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Identity and Struggle of Women Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in Digital Social Media Communication

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Abstract

This study explores how female micro-entrepreneurs in Pangandaran construct their identities and narrate their economic struggles through digital communication on social media. Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, the research identifies that social media functions not merely as a marketing tool but also as a symbolic space for self-representation, emotional engagement, and collective empowerment. The findings reveal that identity construction among women entrepreneurs is shaped by a combination of domestic roles, cultural values, religious expressions, and community affiliation. Through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, these women employ simple but consistent communication strategies to promote their businesses, connect with customers, and share personal narratives. Many include culturally embedded elements in their posts, such as local dialects, traditional products, and expressions of gratitude, reflecting their rootedness in local traditions and values. Community networks like Baraya and PPUMI serve as key enablers of cooperative branding and digital literacy, strengthening the social capital among members. This research confirms that digital communication is an essential tool for empowerment, particularly when it aligns with local contexts and gendered experiences. It also highlights the importance of narrative-based digital training and participatory approaches in fostering inclusive digital entrepreneurship. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how digital media intersects with gender, culture, and economic resilience in tourism-based regions in Indonesia.

Keywords: women entrepreneurs; digital communication; social media; women identity; empowerment; Coastal areas.

Introduction

Women micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) are a force in the people's economy that significantly support the local economy, particularly in tourism-based places like Pangandaran Regency. In this sense, women are not only economic actors but also community drivers and protectors of local cultural values living in the society. However, their entrepreneurial journey is typically marked by structural and cultural difficulties, such as restricted access to technology training, little money, low digital literacy, and a still prominent home role (Juwairiyah et al., 2022).

Under these circumstances, digital social media has surfaced as a possible new platform for women in MSMEs to express their identity, grow their market, and create a story of their fight (Mutmainah, 2020).

Information technology evolution has revolutionized the business communication scene, notably in the informal sector such MSMEs (Sundah et al., 2021). Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp are examples of social media that serve not only as marketing tools but also as platforms for social representation, identity expression, and transmission of shared dreams. Women MSME

business owners in Pangandaran use social media to create connection with consumers, enhance community networks, and share personal stories about their entrepreneurial path. Social media, meanwhile, is not used in a neutral setting; rather, it is shaped by the socio-cultural background, gender role, and knowledge and resource constraints.

Data from the Pangandaran Regency Cooperative and UKM Office in 2023 indicates that over 65% of MSME players in this area are women, both local residents and migrants. Most work in the educational services, housing, fashion, and culinary industries including reptile parks and natural education. Though they are many, these women MSMEs have not yet had complete access to continuous digital marketing training. While information usually only spreads inside particular communities, some of them even say they have never had training invites from the appropriate authorities. Here is where it matters to look more closely at how these women create communication tactics under constrained circumstances using social media.

Studies before have revealed that women's economic empowerment is significantly influenced by social media. According to a Veranita et al. (2023) study, social media can boost women's entrepreneurial potential in suburban areas by means of increasing social networks and online marketing. Though its use is still mostly for product promotion and has not addressed issues of identity representation or stories of social struggle, Harini & Handayani (2019), discovered that social media is a powerful tool for introducing local products from women's MSMEs in the Indonesian setting.

From the perspective of communication theory, this paper discusses McQuail (2010) mediated communication idea, which holds that in the digital age communication is interactive and participatory rather than one-way. Hall (2003) representation theory technique is also employed to investigate how women MSMEs express their identities and challenges via text, photographs, or digital narratives on social media. Regarding women, we also include Butler (2006) concept of gender performativity, which views gender identity as something created by social action and communication, especially in the digital sphere.

The portrayal of women MSMEs on social media in Pangandaran cannot be divorced

from local dynamics like community culture, family roles, and their interaction with government institutions. Some women MSME players in this region operate their companies from home, balancing family or child care responsibilities. Their social media story includes symbols of struggle, tenacity, and innovation that are part of their identity as women, business owners, and protectors of local values. But not all of these stories seem clear-cut. Many MSME players still utilize social media in a straightforward manner: posting product images without a defined communication plan or even passively because of technical constraints and self-doubt.

This study finds a disparity between the current state of social media use by women MSMEs in Pangandaran and the possible strategic communication space social media offers. Though they have not addressed how business people—especially women—create representations of their identity and difficulties using social media, previous research like Nemoto & Koreen (2019) have stressed the examination of the efficacy of digital marketing in MSMEs. Conversely, research on gender and social media in Indonesia usually emphasizes digital activism or social campaigns; few have addressed informal economic areas like MSMEs in tourist destinations.

This situation indicates a lack of study in communication studies addressing how women MSME business owners shape their identity and the story of their struggle in the digital arena, which is growingly relevant. Given the significance of social media as the main communication instrument in the present period, particularly in the context of post-pandemic economic recovery and improving local economic resilience, this gap is crucial to fill.

Studies done before have demonstrated how social media helps to empower economies (Cenamor et al., 2019; Harini & Handayani, 2019). Previous studies, however, have neglected the portrayal of women's identities and challenges in the context of MSME digital communication in tourist locations. Therefore, this study intends to close the gap by responding to the question: how do women MSMEs in Pangandaran construct their identity and tell their challenges in digital social media communication?

This study aims to investigate the types of representation of the identity and struggle of

women micro, small, and medium enterprises (UMKM) in social media communication, to grasp the socio-cultural background of these digital narratives, and to help create empowerment communication strategies more contextual, gender-based, and responsive to locality.

Theoretical Framework

This study explains how women MSME entrepreneurs use social media to express their identity and economic struggle by mainly depending on communication theory. McQuail (2010) theory of mediated communication provides a significant foundation for grasping the change of interpersonal and public communication in the digital age in this framework. Mass media and new media, according to McQuail, are participatory environments not just channels of information but also ones that allow personal and group stories to be created. Particularly for those in marginalized socio-economic circumstances, this makes social media a tactical tool for developing business communication and identity expression.

Hall (2003) theory of representation provides a crucial basis to examine how digital communication portrays women's identity and struggle. Hall claims that representation is a creation of meaning created by language, images, and symbolic behaviors in a particular cultural setting, not just a depiction of reality. Social media is seen in this work as a venue for the creation of meaning whereby women micro and small company owners reflect themselves, their cultural values, and their economic challenges.

Moreover, Butler (2006) gender performativity theory is applied to examine how women's gender identities are formed by daily social activities and communication, particularly in the digital sphere. Business narratives, visual expressions, and interactions with consumers and the community shape and negotiate women's identity in MSMEs not fixed but rather dynamic.

Starting with the function of the media as a space for communication, the process of representing identity and struggle, to the socio-cultural dynamics that shape gender construction in communication practices, the three theories complement one another in their understanding of the digital communication of women MSMEs on social media. These theories

provide the conceptual basis for understanding how social media is both an arena for the expression of identity and empowerment and a promotional instrument.

Material and Methodology

This paper investigates the problem of identity representation and the struggle of women MSMEs in digital social media communication using a case study method within a qualitative framework, as described by Creswell & Poth (2018). This method was selected since it allows academics to investigate the meaning, experiences, and communication techniques of women entrepreneurs in depth and contextually.

The study site was in Pangandaran Regency, West Java, particularly in areas heavily populated by tourism-based MSME businesses including West Beach, Pananjung, Babakan, and Parigi. The choice of location is based on the amount of women MSME players from diverse sectors, such as fashion, gastronomy, handicrafts, tour services, to reptile-based education, who are active on social media and are members of numerous groups such as Baraya, PEPES, PPUMI, and Kompepar. From August to November 2024, the study was carried out.

The demographic of this study is all female MSME players in the Pangandaran region. The sampling method was a purposive one with the following criteria: (1) female, (2) actively managing a micro business, (3) using social media in business activities, and (4) willing to be interviewed in depth. There were 15 major informants altogether, including triangulation with 3 informants from local community leaders and relevant agencies. The number of informants was decided upon using the concept of data saturation, which holds that interviews provide no meaningful new information.

Social media documentation—including images of Instagram, Facebook, or WhatsApp Business accounts—participatory observation, and in-depth interviews drove data collecting. Using open rules, semi-structured interviews permit in-depth investigation of personal and social narratives. Visiting the informants' places of business and tracking their digital activity helped one to observe. Community papers, official reports, and empowerment activity archives also provided supporting data. A thematic analysis method outlined by Braun

& Clarke (2006) was used to conduct data analysis. The steps of analysis were: (1) data transcription and repeated reading, (2) initial coding, (3) topic search, (4) theme review, (5) theme naming and definition, and (6) thematic story construction. To guarantee the correctness and depth of the results, the analysis process is done reflectively and iteratively.

Source triangulation (between informants), method triangulation (interview, observation, documentation), and member checking (verification of findings with informants) approaches help to ensure the validity of the data. In addition, the researcher produces reflective notes during the field procedure to eliminate bias and increase the validity of the interpretation.

This approach aims to address thoroughly how women MSMEs in Pangandaran perceive and create their identity and the story of their struggle via digital communication on social media.

Result and Discussion

Women's Identity in MSMEs Represented on Social Media

Not just as business owners but also as part of the community and family, women MSME entrepreneurs in Pangandaran have found social media to be a key platform to display their identity. Various kinds of identity expression that represent their dual responsibilities as housewives and micro enterprises were discovered in posts on WhatsApp Business, Facebook, and Instagram.

While some interviewees (culinary and handicraft enterprises) clearly stated they started a business out of financial need, others discovered personal significance in entrepreneurial pursuits. On social media, their identity is formed not just by product images but also by the accompanying stories—such as those of post-tsunami hardship, their part in funding their children's education, or their participation in the Baraya and PEPES groups. This indicates that women might redefine their conventional roles in the context of the digital economy by using social media as an articulation tool. Hall (2003) theory of representation holds that media identity is the product of symbolic production, not a reflection of reality. Women MSMEs in Pangandaran build a story of their identity in this setting by means of their selection of language, pictures, and local cultural symbols. Some business

people, for instance, include local components like Pangandaran batik, traditional cuisine, or the Sundanese language in their captions to highlight their connection to local values. This corresponds to the results of Israni et al. (2023) and Nadilla & Soebiantoro (2025), who note that women MSME players frequently show 'local authenticity' as a branding tool as well as a cultural identity.

The identity shown on social media, however, has its drawbacks. Some informants confessed they lacked confidence in front of the camera or were unsure how to write a compelling product description. This indicates that not all women are able or brave to completely express their individuality even though social media is accessible and interactive. This supports Butler (2006) idea of gender performativity, which holds that social norms and cultural expectations actively shape and negotiate gender identity, therefore always forming it.

Women who belong to organizations like PPUMI or Baraya also likely to have a better organized digital identity, according to the findings. Their posts reflect communal logos, shared hashtags, and stories of togetherness. This identity is no longer personal but rather a kind of digital solidarity that enhances their standing in the tourism-driven MSME environment. This is in line with studies by Harini & Handayani (2019) and Nurfitriya et al. (2022), which revealed that involvement in digital networks enhances social capital and increases the self-confidence of women MSME businesses.

Conversely, social media identity representation also shows digital access and capacity constraints. Some women run their social media accounts using small children or family members. The identity shown is also the product of intergenerational cooperation within one family. This indicates that representation is a societal and intergenerational process rather than a personal one.

Generally speaking, the findings of this study indicate that the depiction of the identity of women MSMEs in Pangandaran on social media is the outcome of a negotiation among local values, gender roles, and community dynamics. Social media is a symbolic arena where women construct, negotiate, and establish their identity in an always changing environment, not merely a commercial promotion tool.

The Story of Economic Struggle in Digital Communication

Women micro, small and medium enterprises' social media communication from Pangandaran prominently includes the story of financial hardship. Women company owners express the difficulties and dynamism of their entrepreneurial path by means of straightforward uploads including product images, client reviews, and brief stories in captions. Though some of these stories are not overtly told, they can be gleaned from the way they define business as a kind of struggle for life, tenacity, and a kind of economic independence.

Most interviewees claimed that their primary drive for starting a business was to satisfy family necessities and fund their children's education. For instance, following the 2006 tsunami catastrophe, they lost a lot and had to begin over. These tales of hardship show up on their different social media both via personal narratives in captions and via testimonials from ordinary consumers aware of the history of their company. Framed as a strength to endure and rise again, prior events create a sort of narrative resilience—these stories.

From the angle of communication theory, this story is a contextual, life experience-based kind of identity communication. According to Narrative Paradigm Theory Herman et al. (2012) people are narrative beings who perceive and understand the world using tales. The narratives of women's MSMEs' hardships on social media not only enhance their personal credibility in the eyes of consumers but also foster emotional ties that foster confidence and loyalty. Touching and genuine stories help many consumers, particularly domestic tourists who follow their accounts, to feel connected.

Not all MSME players, nevertheless, can clearly tell their tales of hardship. Most only tell the story indirectly, such as by saying their company was "started from scratch", "learned from the family" or "sold while caring for the children". Lack of intriguing story writing or packaging skills is a hindrance in and of itself. Some informants said they wished to be able to "tell a better story on social media", but they were unsure of the means. This underlines the significance of digital story training included in media literacy in the empowerment of women's MSMEs.

Furthermore, this story of hardship is sometimes presented in terms of the virtues of sincerity, patience, and fate. Phrases like *rezeki sudah ada yang mengatur* (*rezeki*, meaning sustenance, but here it is used to signify that providence takes care of nutrition) or *yang penting bisa sekolahin anak* (the key thing is to be able to educate children) clearly show this. These stories not only reflect economic reality but also the spiritual values and local culture mixed within their communication strategies. Hall (2003) clarifies that meaning in representation is formed in a specific cultural setting. The economic battle shown in this situation frames Pangandaran's local religious and civic culture.

Amalia et al. (2024) also show that the story of women's entrepreneurial struggle on social media has a great motivational component. Apart from selling goods, they also sell tales, aspirations, and life's challenges. This is reflected in the context of Pangandaran, where women MSME players include personal narratives in advertisements to foster emotional connection with consumers, particularly visitors seeking local goods that "tell a story".

Some business owners, interestingly, speak more about their challenges on community forums than on social media. MSME business owners in the Baraya community, for instance, discuss tales of financing challenges, a drop in tourist numbers, or technical issues running social media profiles. Though it is not always apparent on more public digital channels, this interpersonal communication generates the social capital that enhances their group resilience.

All things considered, the story of the economic hardship of women micro, small and medium companies (UMKM) on social media indicates a communication process based on local values that is strategic and emotive. Though not usually in a whole story form, these materials demonstrate that social media has provided a new platform for women to convey tenacity, hope, and the will to persevere under economic constraints.

Women MSMEs' Social Media Communication Strategy

Operating micro enterprises in the Pangandaran tourism area, women MSME business owners struggle not only in manufacturing and distribution but also in developing efficient market communication.

Social media as a platform for marketing, customer service, and preservation of socio-economic ties is one of their key tools.

Interviews and observations reveal that Facebook and WhatsApp Business are the social media most often used by women MSMEs. For the profile of local customers and visitors, these platforms are seen as the most accessible, known, and appropriate. Direct orders are handled via WhatsApp, client inquiries are answered there, and product catalogs in image and description form are shared. Facebook, on the other hand, is utilized for posting more diverse material including community or social activities, discount promotions, and client testimonials.

Especially for those in the fashion, culinary, and handicraft industries, several MSME players have begun to investigate Instagram as a visual medium to highlight product appeal. Creating the emotional attraction of products using the technique of visualisation is crucial. This fits McQuail's (2010) opinion that visual communication in digital media has great persuasive power since it coherently blends verbal and non-verbal messages.

Using personal stories in captions is another fascinating communication tool. Some women business owners include personal anecdotes in every advertisement, including those about the manual manufacturing method, the founding of the company, or client testimonials. This approach indicates a desire to create emotional branding, whereby consumers not only purchase goods but also emotionally relate to business owners. This idea fits the story branding strategy suggested by Merdhi & Hutama (2022), which holds that personal tales in marketing foster a closer connection between brands and consumers.

Though most digital communication is still basic, there is a constant pattern in the way women in MSMEs deal with consumers: replying immediately to communications, using courteous and warm language, and sustaining long-term connections. This indicates a relational communication strategy emphasising proximity, trust, and emotional attachment rather than just transactional communication. Given the communal Pangandaran community, which values social ethics, this approach is quite successful in preserving consumer loyalty.

Conversely, certain MSME players acknowledge their lack of ability to create a

more organized digital communication plan. Some lack knowledge of digital branding, are erratic in content posting, or cannot interpret social media platform analytical data. These challenges are significant considerations in increasing their digital communication ability. Training events, experience sharing, and mentoring help business people who belong to networks like PPUMI and PEPES to have better digital communication habits.

Supporting group communication plans depends much on communities. The Baraya community, for instance, distributes digital promotion templates, runs group campaigns before the Christmas season, and advocates the usage of shared hashtags. In keeping with the idea of cooperative branding—in which small enterprises help one another to enhance their digital presence (Kotler & Keller, 2006) this group communication approach This strategy has been shown to be successful in expanding the reach of promotions and enhancing the negotiating power of MSME players in the local tourist sector.

The generational digital divide is another discovery. Some senior business people depend on younger relatives or their offspring to run their social media profiles. This, on the one hand, reveals cross-generational cooperation in digital communication techniques. Conversely, it emphasizes the need of comprehensive, ongoing, and simple digital communication training for grassroots women entrepreneurs.

Therefore, the social ideals, institutional constraints, and the power of community solidarity as well as the usage of digital platforms define the communication strategy of women MSMEs on social media. A mix of advertising strategies, personal stories, and social relationships makes their digital communication one that helps to maintain business survival under rivalry and constrained resources.

The Socio-Cultural Background Shaping Digital Representation

Digital social media's portrayal of women micro, small and medium enterprises (UMKM) is inseparable from the social and cultural background in which they live and interact. Local values like kinship, mutual collaboration, politeness, and spirituality shape how women build digital narratives and identify themselves as economic actors in Pangandaran. Their social media digital image is not just the outcome of a

marketing plan but rather a reflection of the principles lived out in their daily life.

One notable illustration is how women MSMEs in Pangandaran frequently view their work as part of their family obligations rather than only as personal success. Many uploads highlight that this company is "to help their husbands," "so that their children can go to school," or "to help the family economy." This indicates that the development of women's identities as economic actors is still quite linked to domestic duties and the worth of family service. Consistent with Butler's (2006) theory of gender performativity, this indicates that social behaviors and communication—including in the digital sphere—constantly shape gender identity.

Their social media communication style is also shaped by politeness norms. Women MSMEs in Pangandaran tend to shy away from too glitzy promotional language as compared to aggressive and market-oriented promoting tactics. Rather, they speak with humble, respectful, and grateful language. 'Thank you faithful clients', 'Please pray that our business may be blessed', or 'Alhamdulillah, today's order went successfully' commonly show up as closing stories to uploads. This indicates that the digital connection they create is not merely transactional but also rich with emotional and spiritual significance.

Digital representation trends are also shaped by the cultural background of the community. MSME players participating in communities like Baraya and PPUMI usually create a strong group identity in online communication. Many uploads include community logos, shared hashtags, and voluntary promotion of other community members. A digital communication plan that is mutually supporting and non-competitive reflects the culture of mutual cooperation natural in their social lives. This corresponds to the results of Eka Putri et al. (2020) and Subekti et al. (2022) that MSME communities in tourist zones tend to create digital solidarity as a means of opposition to the hegemony of individualistic markets.

But traditional societal conventions present difficulties of their own as well. Some MSME companies are reluctant to post on social media out of concern about being deemed "show-off" or "disrespectful". Some people believe using personal images as corporate profiles breaches standards of decency or risks

privacy. This indicates that the social-cultural limits still affect the digital sphere. Hall (2003) claims that social pressure shapes representation not only by what one wants to display but also by what one cannot or should not exhibit.

Religiosity is also a key component of the digital story in the local setting of Pangandaran. Many MSME players link their economic success to the idea of 'rezeki from Allah' or use Islamic sayings and prayers. Content like this not only shows personal convictions but also fits a communication approach consistent with the principles of most society. Febrian & Kristianti (2020) study reveals that MSME players in regions with strong religious values tend to include spiritual stories in their business communications both as a reflection of faith and as a cultural strategy. Social structures also affect access to digital communication in addition to cultural values.

Women MSMEs from fishing or small merchant families often have restricted digital literacy, gadgets, and internet access. This disparity strengthens the belief that digital representation is inextricable from questions of social class and opportunity systems. While some rely on community or outside support, businesspeople with young or highly educated family members tend to be more flexible in their social media management.

The way women MSMEs in Pangandaran display themselves and their companies on social media is therefore significantly influenced by the socio-cultural setting. Local values, social norms, family structures, and community cultures all interact to create a unique pattern of digital communication: one that is courteous, spiritual, and supporting. One cannot grasp their digital depiction apart from the social setting in which they develop and engage.

Direction of Empowerment and Communication Consequences

Drawing on past research, one can say that social media communication has turned into a strategic arena for women MSME business owners in Pangandaran as a tool for developing community solidarity, a promotional medium, and a means of expressing identity. But this area is not value-free; socio-cultural elements, digital literacy level, and community networks all have a major impact on it. Efforts to empower women in MSMEs thus have to take into account the complexity of the local

environment so that digital communication techniques may be efficient, inclusive, and sustainable.

Strengthening community-based digital literacy is one key path for empowerment. Studies indicate that companies in MSME communities like Baraya, PEPES, and PPUMI are more consistent and innovative in their usage of social networking. They are used to cross-promoting, employing shared symbols like shared logos and hashtags, and disseminating information. This indicates that the community acts as a collective learning tool speeding the adoption of digital communication as well as an economic network. Therefore, community-based training and mentoring could be a good approach to raise the communication ability of women in MSMEs.

Furthermore, supporting agencies or institutions must intervene not just technically in social media but also in enhancing digital narratives from a gender and local viewpoint. Many women MSME players have motivating and unusual tales, but they have struggled to express them in the digital sphere.

Empowerment communication may be significantly influenced by narrative training (digital storytelling), which helps women not only sell goods but also create identity and widen their social networks (Bassano et al., 2019).

From an institutional standpoint, cooperation among local governments, universities, and communities can be directed toward developing locally based digital platforms holding SME catalogues, motivational narratives of entrepreneurs, and community information. Such a platform might be an easily available online learning centre for MSME players from many backgrounds as well as a better curated, safe, locally-valued promotional area (Kraus et al., 2023).

These results' communication consequences also address the sustainability component of local identity. Many uploads feature MSME participants adding local dialects, local batik, and traditional foods among other cultural emblems. This creates possibilities for the promotion of cultural communication via MSMEs, which can also help to brand Pangandaran tourism depending on local knowledge. Empowerment of women's MSMEs thus affects not only the household economy but also the maintenance of cultural

identity and the enhancement of the image of tourism sites.

Empowerment plans, therefore, should not overlook the structural obstacles women experience, such social norms restricting their room for expression, restricted time, access to technology, the double load of domestic chores, and others. The empowering strategy has to be sympathetic, participatory, and grounded on actual experience. The empowerment communication that is constructed should not be purely normative or top-down, but must start from acknowledging the difficulties and voices of women, the key actors in the local economy.

Digital communication sensitive to local context, gender roles, and cultural identities not only improves the economic situation of women in micro, small, and medium enterprises (UMKM), but also becomes a strategic tool in creating a more fair, inclusive, and sustainable society.

Conclusion

This paper underlines how digital social media has grown to be a crucial platform for women MSME business owners in Pangandaran to express their identity, tell their economic challenges, and build social networks and community solidarity. The identity created is not unique but rather the product of a bargain between domestic duties, cultural norms, religion, and the digital market's demands. Emerging from captions, photographs, and online conversations, the narrative of struggle portrays women's tenacity in the face of social constraints, access to technology, and little capital. Though some of the communication techniques are still basic, the consistency and local specificity in the message delivery show that social media has been changed into a powerful tool for empowerment, particularly when coupled with the strength of communities like Baraya and PPUMI.

These results suggest that local governments and supporting organizations should offer digital communication training not only technical but also narrative-based and local identity-based. MSME communities should be enabled to enhance organized group digital promotion projects, including the creation of collaborative platforms grounded in local knowledge. Considering age, educational background, and access to technology, strengthening digital literacy for women in MSMEs must be done in a compassionate,

participative, and sustainable method. Building an inclusive and contextual ecosystem of empowerment communication also depends on cooperation among academics, government agencies, and communities, hence enabling social media to be a vehicle for social transformation that supports women grassroots economic players.

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