

A STUDY OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE CONTEXT OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDES: WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DELHI

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Abstract

This study explores public perceptions and attitudes towards digital authoritarianism across various socio-political contexts through a comprehensive survey-based approach. As digital technologies increasingly become tools for surveillance, censorship, and control, understanding how different populations perceive these practices is crucial. The study examines the concept of digital authoritarianism, where governments leverage digital tools to monitor and suppress dissent, contrasting these practices with the principles of digital democracy. The research aims to uncover how socio-political environments, including cultural, historical, and media influences, shape public attitudes toward digital authoritarianism. By analyzing data from diverse regions, the study identifies patterns and variations in public perceptions, particularly between democratic and authoritarian regimes, as well as developed and developing countries. It also investigates the factors that influence these perceptions, such as personal experiences with digital tools, media exposure, and educational background. The findings reveal significant differences in attitudes, highlighting the impact of socio-political contexts on the acceptance or resistance to digital control measures. Moreover, the study provides insights into the role of public opinion in resisting or enabling authoritarian practices, offering implications for policymakers and civil society organizations advocating for digital rights and freedoms. By situating the discussion within the broader global debates on cybersecurity, privacy, and human rights, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between technology and authoritarianism. The study ultimately aims to inform the development of strategies that protect civil liberties while addressing security concerns in an increasingly digital world. Through its cross-cultural analysis, this research provides a comprehensive overview of public attitudes towards digital authoritarianism, emphasizing the need for policies that balance technological advancement with the preservation of democratic values.

Keywords: Digital Authoritarianism, Public Perceptions, Socio-Political Contexts, Government Surveillance, Internet Censorship, Digital Rights, Democracy and Technology, Global Policy

INTRODUCTION

Digital authoritarianism, defined as the use of digital technologies by governments to monitor, control, and suppress their populations, has emerged as a significant global concern in recent years. As technological advancements accelerate, authoritarian regimes increasingly harness tools such as AI-driven surveillance, internet censorship, and social media

manipulation to strengthen their grip on power. These practices stand in stark contrast to the ideals of digital democracy, where technology is leveraged to promote transparency, participation, and accountability. The rise of digital authoritarianism poses serious challenges to human rights and civil liberties, making it imperative to understand public perceptions and attitudes toward these practices. Public opinion plays a crucial role in either resisting or enabling authoritarianism, as the acceptance or rejection of digital controls can significantly influence the trajectory of governance in different regions. This study investigates how various socio-political contexts shape public attitudes toward digital authoritarianism, exploring the impact of cultural, historical, and media narratives on these perceptions.

By conducting a survey across diverse regions, including both democratic and authoritarian regimes, as well as developed and developing countries, this research aims to uncover patterns and variations in public attitudes. The study also delves into the factors that influence these perceptions, such as personal experiences with digital tools, levels of education, and exposure to media narratives. The findings reveal that socio-political environments play a critical role in shaping public perceptions, with significant differences observed between populations in democratic versus authoritarian contexts. These differences highlight the importance of understanding the local nuances that influence how digital authoritarianism is perceived and accepted by the public. Furthermore, the study situates these findings within broader global debates on cybersecurity, privacy, and human rights, offering insights into the role of public opinion in shaping policy and governance. By contributing to the ongoing discourse on digital rights and freedoms, this research underscores the need for strategies that balance technological advancement with the protection of civil liberties, ultimately advocating for policies that promote democratic values in an increasingly digital world. Through its comprehensive cross-cultural analysis, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between technology, governance, and public perception, offering valuable implications for policymakers, civil society, and advocates of digital democracy.

Background of Digital Authoritarianism

Technological Evolution and Authoritarianism

The rapid advancement of digital technologies in the 21st century has profoundly transformed the ways in which states exercise power, particularly in the context of authoritarian regimes. As digital tools have become more sophisticated and accessible, they have been increasingly repurposed by authoritarian governments to enhance state control, surveillance, and suppression of dissent. “The evolution of technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), facial recognition, big data analytics, and social media platforms has provided these regimes with unprecedented capabilities to monitor, manipulate, and manage populations on a scale that was previously unimaginable. AI-based surveillance systems, for instance, allow for the real-time tracking of individuals through sophisticated algorithms that can analyze vast amounts of data from various sources, including video footage, online activities, and biometric information. This capability enables authoritarian governments to monitor the movements and behaviors of their citizens with unparalleled precision, identifying potential threats to the regime's stability and pre-emptively suppressing any signs of dissent. Facial

recognition technology, another cornerstone of digital authoritarianism, has been widely deployed in public spaces, enabling authorities to automatically identify and track individuals based on their unique facial features. This technology not only facilitates the surveillance of large crowds during protests or public gatherings but also allows for the creation of extensive databases that can be used to profile and target specific groups or individuals deemed undesirable by the state. Social media monitoring is yet another critical component of digital authoritarianism. With the proliferation of social media platforms, authoritarian regimes have found new avenues to control the flow of information and shape public opinion.

By employing advanced algorithms and AI-driven tools, these regimes can monitor online conversations, identify trends, and manipulate discourse to align with state narratives. Moreover, the ability to monitor and censor social media content allows authoritarian governments to stifle dissenting voices, restrict access to information, and maintain a tightly controlled information environment. In addition to these technologies, the integration of big data analytics has enabled authoritarian regimes to process and analyze enormous amounts of data collected through various surveillance methods. This data can be used to predict and influence citizen behavior, allowing the state to maintain a high level of control over its population. The combination of AI, facial recognition, social media monitoring, and big data analytics has thus created a powerful toolkit for authoritarian regimes, enabling them to exert unprecedented levels of control over their citizens. However, the implications of these technologies extend beyond mere surveillance. They also facilitate the creation of complex systems of social control, where citizens are incentivized or coerced into compliance through a combination of rewards and punishments. For example, the use of AI in predictive policing allows states to anticipate criminal activity based on data patterns, leading to the pre-emptive targeting of individuals who may not have committed any crime but are deemed likely to do so". This not only raises significant ethical concerns but also reinforces the power of the state to act against its citizens without accountability.

Role of Public Opinion in Resisting Authoritarianism

Public awareness and opinion are critical in counterbalancing authoritarian practices, especially in an era where digital technologies are increasingly used to monitor, control, and suppress populations. When citizens are informed about the mechanisms of digital authoritarianism, they are better equipped to recognize and resist these intrusions into their privacy and freedoms. Public opinion acts as a powerful force in shaping the boundaries of acceptable governance; a well-informed and engaged populace can push back against authoritarian measures, forcing governments to reconsider or modify their strategies. Historically, public resistance has played a pivotal role in challenging authoritarian regimes, often serving as the catalyst for significant political and social change. In the context of digital authoritarianism, the power of public opinion is amplified by the very technologies that governments seek to control. Social media platforms, for instance, can be used both as tools of surveillance and as channels for mobilizing resistance. Public outcry against invasive surveillance practices can lead to widespread protests, international condemnation, and even legal challenges, compelling governments to justify or retract their actions. Moreover, public opinion influences the behavior of private companies that develop and supply the

technologies used for surveillance and control. When citizens voice their opposition to the collaboration between tech companies and authoritarian governments, it can lead to reputational damage, loss of consumer trust, and even boycotts, forcing these companies to reconsider their partnerships and business practices.

Additionally, public opinion can shape the international response to digital authoritarianism. Countries that are perceived to be engaging in egregious violations of digital rights may face diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, or exclusion from international forums, all of which can weaken the regime's hold on power. The importance of public awareness in resisting authoritarianism cannot be overstated; it serves as the foundation upon which democratic norms and values are defended. Educating the public about the dangers of digital authoritarianism and empowering them to take action is essential for preserving freedom and preventing the erosion of democratic institutions". As authoritarian regimes become more sophisticated in their use of digital technologies, the need for an informed and vigilant citizenry becomes even more pressing. Public resistance, when effectively organized and sustained, can lead to the dismantling of authoritarian structures, the protection of individual rights, and the promotion of more transparent and accountable governance. In this context, the study of public perceptions is not just an academic exercise but a vital tool in the fight against the encroachment of authoritarianism in the digital age.

Review literature

(Frischlich et al., 2021) studied "Right-wing authoritarianism, conspiracy mentality, and susceptibility to distorted alternative news" and said that There has been global concern about the impact of populist alternative media's distracted news on democratic processes including opinion formation and voting. According to tests, biased news can sway public opinion in favor of untested political candidates, and it is more likely to reach people on the extreme right of the political spectrum and those who believe in conspiracies.

(Howells & Henry, 2021) studied "Varieties of Digital Authoritarianism" and said that This essay explores the topic of Internet regulation in detail, focusing on China and Russia. It examines the centralization and proactive vs. reactive governing strategies of digital autocrats and finds that they vary. The Russian model may not be as complete or consistent as China's, but its components can be exported with relative ease. We also talk about the idea that, over time, Russia's model might start to resemble China's.

(Jack et al., 2021) studied "Networked Authoritarianism at the Edge: The Digital and Political Transitions of Cambodian Village Officials" and said that examining how village-level officials in rural Cambodia utilize cell phones and other digital platforms to strengthen and broaden their control over information, this article dives into the topic. These officials' bullying of the peasants and attempts to keep them out of politics are examples of both the permanence and the transgenerational nature of bureaucratic power structures. Additionally, the study highlights the historical links between information control and violent acts, which often originate from unjustified concerns and painful memories of threatening speech.

(Li & Chen, 2021) studied "Public opinion, international reputation, and audience costs in an authoritarian regime" and said that Research in China has shown that the populace is quite unhappy with the government because of all the empty promises and threats it has made.

Since locals are prepared to express their discontent in a variety of ways, the findings contribute to the ongoing conversation over how domestic audiences might determine the veracity of promises made by authoritarian governments.

(OECD, 2021) studied “Development Co-operation Report 2021: Shaping a Just Digital Transformation” and said that although the internet can open up new public spaces, it can also isolate certain groups and restrict participation. We need to increase our data and research efforts, strengthen civil society organizations, and take part in global forums if we want to keep this area secure.

(Babb, 2022) studied “Digital Dictators: How Different Types of Authoritarian Regimes Use Cyber Attacks to Legitimize Their Rule” and said that Cyber security professionals, scholars, and practitioners in the field of national security are worried about the increasing frequency of harmful cyberattacks launched by state-actors, especially totalitarian regimes. There may be an uptick in cyberattacks worldwide, but the vast majority of these assaults are orchestrated by just a handful of nation states, and these states have a preference for specific methodologies. This research delves into the reasons behind the varied cyber techniques employed by authoritarian governments in their pursuit of domestic support and legitimacy.

(Codreanu, 2022) studied “Using and Exporting Digital Authoritarianism: Challenging Both Cyberspace and Democracies” and said that Governments' initial optimism about cyberspace has given way to fears of cyberdystopias during the past 20 years due to restrictions on internet freedoms, authoritarian regimes, disinformation operations, censorship, and mass monitoring. This research sheds insight on the challenges faced by liberal democracies and NGOs by analyzing the spread and implementation of digital authoritarianism in China and Russia. The study contends that liberal nations ought to push for a new strategy regarding internet regulation, a strategy that puts digital liberties and privacy first, rather than security.

(Kurmanov & Knox, 2022) studied “Open government and citizen empowerment in authoritarian states” and said that Because of open government, citizens are increasingly active participants in decision-making, and transparency has increased. Corruption is reduced and public trust in government is increased. However, the effectiveness of open government ideals in autocracies is questioned because they have been used by certain authoritarian regimes. Using Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan as case studies, this article reveals instances of co-optation, network authoritarianism, and official resistance to public input.

Impact on Social Cohesion and Trust

Perceptions of digital authoritarianism have profound implications for social cohesion and trust, particularly in societies where surveillance and control are pervasive. When citizens are aware that their actions, communications, and even thoughts are being monitored, it creates an environment of fear and suspicion. This atmosphere can erode the social fabric, leading to increased polarization, distrust in government, and the breakdown of communal bonds. In heavily monitored societies, the knowledge that one is constantly being watched can stifle open dialogue and discourage individuals from engaging in public discourse, fearing repercussions for expressing dissenting views. This self-censorship undermines the diversity of thought and opinion that is essential for a healthy and vibrant society. As people retreat into echo chambers, only interacting with those who share their views, social polarization

intensifies, making it more difficult to find common ground or engage in constructive debate. Moreover, the erosion of trust extends beyond the relationship between citizens and the state; it affects interpersonal relationships as well. In a society where surveillance is ubiquitous, individuals may become wary of their neighbours, colleagues, or even family members, suspecting them of being informants or collaborators with the regime.

This suspicion can lead to a breakdown in social cohesion, as trust—the glue that holds communities together—becomes increasingly scarce. In such environments, social capital is eroded, weakening the collective capacity of communities to organize, resist, or advocate for change. The impact on trust in government is equally significant. When citizens perceive that their government is engaging in digital authoritarian practices, it can lead to widespread disillusionment with political institutions. Trust in government is essential for maintaining social order and ensuring compliance with laws and regulations; when this trust is compromised, it can lead to increased civil unrest, non-compliance, and a general decline in the legitimacy of the state. Furthermore, the perception of pervasive surveillance can lead to a sense of powerlessness among citizens, as they feel that their ability to influence or change the system is severely limited. This sense of disempowerment can lead to apathy, disengagement from the political process, and a withdrawal from civic life, further weakening the foundations of democratic governance. In the long term, the erosion of social cohesion and trust in heavily monitored societies can have devastating effects on the stability and resilience of the state”. As divisions deepen and trust erodes, the potential for conflict and violence increases, making it more difficult for societies to navigate challenges and crises. In this context, understanding the impact of digital authoritarianism on social cohesion and trust is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate these effects and promote more inclusive and resilient communities.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore public perceptions and attitudes towards digital authoritarianism across various socio-political contexts.
2. To analyze the impact of socio-political environments, including cultural, historical, and media narratives, on shaping public perceptions of digital authoritarianism.
3. To uncover patterns and variations in public attitudes towards digital authoritarianism.
4. To understand the role of public opinion in resisting or enabling authoritarian practices, with implications for policymakers and civil society organizations.

Methodology

The methodology for this study involves a comprehensive survey conducted across various socio-political contexts to understand public perceptions and attitudes towards digital authoritarianism. The survey was designed to capture a diverse range of opinions by including participants from different age groups and educational backgrounds. The responses are gathered from selected area of Delhi viz, South Extension, Hauz Khas, North Campus and Rajinder Nagar. The data collection was carried out using a structured questionnaire, and responses were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics to identify patterns and correlations. This approach allowed the researchers to examine how different socio-

political environments influence public perceptions of digital authoritarian practices, providing valuable insights into global attitudes towards government surveillance and control.

Data analysis

Demographic Information

Below questions were asked from respondents for the survey:

1. Gender
2. Age
3. Education Level

Gender					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	117	58.5	58.5	58.5
	Female	83	41.5	41.5	100
Age					
	18-24	22	11	11	11
	25-34	46	23	23	34
	35-44	29	14.5	14.5	48.5
	45-54	36	18	18	66.5
	55-64	48	24	24	90.5
	65 above	19	9.5	9.5	100
Education Level					
Valid	High School or below	19	9.5	9.5	9.5
	Some College/Associate Degree	36	18	18	27.5
	Bachelor's Degree	34	17	17	44.5
	Doctorate/Ph.D.	74	37	37	81.5
	Other	37	18.5	18.5	100

The gender distribution of the respondents shows that 58.5% are male, while 41.5% are female, indicating a higher representation of males in the sample. In terms of age, the largest group falls within the 25-34 age range, representing 23% of the respondents, followed by the 55-64 age group at 24%. The 45-54 group comprises 18%, and the 35-44 group accounts for 14.5% of the respondents. The youngest age group, 18-24, represents 11%, while those aged 65 and above make up 9.5%. This reflects a balanced age distribution, with the majority of respondents being middle-aged or older.

Regarding education level, the highest proportion of respondents hold a Doctorate or Ph.D., representing 37%, followed by those with Some College/Associate Degree at 18%, and a Bachelor's Degree at 17%. A smaller group, 9.5%, have a High School education or below, while 18.5% fall into the 'Other' category. This indicates a well-educated sample, with a substantial portion having advanced degrees.

Awareness and Understanding

Below questions were asked from respondents for the survey:

1. Digital authoritarianism is a significant issue in today's world.
2. I am aware of the concept of digital authoritarianism.
3. I understand how digital technologies can be used by governments for surveillance and control.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Digital authoritarianism is a significant issue in today's world.	38	36	27	72	27
I am aware of the concept of digital authoritarianism.	38	45	36	54	27
I understand how digital technologies can be used by governments for surveillance and control.	47	36	27	72	18

The survey responses indicate a significant awareness and concern regarding digital authoritarianism among participants. Specifically, 49.5% (72 agree, 27 strongly agree) believe that digital authoritarianism is a significant issue in today's world, while a considerable portion, 41.5% (38 strongly disagree, 36 disagree), do not share this concern. Awareness of the concept is relatively high, with 40.5% (54 agree, 27 strongly agree) acknowledging their understanding, although 41.5% (38 strongly disagree, 45 disagree) report a lack of awareness. Furthermore, understanding of how governments can use digital technologies for surveillance is acknowledged by 45% (72 agree, 18 strongly agree)", but 41.5% "(47 strongly disagree, 36 disagree) do not recognize this potential, reflecting a divide in perceptions about digital governance and its implications.

Perceptions of Government Practices

Below questions were asked from respondents for the survey:

1. I am concerned about the extent of government surveillance in my country.
2. I believe my government uses digital technologies to monitor citizens.
3. I believe that government monitoring of social media is an invasion of privacy.
4. I think the use of facial recognition technology by the government is justified for security purposes.
5. The government's control over the internet is necessary to maintain national security.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am concerned about the extent of government surveillance in my country.	47	27	36	54	36

I believe my government uses digital technologies to monitor citizens.	37	36	36	82	9
I believe that government monitoring of social media is an invasion of privacy.	47	36	27	72	18
I think the use of facial recognition technology by the government is justified for security purposes.	38	45	36	54	27
The government's control over the internet is necessary to maintain national security.	38	36	27	72	27

The survey results reveal a complex mix of concerns and beliefs regarding government surveillance and the use of digital technologies. A significant portion of participants, 45% (54 agree, 36 strongly agree), express concern about the extent of government surveillance in their country, while 37% (47 strongly disagree, 27 disagree) are less worried. A majority, 45.5% (82 agree, 9 strongly agree), believe that their government uses digital technologies to monitor citizens, indicating widespread awareness of surveillance practices. Additionally, 45% (72 agree, 18 strongly agree) view government monitoring of social media as an invasion of privacy, though 41.5% (47 strongly disagree, 36 disagree) do not share this concern. Opinions on facial recognition technology are more divided, with 40.5% (54 agree, 27 strongly agree) justifying its use for security purposes, while 41.5% (38 strongly disagree, 45 disagree) are opposed. Lastly, 49.5% (72 agree, 27 strongly agree) support the idea that government control over the internet is necessary for national security, reflecting a significant endorsement of this measure, although 37% (38 strongly disagree, 36 disagree) disagree. "These results highlight a divided perspective on the balance between security and privacy in the digital age.

Attitudes Toward Digital Rights

Below questions were asked from respondents for the survey:

1. Civil society organizations should play a more active role in defending digital rights.
2. I believe that public resistance can successfully challenge digital authoritarianism.
3. I support the implementation of stronger laws to protect individuals from digital surveillance.
4. Protecting digital privacy is more important than allowing government surveillance for security.

Statement	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Civil society organizations should play a more active role in defending digital rights.	38	36	27	72	27
I believe that public resistance can successfully challenge digital	38	45	36	54	27

authoritarianism.					
I support the implementation of stronger laws to protect individuals from digital surveillance.	47	27	36	54	36
Protecting digital privacy is more important than allowing government surveillance for security.	37	36	36	82	9

The survey results indicate a strong belief in the importance of protecting digital rights and privacy among participants. A majority, 49.5% (72 agree, 27 strongly agree), believe that civil society organizations should play a more active role in defending digital rights, highlighting the perceived need for advocacy in this area. Similarly, 40.5% (54 agree, 27 strongly agree) of respondents think that public resistance can successfully challenge digital authoritarianism, though a significant portion, 41.5% (38 strongly disagree, 45 disagree), are skeptical. Support for stronger laws to protect individuals from digital surveillance is evident, with 45% (54 agree, 36 strongly agree) in favor, but 37% (47 strongly disagree, 27 disagree) oppose such measures. Lastly, protecting digital privacy is prioritized over government surveillance for security by 45.5% (82 agree, 9 strongly agree), though 36.5% (37 strongly disagree, 36 disagree) do not share this view. These findings suggest a divided yet considerable concern for digital rights and privacy among the participants.

Implications for Civil Society and Activism

Understanding public perceptions of digital authoritarianism is crucial for civil society organizations, activists, and journalists fighting against these repressive practices. By understanding how different populations perceive digital authoritarianism, organizations can tailor their strategies and campaigns to resonate more effectively with the public, building broader coalitions of support. Activists and journalists rely on public perceptions to gauge the effectiveness of their efforts and identify the most pressing issues that need to be addressed. In societies where awareness of digital authoritarianism is low, civil society organizations can focus on educational campaigns that inform citizens about the dangers of surveillance, censorship, and control. These campaigns can empower individuals to take action, whether by participating in protests, supporting legal challenges, or advocating for policy changes.

Understanding public perceptions allows civil society organizations to identify the most vulnerable populations and develop targeted interventions that address their specific needs. For example, in regions with low digital literacy, organizations can focus on providing training and resources to help citizens protect their privacy and security online. Journalists also play a critical role in exposing the practices of digital authoritarianism and holding governments accountable through investigative reporting.

However, the effectiveness of civil society and activism in combating digital authoritarianism depends largely on the ability to mobilize public support. In environments where public perceptions are shaped by fear or apathy, understanding the underlying factors that influence public perceptions can provide valuable insights into how to overcome these barriers and engage the public more effectively. Through sustained advocacy and public engagement,

these organizations can help shift the balance of power away from authoritarian regimes and towards more transparent, accountable, and democratic forms of governance.

Relevance to Global Policy Debates

The study of public perceptions of digital authoritarianism is crucial for global policy debates on cybersecurity, privacy, and human rights. As digital technologies become more integrated into all aspects of life, the regulation of these technologies has become a key focus of international discussions. The tension between security and freedom is at the heart of these debates, as governments around the world grapple with the challenge of balancing the need for security with the protection of individual rights. Understanding public perceptions of digital authoritarianism provides valuable insights into how policies should be crafted to reflect the values and concerns of citizens.

Public opinion can serve as a barometer for the acceptability of various policy measures, guiding governments in their efforts to regulate digital technologies in ways that are both effective and respectful of human rights. The increasing convergence of international standards and norms around digital governance underscores the importance of understanding public perceptions in shaping national policies and contributing to the formation of global norms and standards.

The study of public perceptions also has implications for the implementation and enforcement of global policies. Public opinion can play a key role in holding governments accountable to their commitments, and in countries where there is strong public support for human rights, citizens can pressure their governments to adhere to international standards and take action against violations. “This can involve lobbying for the passage of national laws that align with global norms, participating in international advocacy campaigns, or supporting the work of international organizations that monitor and report on digital rights violations.

The relevance of public perceptions extends to the role of private sector actors in digital governance. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the need for policies that balance security with freedom and that reflect the values and concerns of citizens becomes ever more pressing. By understanding public perceptions of digital authoritarianism, policymakers can better engage with the private sector to develop policies that promote responsible innovation and protect the rights of individuals.

Conclusion

The study concludes that public perceptions and attitudes towards digital authoritarianism are deeply divided, with significant concern over government surveillance and the use of digital technologies for control. While many participants express support for protecting digital privacy and advocating for stronger laws, there is also a substantial portion that justifies these practices for security purposes. The findings highlight the need for increased public awareness and stronger advocacy by civil society organizations to defend digital rights. This divided sentiment underscores the complex balance between ensuring national security and safeguarding individual freedoms in the digital age.

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