



## Indicators of violence against university teachers: cross-cultural consensus using the Delphi Technique

Indicadores de violência contra docentes universitários: consenso transcultural pela Técnica Delphi

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** to define indicators of violence against teachers in higher education by employing a cross-cultural approach. **Method:** This mixed-method study, guided by the modified Delphi technique, was conducted with 19 experts on violence in Brazil and Spain. The results were selected using the snowball technique. With support from the Welphi software, the Likert Scale with five response levels was used to reach a consensus on the answers. **Results:** Two rounds of Delphi were required to reach a consensus on violence, which showed similar response trends. After analysis, the items obtained were grouped into six categories for discussion: use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and violence (ICTs mediating violence); teacher suppression (exclusion of the teacher; ignoring the teacher in class); student autocracy (disrespectful speech by students against the teacher in class, such as personal insults, swearing, ridicule); reductionism of social values (aggressive actions repeated over a short period); homophobic motricity (manifestation of homophobia); and family coercion (family exerting violence against the teacher. **Conclusion:** The conclusion is that violence against teachers has been cross-culturally identified as any act of threat/attempt/actual aggression, disrespect, sexual harassment, homophobia, family coercion, and the utilization of ICTs to practice any of these actions.

**Descriptors:** Violence; Health Postgraduate Programs; Delphi Technique; Consensus; Cultural Diffusion.

## RESUMO

**Objetivo:** definir indicadores de violência contra professores do Ensino Superior, em uma abordagem transcultural. **Método:** estudo de abordagem mista norteado pela técnica Delphi modificado, realizado com 19 especialistas em violência no Brasil e Espanha, selecionados por meio da técnica *snowball*. Para obtenção do consenso nas respostas, utilizou-se a Escala Likert com cinco níveis de resposta e apoio do *software* Welphi. **Resultados:** para atingir o consenso de violência, foram necessárias duas rodadas do Delphi, ambas mostraram tendências de respostas próximas. Após análise, os itens obtidos foram agrupados em seis categorias para discussão, a saber: uso das tecnologias da informação e comunicação (TICs) e da violência (TICs mediadoras de violência); a supressão docente (exclusão do professor; ignorar o mesmo em sala de aula); autocracia discente (fala desrespeitosa dos alunos contra o professor em sala de aula, como insultos pessoais, xingamento, ridicularização); reducionismo dos valores sociais (ações agressivas repetidas vezes durante um curto período); motricidade homofóbica (manifestação de homofobia); e coação familiar (família que exerce violência contra o docente). **Conclusão:** Identificou-se transculturalmente como violência contra o docente qualquer ato de ameaça/tentativa/agressão real, desrespeito, assédio sexual, homofobia, coação familiar e utilizar TICs para praticar qualquer um desses atos.

**Descritores:** Violência; Programas de Pós-Graduação em Saúde; Técnica Delphi; Consenso; Transculturalização.

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## INTRODUCTION

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There is strong evidence that the phenomenon of violence in the school environment against students or teachers has represented a major social problem worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The studies that have been carried out about violence in the school environment are primarily focused on violence against students. However, it is essential to consider the vulnerability of teachers, especially in recent decades, when political and popular discourse has attributed responsibility for the entire educational process to teachers.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, a study using meta-analysis found that between 20% and 75% (average 53%) of teachers had suffered some violence in the last two years.<sup>1</sup> In Brazil, teachers are victims of some violence every week, and the literature shows that the country ranks among the countries with the highest levels of violence against teachers.<sup>1,3-4</sup> This context significantly affects the organization of the climate, the quality of the teaching-learning process, and, consequently, the teachers' health.

Given the cultural complexity that shapes global realities, translated or not into best practices against violence, understanding its concept or meaning is necessary to develop indicators that contribute to understanding violence in academic circles, which can guide public policies in Brazil and Spain.

In this respect, a study that looked at the legislative treatment of bullying prevention and combating in Brazil with the legislation of countries such as Finland, Spain, Portugal, and the United States found that Spain has put into practice strategies to prevent violence in the school environment, such as the development of coexistence plans that include anti-bullying actions and punishments for perpetrators to improve interpersonal relationships.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, measures to combat violence against teachers must also be implemented.

Thus, although violence in the educational sphere has been studied, there are few studies focused on violence against higher education teachers in the health area, quite possibly due to the lack of a worldwide consensus on its meaning.<sup>5</sup> Thus, studies using the Delphi technique have proved to be appropriate in the search for consensus due to the possibility of structuring anonymous communication between specific and geographically distant experts but contributing equally.<sup>6</sup>

## OBJECTIVE

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Define indicators of violence against teachers in higher education using a cross-cultural approach using the modified Delphi technique.

## METHOD

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This is a mixed-methods study guided by the Delphi technique, which allows for the use of various research strategies to collect and analyze data.<sup>7</sup> The quantitative approach used a descriptive cross-sectional design, and the qualitative approach used a descriptive and exploratory design. In addition, Pierre Bourdieu's framework supports the theoretical basis used to define and categorize violence against teachers.

The process of carrying out the Delphi stages is summarized by operationalizing a rigorously designed questionnaire, to be answered asynchronously by previously selected experts in two or more discussion cycles called rounds.<sup>8</sup> The first round contains open questions with space for justifications.

The answers receive simple statistical treatment and association of arguments with the numerical data, which will be presented to the researchers in the following rounds, as many as necessary to saturate the process by reducing disagreements until a group consensus is reached, identified by the researchers by values between 65% and 100%.<sup>7</sup>

Operational steps were followed in accordance with the Delphi technique, starting with a scoping review of the definitions and characteristics of violence against teachers<sup>9</sup>. The types of violence were categorized according to the Bourdieusian theoretical framework to identify consensus and a conceptual model of violence.

In this consensus study, a modified Delphi was adopted in which, in the first round, focus groups or interviews can be implemented in addition to submitting the answers to content analysis or applying a structured form guided by quantitative questions anchored in the scientific literature.<sup>7</sup>

The study was conducted from August to November 2020 with violence experts from Brazil and Spain in a three-phase panel (rounds). The information was analyzed concurrently with the data collection using a qualitative-quantitative approach. A semi-structured survey questionnaire was used in two languages (Portuguese and Spanish), with open and closed questions. The product was pre-tested with two teachers in the field to assess the questionnaire's construct and ensure objectivity and clarity.

In structuring the stages, two researchers reviewed the literature to help draw up the initial questionnaire and conducted a pilot test. This was followed by selecting experts, preparing, launching the instrument, and identifying the results. The eligibility criteria for the experts were professional qualifications in the violence field, solid academic knowledge, and the heterogeneity of the participants.

The experts were selected using the snowball technique until the number considered sufficient to generate relevant information was reached.<sup>10</sup> Thus, 38 potential participants

were identified via the Lattes platform, 32 in Brazil and six in Spain. All were invited by e-mail to participate in the study and answer the form via a Google Forms access link.

In the first phase of the study, when the experts entered the platform, they were guided through the questionnaire, which consisted of individual, quantitative answers supplemented by qualitative information. They scored on a Likert scale with five levels of answers (totally disagree, disagree, indifferent, agree, and totally agree), where 1 and 5 are the extremes of disagreement and agreement, respectively.

In the second phase, once the experts' responses had been identified by statistical analysis, the questions with consensus were kept. The study's researchers again revised and reformulated the final instrument, concluding the data collection stages.

All the information was collected using Welphi software, which contains the tools for analyzing the rounds. Welphi is an online survey software that uses the Delphi technique, making it possible to formulate questionnaires to obtain the opinions of several people. It also makes it possible to produce automatic statistics to analyze the results, which can then be exported to Excel spreadsheets to analyze consensus elements.<sup>11</sup> The indicators, criteria, and objectives that achieved the highest and lowest approval rates were verified. The analytical process of the quantitative data was conducted in the software, and descriptive statistical analysis was applied to summarize the results and identify the consensus among the experts.

Welphi automatically generates descriptive statistics on the responses, such as percentages of agreement, averages, medians, and standard deviations, enabling precise and rapid analysis of the levels of consensus among the experts. In this way, it was possible to identify the items that reached the minimum consensus established for inclusion in the next round. In other words, the items that reached an approval rate of 70% or more of the responses were included in the next round until a consensus was reached. The principles of the classic Delphi were respected - anonymity, interaction, controlled feedback and statistical responses.<sup>7</sup>

The changes in the averages and dispersion of the items between the cycles were analyzed to compare the stability of the answers and identify the convergence of opinions between the rounds. This feedback and statistical analysis process, combined with the anonymity of the experts, reduced possible biases and ensured consistency in consensus building.

The final data was organized into tables and exported to a Microsoft Excel 365® spreadsheet, making it easier to check the frequency of responses for each type of violence and to categorize the results according to the theoretical framework adopted.

In the qualitative stage, content analysis was carried out to create categories a posteriori, grouping the response items according to Content Analysis.<sup>12</sup> From this perspective, the author lists the message of oral, written, or symbolic communications as the starting point for the categorization procedure, followed by the researcher's methodological and theoretical reference and support. The researcher, in turn, will aim to produce inferences that result in units of analysis (record and context) and their limitations, interrelating and interpreting the multiple and varied senses and meanings implicit in the communications until the analysis that defines the categories is concluded.

The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Goiás, CAAE: 08470819.3.0000.5083. All participants signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF) electronically, following the recommendations of Resolution 466/2012 and 510/2016 of the National Health Council, and were coded in numbers to preserve their anonymity.

## RESULTS

Two rounds of Delphi were needed to reach a consensus on violence against teachers, carried out in a participatory, interactive, and asynchronous way using Welphi software. The first round lasted 35 days; 38 experts on violence took part of the 19 who sent in their answers, 16 (84%) completed the questionnaire, 13 Brazilians and three Spaniards. In the second round, which lasted 15 days, 16 experts took part, and only 9 returned the questionnaire, but fully completed.

At the end of the first round, the questions that obtained 70% or more agreement were sent back to the experts, as were the new questions that emerged from the open question. This new questionnaire was answered again by the participants and reassessed by the researchers. Just to let you know, only one question out of the eight that emerged from the open questionnaire was considered a consensus in the second round.

Table 1 shows the results of both rounds, showing the frequency of each type of violence against teachers.

**Table 1.** Items that reached consensus in both rounds. Goiânia (GO), Brazil, 2021.

Question	Round 1 (n = 16)	Round 2 (n = 9)
	Consensus (%)	Consensus (%)
Is bullying or threatening by mentioning inappropriate content via e-mail and social networks considered violence?	88%	89%
Is manipulative behavior aimed at socially isolating the teacher, such as intent to exclude, ignoring, and not paying	94%	89%

attention, a characteristic of violence against the teacher? Is disrespectful speech by students towards the teacher in class, such as personal insults, swearing, ridicule, insidiously or chronically, a characteristic of violence against the teacher?	94%	89%
Is threatening/attempting/actual aggression, with or without the use of a weapon, such as pushing, throwing objects, and attacks with physical contact, regardless of whether it results in the need for medical attention, a characteristic of violence against teachers?	100%	78%
Is any threat or aggression associated with homophobic motivation, such as explicit sexual comments and/or obscene gestures, unwanted touching, and swearing, individually or in front of others, a characteristic of violence against the teacher?	88%	89%
Is being coerced by the student's family a characteristic of violence against the teacher?	NA*	78%

\* None of the alternatives

After analyzing the ranking of the survey questions during the two rounds, the items obtained were grouped into six categories. The ranking of the questions showed similar trends in both rounds. Only the reductionism of social values was identified in the first round with the highest consensus. In the second round, it was classified as one of the lowest, as seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Ranking types of violence against teachers. Goiânia (GO), Brazil, 2021.

	ICT use* and violence	Teacher suppression	Student Autocracy	Reductionism of social values	Homophobic motricity	Coercion by the family
<b>Round 1</b>	88%	94%	94%	100%	88%	NA**
<b>Round 2</b>	89%	89%	89%	78%	89%	78%

\* ICTs: Information and Communication Technologies

\*\* None of the alternatives

## DISCUSSION

The results are discussed in the categories that emerged from the experts' open-ended responses: Use of Information and Communication Technologies and violence; Teacher suppression; Student autocracy through explicit violence; Reductionism of social values; Homophobic motricity; and Family coercion.

**Use of Information and Communication Technologies and Violence:** in this category, it was identified that information and communication technologies in education, used through personal computers and cell phones, among other devices with internet access, have become tools that help in the student's teaching-learning process and favor learning autonomy.<sup>13</sup> However, these tools can be a channel in which violence can be

produced and exercised, with cyberbullying or cyberviolence being a new expression of intimidation and psychological and sexual harassment that exerts actual violence on people who receive it.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding the phenomenon of ICTs in the classroom, it is essential to reflect on what kind of autonomy these resources produce - intellectual independence or leaving learners free to do whatever they want. It is, therefore, necessary that the use of these tools is aligned with the objectives of the lessons and the subject as a whole so that their manipulation is not associated with acts of violence against teachers and other critical social actors in the teaching and learning process, such as classmates and professionals working in administrative and educational support services.

Younger and younger people are using the internet, and as a result, cyberbullying is also happening at an earlier age, usually starting around the age of 10 to 13. This escalation in violence has occurred mainly due to the increased time spent using electronic devices.<sup>15</sup>

The assertion that violence through information and communication technologies encompasses actions of domination, discrimination, and abuse of power that everyone can exercise and causes psychological problems confirms the concepts that give light to this category of violence against teachers: bullying, threatening, mentioning inappropriate content via e-mail and social networks.<sup>15</sup>

In this type of violence, people also live with a certain permissiveness on the part of the spectators of the event. Doing nothing or placing themselves in a position of outsider in the realization of cyberbullying can reinforce the bullying itself and make them accomplices to the violence.<sup>14</sup>

In this way, violence against teachers through ICTs needs to be considered by everyone involved in the teaching and learning process because, despite the benefits of these tools for building knowledge through electronic games and quizzes on the content taught, among other functions, the study indicated that when used negatively, these resources are used in a hostile way by students to attack educators. It is, therefore, necessary to take a more sensitive look at this phenomenon in everyday university life, both inside and outside the classroom.

In the **teacher suppression** category, it was observed that student-teacher interaction tends to increase trust and strengthen relationships between them. This is why affection, already considered a protective factor in any relationship, is equally essential in teaching relationships. The feelings of safety and security that surround it are positive and help to achieve the intended educational goal.<sup>16</sup>

When this relationship was seen in this study as a negative factor, manifested by excluding the teacher and ignoring the teacher in class, it was characterized as violence. It is therefore necessary that, in addition to specific knowledge about the subject they teach, higher education teachers develop interpersonal competence (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) to deal effectively with these aversive situations, as healthy relationships enhance the construction of new knowledge and inspire students to have a greater affinity for the subject taught.

These forms of violence are recurrent at all levels of education, and there is evidence that teachers who have experienced some forms of violence are more likely to experience it again.<sup>4</sup>

Postgraduate students tend to interact more with their teachers. The smaller classes of the *Stricto* and *Lato Sensu* courses allow for better interaction between teacher and student, and this relationship can extend into their personal lives.<sup>16</sup> It is believed that the maturity of the student's profile is also associated with less aggressive situations against the teacher. However, at least in nursing, the relationship between teacher and student is understood and perceived more as a relationship between professional colleagues.

Less manipulative student behavior tends to occur with teachers of the same gender, as they feel more comfortable interacting with authorities of the same gender as their own, improving the quality of interactions and reducing the consequences of negative actions. Positive teacher-student interactions lead to increased trust and intimacy, which can promote collaboration between them.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the evidence of physical violence, social violence is another frequent category in the daily work of teachers, which led to the category **Student autocracy being called explicit violence**, also qualified using specific terms in the view of students, such as nicknames and pejorative codenames that affect the image of teachers.<sup>4</sup>

This is confirmed in the concepts that gave rise to this category, represented by “disrespectful speech by students against the teacher in class, such as personal insults, cursing, ridicule, insidiously or chronically.”

The school is a field with relative autonomy linked to constructing a fairer, more egalitarian society. It is where individuals belong, relationships are established, and subjects are encouraged and stimulated to achieve personal and environmental transformation. Sometimes, this field of formal learning becomes a hostile stage for violent expressions and acts against teachers, reflecting the social class to which the students belong, the communities in which they live, or the families they belong to.<sup>17</sup>



In the view of some teachers, students' disrespect for teachers results from non-compliance with the rules and the social devaluation of the school and the teacher.<sup>4,18</sup> Therefore, in addition to teaching theoretical and practical content that will help learners in their professional lives, subjects related to interpersonal and social relationships also need to be taught so that in any environment in which they are inserted, behaviors such as respect for differences, tolerance, and friendship can be exercised.

There is a realization that violence is the opposite of power because it is what limits it and tests it, highlighting the importance of authority in the education of the youngest by sustaining the guidance of the new generations by the most experienced, such as parents and teachers, for the sake of the continuity of civilization through the maintenance of the regulatory structures of collective life and the preservation of historically conquered cultural goods.<sup>19</sup>

However, authority with students differs over time because, as the students are different, their needs and/or priorities are different, relationships change, they are organized in other ways, and authority figures acquire other meanings. They attribute the change to the transformations that have taken place in society, the family, and the school, above all due to the democratization of access to information, the increase in social rights, and globalization, which constitute a new way of living and relating.<sup>4,20</sup>

From this perspective, when a student, whether from a wealthy social class or not, allows himself to explicitly attack the teacher with disrespectful words, curses, or other forms, verbal and social violence is revealed, and student autocracy is laid bare through explicit violence, which weakens the teacher's authority.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, reflecting on Bourdieusian theories, we note that when violence is practiced by the student using the same language as their daily life in the classroom, it can mask the violence by making it reside in the symbolic field.<sup>17</sup>

However, when the teacher perceives it in the real world, not only the teacher is harmed, but also the school and all its pupils because the level of stress is increased, which can lead to aggressive attitudes and physical and/or mental illness, which has serious consequences for pupils' teaching and learning.<sup>21</sup>

This is because, despite the explicit violence directed at teachers by students, there is a lack of a rapid system for reporting and informing about violence, which makes it difficult to monitor the occurrence of this type of event, which puts pressure on teachers to remain in the classroom exposed to conflictive and highly demanding work environments.<sup>4</sup>

One of the ways of characterizing student violence against teachers is when they repeatedly provoke aggressive actions over a short period. Through the category

**Reductionism of social values**, it was possible to verify that these violent behaviors can occur verbally, physically, on the property, through social coercion, and through manipulative behaviors to isolate the teacher.<sup>4,22</sup>

Evidence that 80% of teachers have suffered some violence at work confirms that aggression against teachers has an impact on other areas of life, such as emotional, psychological, and professional life. Thus, in addition to the negative experiences of aggression, teachers also experience fear, both of suffering violence and of reliving it.<sup>22</sup>

One strategy for preventing violence is for the teacher to support the student, which can reduce verbal aggression and avoid aggression.<sup>4</sup> Because by committing violence against the teacher, the student is often reproducing the aggression they have also suffered, so it is essential that both parties be welcomed.

Data from the **Homophobic Motricity** category confirms that cultural diversity tends to be addressed in educational programs in all countries. However, more than this approach is needed to change students' beliefs and conceptions.<sup>23</sup> As much as we can work in an environment considered "friendly," this does not mean it will be welcoming and inclusive.<sup>4</sup>

Environments such as schools can be peaceful, but the negative behavior of some co-workers can make them hostile.<sup>4</sup> Discussing homophobia in these places can suppress conflicts, but it doesn't eliminate them and can lead to violence.<sup>23</sup>

There is a need to implement anti-LGBTQIA+phobia programs in all countries,<sup>23</sup> as there are reports of people who have lost their jobs for fear of going to work because the environment has become a stressor and negatively interferes with workers' health.<sup>24</sup> It has already been identified that mistreatment in the workplace, such as bullying and discrimination, makes the work environment less collaborative, the professional more exhausted and with more negative attitudes. Furthermore, in the learning environment, victims of violence tend to work more hours per week to avoid further abuse in the future, as those who work fewer hours are sometimes considered less skilled and efficient, making them more susceptible to reprimands.<sup>24</sup>

The professional-family relationship is directly linked to teachers' job satisfaction, and reconciling this binomial favors their work.<sup>25</sup> However, this relationship with students' families can often lead to violence against teachers. The category of **Family coercion** addresses this issue.

As a basic social unit, the family plays a vital role in providing the social, emotional, and economic conditions for the student's upkeep during their education process. However, depending on how it is presented and received, this provisioning can symbolize a power

relationship between family members and characterize a positive and negative burden on the student's journey.<sup>25</sup>

Individuals and families are complex groups that need integrated care, making it essential for the teacher to understand the family as part of the context in which the students find themselves since many students live in accommodations close to higher education institutions and not with their parents, have a more excellent bond with the teacher.<sup>16</sup> This data allows us to infer that teachers and families can occupy close roles in the student's life, as they become a reference for supporting academic and personal needs. However, these close roles can facilitate conflicts between parents and teachers.

It is worth highlighting methodological aspects that limited the study, such as the lower response rate in the second round than in the first. This is an expected characteristic of the Delphi technique, and it would have been helpful to collect sociodemographic data from the participants to describe them. Another challenge in implementing the study was the participation of university lecturers, given the heavy workload of these professionals. To mitigate these limitations, the study included reminders to participants between rounds and pre-tested the questionnaire with experts to ensure clarity and objectivity in the answers.

Although the study involved experts from Brazil and Spain to achieve a cross-cultural perspective on violence against teachers, the limited sample and the focus on consensus restrict the possibility of direct comparisons between the countries. The analyses focused on the common categories of violence identified among the experts, regardless of their geographical context.

## CONCLUSION

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This study, with the participation of Spanish experts, broadened the cross-cultural concept of violence. It identified as indicators of violence against teachers any act of threat/attempt/actual aggression, as well as ignoring or disrespecting the teacher through speech, engaging in sexual harassment, homophobia, receiving coercion from the student's family, or even using information and communication media to carry out such acts.

The study's results provide clear indicators of violence against teachers, which can inform public policies and institutional practices to create safer and more supportive educational environments for teachers. These indicators serve as a reference for specific interventions, promoting prevention and protection actions in the academic context.

The indicators identified enable practical actions both at the individual level, with support and training programs for teachers to deal with situations of violence, and at the organizational level, through institutional prevention and intervention policies. These actions

can be translated into protocols and training that promote a safer and more welcoming academic environment. In addition, the indicators allow teachers, managers, social actors in the educational community, and political leaders to broaden their understanding of the factors that intensify violence against teachers, providing a solid basis for building interventions and public policies to welcome these essential professionals.

By identifying and categorizing the indicators of violence, the study provides a solid basis for future research on the topic, allowing for a more profound understanding of the types of violence faced by university lecturers and their implications. This contributes to advancing scientific knowledge by expanding the experience of violence in the academic environment and providing insights for developing effective policies and interventions to prevent and deal with this problem.

Future studies could involve a larger and more balanced sample from different countries to better understand possible cultural particularities. This would allow for more detailed comparisons of violence indicators according to different educational and cultural realities.

## CONTRIBUTIONS

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Angela Gilda Alves and Sara Oliveira Souza contributed to all stages of the article's production: conception, data analysis and interpretation, writing, critical revision of the content and final approval of the version to be published. Flaviane Cristina Rocha Cesar and Johnatan Martins Sousa contributed to the writing, critical revision and final approval of the version to be published. Lizete Malagoni de Almeida Cavalcante Oliveira and Maria Alves Barbosa contributed to the critical review of the content and final approval of the version to be published. Edinamar Aparecida Santos da Silva and Dolors Rodríguez-Martín contributed to data analysis and interpretation, writing, critical revision of the content and final approval of the version to be published.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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There is nothing to declare.

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