

# Analyzing Talent Trends of Generation Z Students in College of Agriculture Classrooms



Matthew Gold<sup>1</sup>, Megan S. Cantrell<sup>1</sup>, and Jonathan Orsini<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, University of Florida

<sup>2</sup> Office of Distance Learning, University of Florida

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Matthew Gold, PO Box 110540 Gainesville, FL 32611  
Email: matthewgold2000@yahoo.com

## Abstract

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, has taken over university classrooms. A sample of 592 U.S. Generation Z students enrolled in an agricultural leadership course was examined to determine if talent theme trends exist for the target population and how this information could enhance learning environments and agricultural education. The results indicate that the studied population have the signature talent themes of Achiever, Restorative, Empathy, Strategic, and Futuristic. Additionally, one substantial difference is that the Responsibility and Learner talent themes were sixteenth and eighteenth for the population in this study, respectively. At the same time, they were second and third in the Gallup Organization's 2014 study. This difference may suggest a shift of Generation Z students in college of agriculture classrooms preferring outcomes in their education that can help them make an impact in the future over the learning process. A ranking of talent themes for the sample was determined, along with rankings based on sex. Significance was found that males were more likely to have one-or-more talents in the Influencing domain and two-or-more in the Strategic Thinking domain.

*Keywords:* clifton strengths, talent themes, generation z

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, has been impacted by technological innovations, economic volatility, global health crises, and campaigns for social justice (Jayathilake et al., 2021; Seemiller & Grace, 2017). International topics have developed this generation, the majority of undergraduate students, into well-rounded people (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). However, minimal research on their personal talents, specifically those taking courses in colleges of agriculture, exists.

With Generation Z being the dominant population of college students for only a few years, there is a lack of information on what talent theme trends may exist in Generation Z college of agriculture students. These trends can be used by agricultural educators as they work to adapt teaching and lessons of topics that inherently connect with knowing ones' talents, such as self-awareness and team dynamics. Currently, Generation Z describes themselves as compassionate, responsible, and open-minded. However, an important point for university faculty to note is that these

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same students are also much less likely to want to work with peers (Mohr & Mohr, 2017). While outliers are common in research, it is prone to happen when looking at Generation Z because this generation is the most ethnically and racially diverse in United States history (Fry & Parker, 2018). Since ethnicity and race play a factor in the lens of which individuals experience the world, it is important to take note of the potential for skewed results in the talent theme trends of this research as a population has yet to have the diverse lens of Generation Z. However, Generation Z college students taking courses in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida will be able to align with their signature themes and use those to develop their personal leadership skills in the classroom and beyond to positively impact the agriculture and natural resources industry.

### Clifton Strengths

The Clifton Strengths assessment measures the “naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that is productively applied” (Hodges & Clifton, 2004, p. 257). This assessment contains 34 talent themes, separated into four different talent theme domains: nine in Executing, individuals who have the innate talent to implement ideas and make things happen; eight in Influencing, those that can make sure ideas are heard and take charge if needed; nine in Relationship Building, those who are key to keeping groups together and making the group better as a whole; and eight in Strategic Thinking; people who can look ahead and help make beneficial decisions for the future (Tomkovick & Swanson, 2014). While every individual who takes the assessment will have all 34 talent themes ranked, the top five, known as signature themes, are the ones reported to individuals due to these being the talents with the highest chance of development into strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

The assessment, used by millions each year, has faced criticism for the reliability and validity of the accuracy of the results (Gallup, 2020). Based on the most recent findings from The Clifton StrengthsFinder 2.0 Technical Report: Development and Validation (2007), the test-retest reliability ranged from 0.60-0.80 and had significant Chi-Square results in 29 of the 34 talent themes (Asplund et al., 2007). This outcome provides the necessary data to conclude the stability and reliability of the assessment, pretest to posttest. Even though five talent themes in the top five were not considered significant, almost all were seen in the top ten on the pretest for those specific individuals. This provides evidence that there was little overall change in talent themes from the pretest to the posttest.

Gallup researchers are confident that after being used by millions, the content validity of the assessment is sound, even though personality-type assessments are hard to provide evidence of this type of validity (Asplund et al., 2007). It also must be noted that demographics had almost no influence on the results, and every person taking the assessment has an equal chance of having any of the 34 talent themes (Asplund & Hickman, 2021). The biggest difference was between sex, but this only

accounted for a 4% disparity for the themes of Analytical and Empathy (Asplund & Hickman, 2021). The percentage was even smaller regarding race and ethnicity, with only a 1.8% difference in talent theme results across all 34 talents (Asplund & Hickman, 2021).

### Sex Differences Based on Clifton Strengths

Even though stereotypes about sex tend to be inaccurate and often misleading, they give a general picture of the main differences between males and females (Brody, 1997). Expressing emotions is typically seen as important for women, while men may see emotions negatively. Additionally it has been suggested that men see themselves as the more rational sex stemming from the idea that they are more reasonable when comparing themselves to women (Brody, 1997).

While the generalization of males and females is typically unreliable, the Gallup Organizations (2014) study on the Clifton Strengths of males and females in higher education shows a slight similarity to the main stereotype of emotions that were mentioned before by Brody (1997). The results from the study show the theme of Empathy was the fourth highest among females and was 22nd for males (Gallup, 2014). This data could create the assumption that females are typically more empathetic and value emotions more than males (Brody, 1997). The Strategic talent theme, which was third for males, was much closer for females at tenth in the study (Gallup, 2014). There was minimal separation for this talent theme, so it is difficult to determine if the characteristics of males versus females cause this difference.

### Generation Z

Generation Z, born between 1997-2012, grew up surrounded by technology the internet and constant connectivity (Dimock, 2019). Generation Z was shaped by this pervasive technology, worldwide violence, social justice events, and a turbulent economy (Seemiller & Grace, 2017). Large portions of Generation Z experienced disruption in education due to COVID-19, which has led to an increased rate of virtual learning spaces (Jayathilake et al., 2021). While the world and the United States are constantly dealing with new and problematic obstacles, 66% of Generation Z, according to a study completed by AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, is still optimistic that they can be the ones to make actual change occur in the world (Amiri, 2021).

Characterized as an empathetic, open-minded, and faithful generation, Generation Z is also known to be judgmental of their peers and has trouble staying focused (Mohr & Mohr, 2017). However, even with being critical of others and preferring intrapersonal learning, this generation still sees others as important resources to work with. Furthermore, Generation Z is focused on the “we”-centered mentality and fixing the community's troubles rather than just themselves as some past generations might have (Seemiller & Grace, 2017).

Overall, this generation is the most diverse compared to

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any generation before them.

It is also important to note that this generation is now the majority of higher education students and looks at learning differently than in past generations. Generation Z prefers a type of flipped classroom where they use videos as their primary type of instruction rather than in-person. This type of learning fits with their personality of being more individualistic and preferring to at least start assignments and projects by themselves (Mohr & Mohr, 2017).

One critique of generational research is that it is difficult to determine the cutoffs and what definitive factors influence a change (Dimock, 2019). This concern about generational theory, or the patterns typically seen in each generation, has been alleviated by using social, political, and economic factors to show how a shift occurred for the next generation.

Linking this generation back to Clifton Strengths, there is currently little to no research to find a trend as the Gallup Organization has done with past generations. Additionally, there is a lack of research that exists viewing talent themes of Generation Z students in colleges of agriculture. However, since enough studies have been completed to get data on the characteristics, behaviors, and preferred learning environments, it is safe to assume that the CliftonStrengths assessment can make conclusions about both students in college of agriculture classes and college of agriculture students in this generation.

### Methods

The purpose of this research was to use the Clifton Strengths assessment to determine if there was a talent theme trend in Generation Z college students taking a leadership course in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida. This research was further broken down into looking at potential differences between the sexes within the studied Generation Z sample. The following research questions guided this study:

- What talent theme trends, if any, exist within the studied U.S. Generation Z college student sample?
- Is there a difference in talent theme trends between males and females within the studied U.S. Generation Z college student sample?

### Population and Sample

The population of interest in this study was Generation Z students taking classes in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida. All students were determined to be in Generation Z, based on their birth year set by the Pew Research Center (2019); "Generation Z" were born between 1997 and 2012. A convenience sample of 592 college students was taken from two undergraduate courses in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida, taught over seven semesters from 2019 to 2021 at a tier-one public research university in the southeastern United States to make inferences to Generation Z college students in other colleges of agriculture. IRB approval was received before using the archival data.

### Participants

Of the 623 students in the courses (N=623), 25 were not a part of Generation Z, and six did not input their results, giving a final sample of 592 participants (n=592). Table 1 displays the overall demographics of the 592 participants in this study.

Table 1.

*Demographics of Student Participants (n =592)*

	n	%
Gender		
Male	195	32.9
Female	397	67.1

### Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to demonstrate rank differences in talent selections between study participants and past generations by comparing data provided by the Gallup Organization (CliftonStrengths, 2019). Analysis of ranked differences was also conducted to determine rank differences between talents given to men and women. Finally, researchers were interested in determining the differences in the number of talent themes within the four domains between men and women. Chi-square tests of independence were used to determine differences between men and women who had one-or-more talents per domain and also two-or-more talents per domain.

### Limitations

The first limitation is the sample size. Only having the top five Clifton Strengths of 592 Generation Z college students is not a large enough sample to make assumptions about the whole generation. Furthermore, this study used a sample of college students enrolled in an agricultural leadership class at the University of Florida. This does not echo the entire generation or the individuals of this generation in all universities. Additionally, the enrollment of the program the study was conducted in skews to have more females, which resulted in the data being over-representative of female identifying members of Generation Z. Another limitation is that the study focuses on the older side of Generation Z and does not consider the ones not yet in college.

### Results

Participants were described, as a whole and by sex, through frequencies in the 34 individual talent themes. Along with the frequencies, the chi-square tests of independence were utilized to determine the significance of the relationships between sex for the four domains of Clifton Strengths. The findings for the first guiding question of this study are displayed in Table 2.

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Table 2.

*Participants' Clifton Strengths Talent Theme Frequencies*

Talent Themes	Domain	n	N	%
Achiever	E	182	592	31
Restorative	E	160	592	27
Empathy	R	136	592	23
Strategic	S	131	592	22
Futuristic	S	124	592	21
Adaptability	R	122	592	21
Relator	R	119	592	20
Communication	I	110	592	19
Harmony	R	110	592	19
Competition	I	108	592	18
Positivity	R	108	592	18
Individualization	R	106	592	18
Woo	I	104	592	18
Developer	R	103	592	17
Input	S	100	592	17
Responsibility	E	93	592	16
Includer	R	85	592	14
Learner	S	82	592	14
Discipline	E	79	592	13
Activator	I	67	592	11
Context	S	66	592	11
Ideation	S	66	592	11
Analytical	S	64	592	11
Intellection	S	61	592	10
Consistency	E	60	592	10
Significance	I	60	592	10
Deliberative	E	58	592	10
Connectedness	R	57	592	10
Arranger	E	52	592	9
Focus	E	50	592	8
Belief	E	46	592	8
Command	I	38	592	6
Maximizer	I	36	592	6
Self-Assurance	I	17	592	3

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### Question 1: Talent Theme Trends within U.S. Generation Z College Students

Table 2 displays the breakdown of all 34 Clifton Strengths in each domain (Executing (E), Influencing (I), Relationship Building (R), and Strategic Thinking (S)), for the studied population (N = 592), broken down by rank order. The Clifton Strength of Achiever was the most prevalent in the study, with approximately 31% (n = 182) of participants receiving this talent theme in their top five. The talent themes of Restorative (27%, n = 160), Empathy (23%, n = 136), Strategic (22%, n = 131), and Futuristic (21%, n = 124) rounded out the most common talent themes in the top five Clifton Strengths of participants. The least common talent theme was Self-Assurance, with only 3% (n = 17) of individuals receiving this theme in their top five. This was followed by Maximizer (6%, n = 36), Command (6%, n = 38), Belief (8%, n = 46), and Focus (8%, n = 50).

### Question 2: Differences in Talent Theme Trends and Domains between Males and Females

Participants in the study were described through descriptive statistics applying ranked differences between males and females by talent theme and using the chi-square tests of independence to determine if there are differences between these two sexes for one-or-more and also two-or-more talents per domain.

Table 3 shows the ranked differences of participants based on sex. Data shows that males (M) and females (F) had different talents in their top five, however, they share the talent themes of Achiever, Restorative, and Strategic. Females had the most common talent theme of Achiever at 32% (n = 127), followed by Empathy (26%, n = 105), Restorative (26%, n = 102), Futuristic (22%, n = 86), and Strategic (21%, n = 83). Males had Restorative as their most common at 30% (n = 58), followed by Achiever (28%, n = 55), Competition (25%, n = 49), Strategic (25%, n = 48), and Adaptability (24%, n = 47). Additionally, males and females both had the same least common Clifton Strength of Self-Assurance at 4% (n = 7) and 3% (n = 10), respectively.

Along with the ranked differences, as shown in Table 3, chi-square tests of independence were used to determine if significant differences were seen between Generation Z male and female college students in one-or-more and also in two-or-more talents per domain, as shown in Tables 4 and 5. Since eight tests were run for this study, four for one-or-more and four for two-or-more talents per domain, a Bonferroni-adjusted p-value was calculated. Thus, the results for the adjusted p-value were determined to be significant if they were below 0.125 instead of .05. Cramer's V was used to determine the effect size of the tests, which is used to determine how strong the connection is between two different categories or variables (McLeod, 2019).

A chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between sex and having one-or-more talent themes in the Influencing domain. The relationship between these variables was significant,  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 6.315$ ,  $p = .012$ , Cramer's  $V = .103$ . This relationship shows that men are significantly more likely

to report one-or-more Clifton Strengths in the Influencing domain than women. However, based on the Cramer's V result, the effect size was small, meaning that even though the results were significant, the connection between the fields was not strongly associated.

Another chi-square test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between sex and having two-or-more talent themes in the Strategic Thinking domain. The relationship between these variables was significant,  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 8.505$ ,  $p = .004$ , Cramer's  $V = .12$ . This relationship shows that men are significantly more likely to report two-or-more Clifton Strengths in the Strategic Thinking domain than women. Like the relationship between sex and one-or-more talent themes in the Influencing domain, the effect size for this test was also small. Tests also showed that the p-value for two-or-more talents in the Executing domain was significant; however, after calculating the adjusted p-value, the results were no longer significant.

## Discussion

Faculty members in colleges of agriculture are working with an generation who have experienced unique events influencing their development. The talent themes possessed by the participants are different than the previous generation, and thus education in colleges of agriculture should be adapted to fit the strengths of these new students. While the Generation Z participants share a similarity of the Achiever and Empathy talent themes with previous generations, the talent themes of Restorative and Futuristic show up for the first time in the top five strengths, as compared to the top five of those previously recorded generations. Looking at the Restorative talent theme, as Seemiller and Grace (2017) mention, Generation Z has grown up around economic struggles and social justice movements, along with adaptation to new classroom technology, it makes sense that this generation would be good at handling and fixing problems, the core concept of the Restorative talent theme (Gallup, 2021). The Futuristic talent theme could be attributed back to Fry & Parker's (2018) point about Generation Z being the most diverse, racially and ethnically, which may be a lens into why this generation has aspirations of wanting a better future for all. Even with the sample being a very specific set of students, they are still members of Generation Z and thus can fit certain generalized specifications of the generation.

The least common talent theme in this study, Self-Assurance, may indicate that Generation Z students taking courses in colleges of agriculture are not fully comfortable handling their life and know they are making correct decisions (Gallup, 2021). Since Self-Assurance was also found to be an uncommon talent theme in other generations by the Gallup Organization (2014), it can be assumed that this theme has not been common due to cultural implications within the United States. As with Self-Assurance, the talent theme of Maximizer being the second least common is important for educators to note since this shows that Generation Z students, similar to the studied sample, may not focus on strengths to help reach excellence in various settings and may need encouragement to take an assignment or task to the next level.

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Table 3.

Ranked Differences of Sampled Generation Z Male (N = 195) and Female (N = 397) Students

Talent Themes	Domain	n (M)	% (M)	n (F)	% (F)
Achiever	E	55	28	127	32
Restorative	E	58	30	102	26
Strategic	S	48	25	83	21
Futuristic	S	38	19	86	22
Relator	R	38	19	81	20
Adaptability	R	47	24	75	19
Empathy	R	31	16	105	26
Harmony	R	33	17	77	19
Communication	I	40	21	70	18
Competition	I	49	25	59	15
Positivity	R	31	16	77	19
Individualization	R	33	17	73	18
Woo	I	37	19	37	19
Developer	R	31	16	72	18
Input	S	27	14	73	18
Learner	S	31	16	51	13
Includer	S	29	15	56	14
Responsibility	E	23	12	70	18
Analytical	S	35	18	29	7
Context	S	30	15	36	9
Activator	I	21	11	46	12
Ideation	S	27	14	39	10
Significance	I	27	14	33	8
Discipline	E	12	6	67	17
Intellection	S	18	9	43	11
Deliberative	E	18	9	40	10
Arranger	E	19	10	33	8
Connectedness	R	14	7	43	11
Consistency	E	13	7	47	12
Focus	E	17	9	33	8
Belief	E	14	7	32	8
Command	I	12	6	26	7
Maximizer	I	12	6	24	6
Self-Assurance	I	7	4	10	3

**Note.** The rank order of the table was calculated by adding the sum of n (M) and n (F) and then dividing by two.

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Table 4.

*Chi-Square Tests of Independence for Generation Z Male and Female College Students – One-or-More Talent Themes per Domain*

Group	Male		Female	
	1 or more	None	1 or more	None
Executing <sup>1</sup>	142	53	304	93
Influencing <sup>2</sup>	122	73	205	192
Relationship Building <sup>3</sup>	147	48	327	70
Strategic Thinking <sup>4</sup>	136	59	278	119

**Note.**

1.  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 0.992, p = .319, \text{Cramer's } V = .041$
2.  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 6.315, p = .012, \text{Cramer's } V = .103$
3.  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 3.996, p = .046, \text{Cramer's } V = .082$
4.  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 0.003, p = .944, \text{Cramer's } V = .003$

Table 5.

*Chi-Square Tests of Independence for Generation Z Male and Female College Students – Two-or-More Talent Themes per Domain*

Group	Male		Female	
	2 or more	None	2 or more	None
Executing <sup>1</sup>	64	131	166	231
Influencing <sup>2</sup>	62	133	98	299
Relationship Building <sup>3</sup>	90	105	196	201
Strategic Thinking <sup>4</sup>	82	113	119	278

**Note.**

1.  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 4.452, p = .035, \text{Cramer's } V = .087$
2.  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 3.352, p = .067, \text{Cramer's } V = .075$
3.  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 0.542, p = .462, \text{Cramer's } V = .03$
4.  $\chi^2 = (1, N = 592) = 8.505, p = .004, \text{Cramer's } V = .12$

Looking at the differences between the top five talent themes between males and females within the studied sample, three of the five are the same, Achiever, Restorative, and Strategic. Females in the study had the Empathy and Futuristic talent themes in their top five, which mimicked the talent theme trend for the entire population in this study. At the same time, males did not follow the same general trend and had Competition and Adaptability in their top five. However, these two themes were within the overall top ten for the participants, showing that they were still relatively common in the study's female participants. Along with comparing the individual talent themes for males and females in the study, it is also important to notice that males are significantly more likely to have at least one talent theme in the influencing domain and two talent themes in the Strategic Thinking domain compared to females.

Between the sampled Generation Z students in college of agriculture classes and students in other generations in higher education (broadly) as of 2014, the only similarities in the top five were sharing Achiever and Strategic talent themes (Gallup, 2014). Since both studies were looking

solely at students in college/higher education, the Achiever talent theme being seen most frequently could be attributed to students reaching this academic level due to rising expectations of incoming college students globally. The Strategic talent theme being common may explain why many students in academia are prone to discover alternative ways to find solutions to issues (Gallup, 2021). One drastically different aspect was that Responsibility and Learner were second and third, respectively, for the Gallup Organization's 2014 study, while they were sixteenth and eighteenth for this participants in this study. This could emphasize a shift in Generation Z students in colleges of agriculture wanting to see outcomes instead of enjoying the learning process and not being as committed to certain values that would keep them from looking toward change in the future. On the topic of the future, there was also a shift in how common the Futuristic talent theme was. In this study, Futuristic was fifth, while in Gallup's study, this same talent theme was seventeenth. This may be because of the flip from being committed to psychological values and being more invested in the future. Even though the Gallup (2014) study looked

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at students in higher education on a broad scale and not limited to a specific generation and a specific sample, the comparisons are important to highlight because it presents a shift from older generations to a newer one.

### Summary

Overall, it is recommended that this information be used to understand the parallels and differences between Generation Z students taking leadership courses in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at the University of Florida to other generations of students that educators may be more familiar with, and the studied sample of Generation Z males to Generation Z females. Since this study could be used as a tool to adjust teaching styles in agricultural courses and observe how Generation Z students in those classes can be taught and developed for future success, it is also necessary to look at what talent theme trends these student participants do not align with as frequently.

The recommendation for agricultural educators is to utilize this information in adapting the curriculum and strategies to make sure that the learning strategies match this generation's strengths, especially leadership courses in colleges of agriculture. Educators should consider providing external motivation and praise to Generation Z students to keep them on task, which may be a necessity and stem from this study's sample of Generation Z students' least common talent theme of Self-Assurance. With this sample of Generation Z students' talents, additional thought may be put into the curriculum based on decision-making and self-advocacy, again attributed to the lesser frequency of Self-Assurance as a talent.

The addition of Empathy, as well as other relationship building talents, indicates that there is more room for emotions and care for others among students enrolled in our current college of agriculture leadership classrooms. It is important to think through emotional implications, and potential triggers, that students may have that might have been lesser of an issue with previous students. Consider reevaluating some activities and course inclusions that may bring a higher emotional response for validity and inclusion. Additionally, since Generation Z students have been found to work well both as individuals and in groups, assignments and projects can have varying modalities. As teamwork and team-based classes are becoming more prevalent in agricultural education curricula, it is important to note that generationally and based on talent indicators, group work may not be jubilantly received. It is imperative to draw connections to the outcome of the learning rather than the process due to the decrease in the Learner talent. As we continue to empower our students with self-awareness, it is important to note each student's uniqueness in the classroom through assessments like Clifton Strengths. Students in our classrooms have experienced a unique set of circumstances that have impacted their development, and we must not lose sight of the individuality of each student and the stories that make up our classrooms.

Several topics could be used for future research, including first looking at Generation Z students on a broader scale to be able to make more generalized assumptions

about the generation. Additionally, looking to add in the younger side of Generation Z, who are not yet in college, colloquially referred to as "Little Zs" to understand the whole generation. Other research could focus on the global aspect of students at traditional college age and see if the rest of the world mirrors the Clifton Strengths trends noted in this study. Also, looking at differences based on race, or the intersectionality of identities, to see how that may or may not relate to differences in talent theme trends could be an important piece to examine further. Finally, comparing the differences between Generation Z college students taking courses in colleges of agriculture to both students not taking or a part of colleges of agriculture or non-student individuals in Generation Z, in general, would be a future topic that would help to see if the trends are consistent based on the results from this study.

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