
- To examine the impact of social media and activism on audience participation and cultural representation with regard to the show.

Research Questions

1. How do the experiences of Indian American teens and their negotiation of postcolonial identities play out in *Never Have I Ever*?
2. What role does digital media, as evident in *Never Have I Ever*, play in the representation of marginal identities in today's culture?

Significance of the Study

This study is important because it adds to the conversation about the impact of digital media on postcolonial identities. It explores the impact of contemporary streaming services on the representation of racial and cultural diversity, giving voice to traditionally underrepresented communities. The study's focus on Indian Americans draws attention to the challenges faced by diasporic youth as they navigate their cultural inheritance and contemporary American culture (Qasmi & Bari, 2024). Additionally, the study highlights the importance of inclusive and accurate representation in digital media. With the rise of global media platforms such as Netflix, it is important to understand how different experiences are depicted in order to foster social inclusion and recognition. *Never Have I Ever* is a series that promotes Indian Americans and breaks stereotypes in its characters and narratives (Guha, 2024). Lastly, this study has connections to social justice issues by examining how social media and online activism promote activism, inclusion, and

representation. It offers insights for educators, communicators and policymakers who seek to raise cultural diversity and inclusion in storytelling.

Delimitations

This research is centred on the representation of Indian Americans in *Never Have I Ever*, given its first season. This study is limited to the digital platform, Netflix, and does not include other media, such as books and movies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the connections between postcolonialism, race, culture, and media is an enduring theme in scholarly work. Numerous studies examine how colonial legacies shape the ways in which people perceive themselves and others. One approach is Robert Young's (2024) exploration of the link between the emergence of postcolonial theory and the Algerian War of Independence. He traces how this war transformed global debates about power, identity, and resistance, as well as subsequent cultural and racial studies. Likewise, Frantz Fanon's analysis is important in understanding the effects of colonial domination on individuals psychologically and socially. His research shows how colonization creates a sense of alienation and inferiority in those it affects (El Shakry, 2024).

Fanon's analysis of the psychological effects of colonialization still informs the ways we think about race and identity in the postcolonial world. Drawing on his work, Villet (2024) explores the connection between Fanon's "misrecognition" and Axel Honneth's "mutual recognition". He further clarifies that the actual, social and psychological trauma of colonialism is akin to Honneth's disrespect, like exclusion or humiliation. This insight aids in analysing the struggles of marginalised groups in contemporary society as seen in television shows like *Never Have I Ever*, where characters fight for recognition in a world influenced by their culture and their place in society.

Cultural hybridity is explored in the work of Homi K. Bhabha. Bhabha's book *The Location of Culture* (1994) offers the idea of "Third Space" where cultures intersect and create hybrid identities (Umar & Lawan, 2024). This concept helps to account for the cultural struggles of characters such as Devi in *Never Have I Ever*, who regularly finds herself bridging her Indian roots and her new life in the US. Hybridity complicates rigid notions of identity and place, and illustrates how cultural mixing can be empowering and disorienting in our globalized world.

Identity construction and representation has also been shaped by globalization. Academics like Bhabha, Appadurai, Amin and Brah (2024) have written about how global media create intersections of cultural spaces, rather than a binary divide of a "center" and "periphery". Here, global media platforms such as Netflix function as cultural spaces that connect diverse perspectives. As Guha (2024) notes, Netflix's diversity enables shows like *Never Have I Ever* to challenge stereotyping, and show that Indian Americans are not simply caricatures. This global perspective prompts viewers to think of identity as multifaceted and in flux.

Similarly, Qasmi and Bari (2024) highlight the role of digital networks in personal identity in a networked world. They conceptualise identity as an ongoing process shaped by language, culture and technology. Their theories help to understand the construction of Devi's identity in relation to her friends, family and the media. The combination of her cultural identities shows what Qasmi and Bari refer to as the "fluid construction" of identity in the digital age. Another view is presented by Waghmare (2024), who writes about the role of global English literature in postcolonial identity. Authors such as Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri employ narrative tropes of migration, dislocation, and cultural conflict to represent cultural

duplicity. These literary examples reflect the challenges of *Never Have I Ever*'s characters as they confront identity crises. Like postcolonial writers, the television series uses fiction to challenge cultural divisions, and represent hybrid identities in a contemporary context.

Overall, the research demonstrates that the creation of a postcolonial identity is multifaceted, historical, cultural, and global. The work of Fanon, Bhabha and others offer insights into how descendants of the colonised continue to negotiate and reshape identities in a modern world. But although postcolonial identity and hybridity have been much debated, there has been less research on the effects of digital media. As digital media plays an increasingly significant role in shaping public narratives and personal expression, it needs to be explored (Villet, 2024).

This study does so by drawing on Fanon's postcolonial analysis in relation to digital media. It will analyse the representation of Indian American identity in *Never Have I Ever* and how the show can engage with giving voice to marginalised groups through global media platforms. Although previous research has explored topics including mental health, stereotypes, and the immigrant experience, this study adds a novel dimension by linking postcolonial identities with online self-representation. This adds to our understanding of the role of media platforms such as Netflix in postcolonial cultural narratives and identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study analyses Season 1 of *Never Have I Ever* through Qualitative method, Narrative approach and Constructivist-interpretive paradigm and particularly textual analysis. This research examines situations, character conversations and development that portray Indian American identity in the series. Existing literature on postcolonial studies and digital media are reviewed to provide theoretical context and saturation of ideas. The research also draws on previous scholarship about postcolonial identity and new media to offer theoretical context and framework. The data are analysed thematically to find patterns of hybridity, cultural identity and individuality. When appropriate, representations from the show are compared with other media representations of Indian Americans to show how *Never Have I Ever* adds to cultural conversations. This analysis provides an insight into the representation of postcolonial identities in digital media. It also demonstrates how transnational media giant Netflix shapes identity and representation in diasporic communities (Waghmare, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This research is rooted in a postcolonial approach that seeks to understand the portrayal of Indian American identities in Season 1 of *Never Have I Ever*. This framework is heavily influenced by the writings of Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha, who offer valuable insights into understanding identity, culture and representation in postcolonial society in the digital era.

Postcolonial Identity

Frantz Fanon's work examines the impact of colonization on the self. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon explains how the colonized can have a split identity, between their own culture and the culture of the colonizer. Such conflict can result in feelings of isolation, inferiority, and a yearning to become more like the dominant culture (Fanon, 1952). In *Never Have I Ever*, the protagonist, Devi Vishwakumar, embodies this conflict as she navigates her cultural heritage and teenage life in America. This reflects Fanon's concept of the "divided self" as she struggles to reconcile her two identities. This dimension of Fanon's work makes sense of Devi's identity struggle and her constant struggle to establish her identity between the impacts of Indian culture and Western modernity (El Shakry, 2024).

Cultural Representation

The second aspect of this theory is cultural representation how groups are portrayed in the media. Fanon (1952) suggested that, under colonialism, representations of the colonised were often dictated by colonial powers, and reduced to stereotypes that supported this racial power disparity. However, taking control of representation can be subversive. In this context, *Never Have I Ever* becomes an act of cultural self-representation. Through the show, Indian Americans can portray their lives, struggles and experiences more accurately. By depicting both the positive and negative experiences that Devi faces because of her identity, the show challenges stereotypical representations of cultural identity and invites viewers to consider cultural identity as dynamic and multifaceted (Guha, 2024).

Hybridity and Otherness

This work builds on Homi K. Bhabha's notions of hybridity and otherness. In his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha speaks of a "Third Space" as a metaphorical space where cultures intersect and form something new (Umar & Lawan, 2024). This hybridity does not negate cultural differences, but rather, turns them into a productive force. Devi's status as an Indian-American is an example of this. She continually struggles to negotiate her relationships within her family and in wider society. Bhabha's work can be used to understand how Devi and other characters create hybrid identities that cannot be contained under a singular cultural identity. This realisation of both belonging and difference between Indian and American is a major focus of the show (Villet, 2024).

Digital Media and Agency

The framework also takes into account the contemporary dimensions of identity and difference through digital media. Social media and other digital platforms enable users to produce narratives, with the opportunity to give voice to those who have been historically overlooked. Fanon's emphasis on the importance of self-representation takes a new shape in the digital age, where social media and diverse representations on media platforms like Netflix seek to challenge stereotypes and celebrate diversity (Qasmi & Bari, 2024). Like Devi, characters in *Never Have I Ever* use digital tools to express and connect with others, and media operates as personal and collective sites of empowerment. Yet empowerment also occurs within larger structures that can restrict freedom of expression a common factor for Fanon (1952) in his critique of colonialism. By bringing together Fanon's psychoanalysis of colonialism, Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the role of digital media in contemporary times, this framework enables a complex understanding of how identities are framed, represented and challenged in *Never Have I Ever*. It offers a framework to study how the show reflects the real world struggles of postcolonial identity in a multicultural and media-saturated world.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Portrayal of Indian-American Experiences

In the TV show *Never Have I Ever*, the protagonist, Devi Vishwakumar, exemplifies the experiences of a teenage, Indian-American girl. Her struggles reflect Fanon's (1952) analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks* a psychological conflict that arises when people live under the influence of two cultures. Devi struggles to balance her American and Indian identities; to be accepted by her peers, she has to balance the expectations of her Indian parents. Devi says, "I don't know, sometimes I feel like I'm too Indian for the Americans and too American for the Indians" - this is the postcolonial struggle of fitting in (Episode 3, 00:22:15). Fanon (1952) refers to this as the "divided self", feeling out of place in the native country as well as in the coloniser's nation. This is enacted in Devi's dilemma and her search for acceptance in both worlds.

Devi's mother, Nalini, introduces this notion when she says, "You have to try twice as hard to be half as good" (Episode 1, 00:28:50). This exchange represents the cultural load that minority families feel in a white culture. Fanon's insights on racism, work, and self-esteem tie in with this idea of perpetual performance to be accepted. In other exchanges, such as Devi commenting on being seen only for her race "I don't want to be the girl who gets noticed because of her background" (Episode 2, 00:10:05) these discussions show the ways in which cultural heritage can be a blight or stigma. These exchanges echo the reality of postcolonial identities: to be seen, but not seen.

The conversation between Devi and her friend Eleanor, "You can't just be a good Indian girl. You have to be different!" (Episode 4, 00:11:45), also resonates with the tensions of conformity and standing out. For Fanon, this moment is symbolic of a colonised subject's quest to be an independent agent in crafting their own identity. In these scenes, *Never Have I Ever* illustrates the complexities of identity formation for postcolonial subjects as a fluid struggle between self and other, culture and society (El Shakry, 2024).

Postcolonial Identity Themes

Fanon (1952) suggested colonised people have "double consciousness" a consciousness of how they are viewed by others and how they view themselves. We see this double consciousness in Devi as she struggles to assimilate her Indian culture with the new, modern American culture.

Her statement, "Why do I have to choose? I am both," (Episode 4, 00:25:10) exemplifies this. It illustrates her resistance to the binary identity one that is purely traditional or modern. This refusal exemplifies Fanon's concept that postcolonial people need to define their identity for themselves, not according to categories imposed by either culture. Devi's cousin, Kamala, exemplifies the identity crisis experienced by some bicultural people when she says, "You can't be both; you have to choose" (Episode 5, 00:30:00). This is a response to this expectation from society. But Devi counters with "I'm both". This is reflective of what Bhabha (1994) considers to be "hybridity", where identity is constructed in the "in-between" of cultures rather than inside boundaries (Umar & Lawan, 2024).

Her mother, Nalini, advises her, "Remember, our culture is important. Don't forget where you came from" (Episode 6, 00:05:40). This shows the divide between generations in cultural identity. Older generations emphasise maintenance, while younger people like Devi want change. When Devi says, "I am all for celebrating my culture, but I don't want it to define me" (Episode 8, 00:17:55) she takes back her identity. This awareness illustrates the shifting postcolonial identity one that celebrates tradition and modernity. Thus, *Never Have I Ever* embodies the postcolonial consciousness that Fanon and Bhabha theorised: the post-colonial subject does not belong to a fixed cultural identity but is constantly in process (Villet, 2024).

Traditional Culture and Modernity

Another key theme in Fanon's work and *Never Have I Ever* is the conflict between culture and modernity. Fanon (1952) observed that colonies' native populations are often compelled to mimic the colonizer's way of life in order to survive or be accepted. This assimilation can lead to internal struggles and isolation.

Devi's desire to "just be a normal teenager" (Episode 1, 00:20:15) echoes this conflict. Her desire for simplicity to be able to "fit in" instead of having to stand out due to her background symbolises the colonised person's internalised sense of their indigenous background as a hindrance. This is reminiscent of Fanon's analysis of the way colonized people are made to feel inferior to the coloniser (El Shakry, 2024). Kamala's admission, "I can't be the perfect Indian girl and the perfect American girl at the same time" (Episode 5, 00:10:40) reflects the emotional dilemma of being born of two cultures. The conflict between meeting expectations as a cultural duality illustrates the dilemma of the postcolonial subject.

Devi's acts of defiance such as saying, "I want to wear what I like, not what you want me to wear" (Episode 2, 00:23:00) symbolise her efforts to break free from the cultural expectations placed on her. This echoes Fanon's call to arms: the need to break free from the social and cultural conditioning to recover a sense of freedom.

Her mother's words, "We must respect our customs, even if they are old-fashioned" (Episode 7, 00:12:30), are in contrast to Devi's views. This highlights the generational conflict between tradition and modernisation in diaspora. Devi, rather facetiously, asks "Why can't we have both? Indian food and American parties?" (Season 1.3, 00:18:45) is the hybrid dream a blending of the old and the new. It speaks to Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity that embraces the blend of different cultures, rather than assimilation (Umar & Lawan, 2024). Through Devi's journey, *Never Have I Ever* portrays the duality of posterity and modernity that characterises the hybridity of postcolonial life in the digital world. The show demonstrates that being part of two cultures isn't a matter of "either/or", but "and".

Digital Media as a Platform for Representation

For colonized or marginalised groups, asserting the right to represent oneself is an important part of psychological emancipation, according to Frantz Fanon (1952). In the past, colonised people were frequently represented through the distorted views of dominant culture, which stereotyped and flattened them. Today, social media offers an opportunity for marginalized people to take control of such portrayals.

In the show *Never Have I Ever*, social media serves as a platform for Devi and her friends to express and empower themselves. When Devi states, "We have to talk about our culture! We need to post about our culture!" (Season 6, 00:18:30) she exemplifies how to use online platforms to celebrate her culture. She reclaims her culture, rather than have it defined by others. This is a direct response to Fanon's argument that regaining one's image is crucial to challenging dehumanising narratives (El Shakry, 2024).

Eleanor's statement, "Social media is where we can control our narratives" (Episode 2, 00:10:25), highlights how social media allows people to circumvent traditional media narratives. In this sense, social media serves as what Bhabha (1994) calls a "Third Space" that is a cultural space where people negotiate their identities (Umar & Lawan, 2024).

Devi is excited to get recognition online "Look at all these followers! People actually listen to what I have to say" (Episode 5, 00:15:50) illustrates how social media can offer voices that are typically absent from mainstream conversations a chance to be heard and recognised. (Episode 4, 00:07:10) Fabiola's encouragement, "Let's use Instagram to show our talents and celebrate our culture!" (Episode 4, 00:07:10), further contributes to this sense of digital empowerment.

Through these instances, *Never Have I Ever* showcases the way digital media provides marginalised characters with opportunities to self-represent. But it also highlights the need for external recognition since online validation can still reproduce the same power dynamics of recognition that the people in the series are protesting (Villet, 2024). This makes digital media a liberating and constraining space of self-representation within the parameters of social power in the series.

Influence of Social Media: Collective Identity and Empowerment

Fanon (1961) saw liberation as both personal and collective. He saw liberation as arising when "colonized" people "rally together in order to recover their humanity". Today, social media offers one such platform where this collective reclaiming can take place; a place where those on the margins can come together, organise and build alliances (Villet, 2024).

In *Never Have I Ever*, the characters' online activities exemplify this notion of empowerment. When Fabiola declares, "Let's use Instagram to show our talents and celebrate our culture! (Episode 4, 00:30:00), she demonstrates how digital media can bring people together in the experience of identity and pride. Likewise, Devi's "I can express myself through social media without being judged" (Episode 2, 00:14:10), reflects a sense of freedom that social media can afford.

Eleanor's statement, "Online, we can connect with others who get us (Episode 3, 00:11:55), echoes the development of what Fanon would call a "community of recognition" a community that affirms the identity of its members through solidarity and struggle. Devi's statement, "I've posted my thoughts and it feels so cathartic!", (Episode 7, 00:20:45), illustrates the sense of relief that Fanon associated with self-assertion and resistance. (Episode 7, 00:20:45) she speaks to the cathartic effect of actions of self-assertion and resistance that Fanon experienced.

Further, Devi's statement, "Let's hashtag, to show our Indian pride!", (Episode 6, 00:12:30), is an example of digital activism. This is consistent with accounts of the hybridization of social and digital identities in global spaces by scholars like Qasmi and Bari (2024). By using social media, the characters create a digital collective identity that cuts across geographical borders, connecting them with like-minded people with shared cultural identities. In portraying social media as a place of community building, *Never Have I Ever* updates Fanon's theory of decolonization. The show implies decolonisation is not an individual journey, but collective and recognition-based as digital networks

Impact on Contemporary Cultural Narratives

Fanon (1961) saw the process of decolonization as the birth of a "new humanism" a society in which individuals were free to exist without the mental baggage of colonial domination. *Never Have I Ever* is part of this process by breaking away from the stereotypical representations of Indian Americans in popular media and presenting more nuanced and complex characters.

Devi's words "I want to be proud of who I am, and I won't let anyone make me feel ashamed of my culture" (Episode 8, 00:24:50) exemplify this decolonizing moment. It's a moment of transition from self-rejection to self-acceptance. Likewise, her mother telling her, "You should be proud of who you are, not shy away from it" (Episode 1, 00:10:00), is a move from feeling defensive about one's culture to feeling confident.

When Devi says, "We are more than stereotypes; we have stories to tell" (Episode 6, 00:29:10), she is rejecting the representation of South Asians as a "model minority" in Western media. This repositions Fanon's (1952) view of regaining agency and dignity, rejecting the imposed tags of others.

Kamala's comment, "The world needs to see how diverse and vibrant our culture is" (Episode 5, 00:22:45), resonates with Bhabha's call for embracing cultural diversity (Umar & Lawan, 2024). Similarly, when Devi says, "It's our time to shine and be who we are" (The Nerd, Episode 8, 00:15:25), it reflects the power of representation.

In depicting Indian-American culture in all its complexity, *Never Have I Ever* adds to what Fanon called a "new humanism" in which people are not seen through the lens of colonial and racial classifications, but as human beings. The show demonstrates that representation in digital media is not just symbolic, it is political and cultural, as it undermines established power relations and opens new possibilities for considering identity in a globalised world (Guha, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This research has examined the representation of postcolonial identity, culture and the role of digital media in identity expression on *Never Have I Ever*. In the lives of Devi Vishwakumar and her friends, the study has traced the journey of Indian-American teenagers between two cultural spheres one rooted in tradition and the other in contemporary Western culture.

Using the postcolonial theories of Frantz Fanon, the study demonstrates how the characters undergo experiences of alienation, self-recognition and liberation. Devi struggles with Fanon's notion of the "divided self" (1952) as she tries to reconcile her Indian heritage and her US identity. Such a mental conflict is an example of the enduring effects of colonialism on identity. However, rather than the "classical" postcolonial subject who turns to the dominant world for acceptance, Devi eventually comes to understand herself on her own terms; a process which Fanon considered crucial to decolonisation (1961).

This youth study also shows the role of digital media in the postcolonial world. Digital media, such as Netflix and social media, enable marginalised people to express their narratives and challenge representations. For Devi and her friends, these digital spaces are sites of cultural resistance where they can freely represent their identities, celebrate diversity and connect with others that share their experience. This echoes Fanon's argument for "taking back the pen" as a means of empowerment and liberation (Villet, 2024).

Moreover, *Never Have I Ever* adds to cultural representation by challenging stereotypical monolithic representations of South Asians in Western media. It offers complex, funny and relatable characters, stressing identity as multiple and malleable. In its narrative, this show manifests Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, the mixing of cultures, that opens up new possibilities for knowledge and expression (Umar & Lawan, 2024). In all, this study shows that digital media can be a mirror and a stage: a mirror that mirrors the lived experiences of postcolonial identities and a stage that gives voice to minority narratives. The media can both reinforce stereotypes and have transformative potential when it comes to representation.

In bridging Fanonian analysis with today's digital milieu, this research offers a glimpse into how stories in the digital age reshape the understanding of identity and inclusion in a globalised and multicultural space. It reaffirms the relevance of Fanon's ideas in contemporary struggles for representation, recognition and cultural identity. In short, *Never Have I Ever* shows how media representation (when approached carefully) can be used to reclaim identity, undo the traumas of history, and foster a more humanistic and inclusive digital media culture

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