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### You are what you wear: a conceptual exploration of clothing and the body in identity formation

Kayla Holliday  
*Vassar College*

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Kayla Holliday

*You Are What You Wear:*

*A Conceptual Exploration of Clothing and the Body in Identity Formation*

April 26, 2019

Media Studies Senior Project

Colleen Cohen

This photo installation is an exploration of fashion and identity. These photographs are portraits of student on campus photographed in their everyday clothing. I asked each model to construct a visual representation of their identity through their clothing for the photo shoot. By asking each model to dress with the intention of expression, the clothing worn is no longer merely utilitarian, it becomes fashion. It is a fashion statement in which the clothing operates as a system of signs to communicate our intrinsic desires to the outside world in a tangible way. Fashion is interwoven in our identities as an extension of our bodily self. In each portrait, I have extracted the body of my models from their clothing to position the clothing as the subject. By abstracting the human image through making the body disappear, I am deconstructing the role of clothing as a supplement to the body and instead creating a vision of an alternative body that has the power to participate in a dialectic with an imagined audience about how one uses the world to conceptualize their definition of self through dress. Through this conceptual visual exploration, I am interrogating how fashion functions as a medium to express our intrinsic construction of *self*. What does our clothing *say* when the body disappears?

By extracting the body of the models from each photo, I have rendered the models anonymous so that the clothes are privileged as the primary source of representation. The presence of the body is hinted at but not fully revealed. The clothes appear empty, but at the same time, alive. This photography installation imagines a fantastical world where we literally are what we wear. Other artists have used similar imagery to “transgress gender boundaries and stereotypes.”<sup>1</sup> My project is an extension of this kind of work, but I want to explore

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Felshin, Clothing as Subject (Art Journal 54, no. 1, 1995), 22.

what it will mean for these clothes to come to life and live within a space in the absence of the body. “The body's absence also demands that we read between the lines and examine the meaning of what is not represented—the conditions of representation it.”<sup>2</sup> Our conception of fashion is so linked to the body that we understand clothing through an understanding of the body itself. By making the body disappear, I imagine an identity conceptualized through fashion, exposing our inherent affinity to conceptualize identity through materiality.

We understand clothing as a tool of performativity, but within the hierarchy of identity construction, fashion is often regarded as a frivolous accessory to our identity. I am disrupting this hierarchy by deconstructing the notion that fashion represents the superficiality of self. Fashion is an expression of our most intrinsic desires to define who we will be in the world. During the formative years of development “dress-up is a fundamental form of play and identity formation that most children engage in, [but] it is rarely treated seriously. Its grown-up equivalent—fashion—is similarly devalued.”<sup>3</sup> As children, dressing up gives us a sense of belonging in the world when we do not fully understand who we are. The act of dressing up exposes how we conceptualize and categorize the world through dress. Children emulate the secure sense of self in adults and try to embody this by dressing up. These practices carry on through adulthood because fashion typifies our identity visually. It grounds our conception of identity in reality because of the tangible nature of clothing. Societal norms mandate that we must wear clothes to be deemed acceptable in the public sphere, so to regain our autonomy back from this source of societal control, the action of choosing what is worn is powerful. It becomes a visual representation of everything one

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<sup>2</sup> Felshin, *Clothing as Subject*, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Kyra Hunting, *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 116.

believes themselves to be and it allows the fluidity to explore that notion of the self on a day to day basis. When choosing what to wear, we exert our autonomy over our lived experiences which society attempts to use to categorize our identities. Dressing is a way of reclaiming one's control over the perception of the onlooker so that we define our own identities rather than our lived experience defining it for us.

Clothing transforms our bodies into a continuous sensory experience with the world. To show ourselves, is to be seen. To be seen is to participate in an optical sensibility. "Our relationship with the world is a sensible life: an uninterrupted production of sensible realities made of sensations, odors, and images."<sup>4</sup> We understand the world through a continuous relationship to stimuli. The basis of *being* is encompassed in the continual action and reaction of our bodies to the sensory experiences provided by the world. To *be* is to live and to live is to *be* in the world. Our conception of the body is a reference for our conception of the world. We exist in the world through the body because it is the medium that acts upon and reacts to the sensible. "In comparison with the rest of the world, man himself is a medium that acquires and gives the sensible back to the world; he gives back himself, his own image, his own appearance"<sup>5</sup> Coccia's idea of the uninterrupted exchange between the subject and the world provides a framework for how clothing mediates the body to express identity. The existence of clothing is predicated on the organic manifestation of the corporeal form. Without the body, clothing becomes obsolete. Clothing would not exist without the body, but the body holds no meaning without clothing because clothing transforms the body into an image. "A piece of clothing is first and foremost a body" because we are constructing an

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<sup>4</sup> Emanuele Coccia and Scott Alan Stuart. *Sensible Life: A Micro-ontology of the Image* (New York: Fordham University, 2016), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Coccia and Stuart, *Sensible Life: A Micro-ontology of the Image*, 84.

alternative anatomy out of the physical world. When these two bodies are conjoined the subject becomes an image because “it is always in the medium of this nonanatomical body that our anatomical body appears, makes itself seen and reveals itself.”<sup>6</sup> Because of this exchange of the sensory, when the subject present themselves as an image in the world, the world also accepts that image as a part of the world.

The representation of the body in the public sphere is the clothed body because the only body acceptable to participate in the world is the body that does not fully reveal itself. “In order to be absolutely recognizable, we mix with something that does not belong to us.”<sup>7</sup> Clothing does not exist naturally in the world, but it allows our natural bodies to exist more freely in the world. There is a paradoxical nature to clothing that alludes to the sacredness of the natural, unadorned form. There is a sacredness to the nude form that is too pure to be tainted by the outside gaze, so we use clothing to construct a shield that is believed to bring the gap between the physical form and the inner self. We must acquire a second materialized skin in order to grapple with the dissonance between our conception of the self that lives within that is identified as identity and the organic form in which our being manifest itself in this world. “An extrinsic portion of our body, which is made solely of images, is able to convey and express our soul, its psychology, its character, more than our anatomical body ever could.”<sup>8</sup> We borrow pieces of the world to conceptualize our own being. We do not have autonomy over the form our anatomical bodies take, but we can control the way they are adorned.

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<sup>6</sup> Coccia and Stuart, *Sensible Life: A Micro-ontology of the Image*, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Coccia and Stuart, *Sensible Life: A Micro-ontology of the Image*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Coccia and Stuart, *Sensible Life: A Micro-ontology of the Image*, 85.

Since our subjectivity is understood through the appropriation of an image by adorning the body with clothing, I want to transfer the consciousness of each subject into their clothing to create a counternarrative to scholarship that seeks to understand clothing in an interpretive sense. Instead, I am asking each outfit what they want to say by illuminating the ways in which we construct identity based on how clothing speaks to us. Clothing has been understood as a means of interpreting our identity, but I argue that clothes construct it. Without clothing, we would have no perceptible grounding in what identity *looks like*. Each article of clothing operates as a signifying unit. Barthes proposes a methodology to “discover a constant form” that uncovers how meaning is produced in clothing.

“first, we must be able to divide up the utterance of the signifier into spatial segments as reduced as possible, as if each utterance of Fashion were a chain whose links must be located; we must then compare these segments with one another, so as to determine according to which oppositions they produce different meanings.”<sup>9</sup>

Barthes asserts that there is a connection between the material item and the immaterial meaning embedded within it. This relationship entails a tri-dimensional pattern the signifier, the signified, and the sign. The signifier and signified belong to different categories and represent a relationship that is not equal but equivalent. Since the signifier and the signified will never resemble each other they cannot be equal, but they become equivalent because of the correlation that unites them. Working in conjunction they become a concrete entity, the sign. Barthes ask the question: “But which body is the Fashion garment to signify?” The body is a blank canvas and represents the material that is embedded with immaterial meaning through clothing. Clothing acts as the conduit for placing subjectivity onto the

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<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, *The fashion system*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 59.

body. Barthes provides a framework for signified body through Hegel. The human body exist in a “relation of signification with clothing; as pure sentience, the body cannot signify; clothing guarantees the passage from sentience to meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Clothing embeds meaning into the body, the result of this relationship is clothing as sign. “The body is taken in charge by an intelligible system of signs, and sentience is dissolved in the signifier” so that identity is born.<sup>11</sup>

By abstracting the body, I have replicated Barthes “ideal incarnate body” by creating an abstract form that lacks individuality. My visual representation of fashion as a medium “transform the real body and succeeds in making it signify Fashion’s ideal body.” Fashion’s ideal body for Barthes is the runway model’s body. I am situating clothing on a generic body by imagining the generality as absence rather than privileging the fashionable body normalized as the standard body through hegemony. This “deformed body” I have created, parallels the body of the model Barthes uses to theorize the relationship between the body and clothing. I have removed the body of each of my models so that they assume the role of Barthes cover girl without having to grapple with the paradoxical nature of her subjectivity outside of generic role she embodies in fashion photography and on the runway. The cover girl must assume this position, but I have imagined what it would look like if we destabilize our understanding of the bodies inherent link to clothing. By removing the body, I am creating the purest form. My photographs “essential function is not aesthetic, it is not a question of delivering a beautiful body, [they are] a pure form, which possess no attribute

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<sup>10</sup> Barthes, *The fashion system*, 258.

<sup>11</sup> Barthes, *The fashion system*, 260.

and by a sort of tautology, it refers to the garment itself...”<sup>12</sup> Through the white space that dislocates the body - signaling the ultimate generality - the meaning that is embedded in clothing comes to the forefront. The material quality that makes an article of clothing is arbitrary, but clothing becomes a sign through its interaction with the signified body. Once the signified is open to appropriation by society, it possesses the power to communicate through referential symbolism.

We project our identities onto the world through materials that exist in the world. Even though our mind is sovereign over our bodies, we still have the desire to use the material world to dress up the body in a way that alludes to the existence of the inner self by using signification to signal the congruency between the outward expression and the internal self. Our being in the world relies on our inherent desire to categorize our surroundings as a means to understanding them. “...by [getting dressed] we identify ourselves with a feature of the world; we make it a bearer of our own spirit, expecting that our own personality will emanate from this feature.”<sup>13</sup> Our bodies have reference in the real world through non organic materials. Clothing gives life to the body in a way that allows it the subjectivity needed to *be* in the world. Clothing represents the binding between the physical and metaphysical manifestations of the self. It signifies the symbiotic relationship between the subject and the world in which it occupies. One has no meaning without the other because the body is the corporal iteration of the soul in a world that is rooted in the physical. Clothing imitates the form of the body to ground the body in the real world but also to

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<sup>12</sup> Barthes, *The fashion system*, 259.

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establish the physical world as the place in which the corporal form is suited to inhabit. Clothing is not just made for the body; it is made for the body that lives in this reality. Clothing positions the body as a subject amongst objects in the world. The ability to imagine a self that extends beyond the physical body is a human's ability to conceptualize a version of the self whose characteristics are not inherent to all beings characterized as human. Clothing creates a subspecies that is self-defined by the wearer. The clothed body allows the subject the power to go beyond the question of what they are and engage in a dialogue with the world about who they are through materiality.

“For fashion was never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver, provocation of death through the woman, and bitter colloquy with decay whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter. That is fashion. And that is why she changes so quickly; she titillates death and is already something different, something new, as he casts about to crush her.”<sup>14</sup> Fashion does not obey the laws of the natural world. Fashion does not die. It is ever changing. It is immortal. It is always creating new references to building upon itself resulting in something perpetually new. Fashion as a second body occupies a space that the anatomical body never could. It allows for constant rebirth while the anatomical body lives one life. It is the ultimate medium because of the way in which it participates in the double logic of remediation being both immediate and hypermediated. Clothing is immediate in the way that our anatomical body and second body get conflated into a whole. The body is defective in presenting itself in the world when it is not clothed, so although the clothed body is a mediated body. That mediation is concealed because the two bodies become

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin and Rolf Tiedemann, *The arcades project* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999), 63.

inextricably linked in the manifestation of the end result, the image projected onto the world. On the contrary, clothing is hypermediate because it relies on the body to show itself in the real world. The body is always alluded to so even though the clothing is extending the body into the realm of technology the body never fully disappears. We experience the body through clothing. “The appeal to authenticity of experience is what brings the logic of immediacy and hypermediacy together”<sup>15</sup> An authentic sense of being is the driving force behind adornment. The complex relationship between clothes replacing the body but relying on it to have grounding brings me back to the question: what does clothing say when the body disappears?

Theorist Daniel Miller argues, “there is no true inner self...because if we remove the clothes there is no true inner core. The clothes [are] not superficial, they actually are what made us what we think we are.”<sup>16</sup> As we define ourselves and grapple with the idea of identity in the world, clothing is our only means of starting a conversation with society about who we are. It would be mentally taxing to present a disclaimer of how we perceive ourselves to everyone we encounter in the world, so clothing becomes a nonverbal language tool that fosters a dialogue with the subject and the outside world about their identity. Just as language can be deceptive, so can clothing. One can also use clothing in a subversive way to hide or reimage their true self because fashion is surrounded by specific connotations that have been informed by society through the media. Since media values the visual, clothing is used in media to symbolize identity tropes. The over exposure to these visual identity tropes

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<sup>15</sup> David J. Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding new media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press), 71.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 13.

due to the hypermediated world in which we live cause this iconography to become internalized so that when one is constructing their own identity, the act becomes a realignment of these cultural signifiers that is believed to allude to the ingenuity of the self. There is a false sense of uniqueness that we feel through fashion, “because clothing is...a densely coded system of signification that transmits psychological, sexual, and cultural messages.”<sup>17</sup> In reality, we (in America) are all operating within the same cultural context that provides a fashion language as the basis of all expression that manifested through dress. Before we interact with people orally, we dissect the way in which others adorn their bodies to make assumptions about sex, class, age, race, occupation, mood, sexual orientation, and tastes. We each patriciate in our own fashion dialect within this language.

Fashion has the ability to speak. The body is a medium that brings the mediatized reality into visibility. Clothing as an extension of the body gives way for a means to the bodies continuous disembodiment by transferring our consciousness through the body into our clothing and through the clothing into the real world. The corporeal body is the sacred holder of our identity, and clothing as a secondary body transcends the corporeal body’s limitations to fulfil our longing to be whole. Our body is the system of organs that defines our being in the world, but clothing is a technology that extends the way in which we are able to be. “One could say that every human body is made up of the set of existing organs and by additional faculty of incorporation of foreign bodies (the faculty of clothing) that allows for the recognition as one’s own (or as the extreme limits as one’s own body) a series of foreign bodies that do not participate in our own nature.”<sup>18</sup> The naked body fails to be

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<sup>17</sup> Felshin, *Clothing as Subject*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Coccia and Stuart, *Sensible Life: A Micro-ontology of the Image*, 89.

effective in harnessing the complexity our consciousness. Clothing is a means extending the body to assume the role of “I”. The imagination allows for the subject to assume subjectivity through clothing that mediates the self and presents our being as an image. This image possesses the consciousness found in the anatomical body to supplant a recognizable image of oneself onto oneself. This recognizability allows one to own this image as their identity because of its referential nature. Clothing reconfigures the body to imagine a sense of self.

“The concept of the person, the sense of self, the experience of being an individual, are radically different at different times and in different places, partly in relation to differences in clothing. In each case we have found that clothing plays a considerable and active part in constituting the particular experience of the self, in determining what the self is.”<sup>19</sup> There are identity signifiers so ingrained into our minds that they become naturalized so that fashion statements are processed on the subconscious level as a way for our brains to typify the world as well as a basis for the construction of our own sense of self. Theorist, Alison Lurie quotes Balzac’s *Daughter of Eve* where he describes fashion as a “continual manifestation of intimate thoughts, a language, a symbol” in her discussion of the language of clothes.<sup>20</sup> The act of getting dressed every day is one imagining what this conceptual notion of the self looks like in the material world. Lurie posits, “if clothing is language, it must have a vocabulary and a grammar...and within every language of clothes there are many different dialects and accents...” The same way in which we make language our own by tailoring the conventions of our speech to who we are, “each individual has his own stock of words and employs personal variations of tone and meaning” through their fashion choices

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<sup>19</sup> Miller, *Stuff*, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (Vintage, 1981), 205.

and the construction of an outfit as a whole.<sup>21</sup> Lurie discusses the chameleon as metaphor for how we change, adapt, or deceive the world through clothing. Fashion is a second skin that “contributes to extending the bodily I” so that it may act as a medium of communication.<sup>22</sup> Communication is indicative of two subjects, the sender and the receiver. The receiver is essential to the understanding of how we communicate through clothing because the perception of the outside world is inherent in one’s own choices of representation through dress. “There is the notion of the interaction between the individual and the “viewer” of the clothing or artifact. Thus, one introduces the idea that the wearer of the clothing, in effect, makes a statement that is then interpreted by the viewer. The interpretation may be true to the intention of the wearer, or perhaps it is clouded in the bias of the viewer. Nonetheless, fashion in this perspective is seen as an interaction between the wearer and the viewer. Just as with conversation, there is an exchange between the individuals, and there is a whole range of para-communication or background communication that goes on in parallel with the more open interaction.”<sup>23</sup> The exchange of information positions clothing as the medium.

We conceptualize the human and the consciousness through the body, so when the body is adorned with clothing, we are dressing our identities in a way that signifies our intrinsic definition of who we are. “Clothing as subject... parallels the contemporary cultural and academic interest in issues of identity. Central to the work of many cultural theorists is the idea that the self is no longer seen as something simply innate and biologically

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<sup>21</sup> Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 205.

<sup>22</sup> Leopoldina Fortunati, James E. Katz, and Raimonda Riccini, *Mediating the Human Body: Technology, Communication, and Fashion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 62.

<sup>23</sup> Fortunati, Katz, and Riccini, *Mediating the Human Body: Technology, Communication, and Fashion*, 94.

determined, rather it is considered a mutable reflection of sociality, a kind of repository of cultural”<sup>24</sup> We feels most *ourselves* when the outer shell encasing the body, *clothing*, reflects our most inward conception of self. “On the surface is found the clothing which may represent us and may reveal a truth about ourselves, but it also may lie. It is as though if we peeled off the outer layers we would finally get to the real self within.”<sup>25</sup> This conception of the real self is truly conceptualized through the outward construction of the identity. We understand who we are and who we are not through clothing from childhood. The fashion language is a reflexive system who relies on itself for meaning. We understand the implications of one article of clothing through its similarity or difference to another article of clothing. The miniscule differences in clothing that account for different ways that interpret reality are the reason why we are all able to participate in a fashion language but construct a unique dialogue that speaks the same language of the soul. When one assembles an outfit all of the different elements are at play to conjure up a dialogue that is unique, but referential enough to be interpreted as a real sign of identification.

I invited each of my models to imagine the rhetoric embedded in their outfits to uncover the desire that their clothing identifies. By dislocating the body, I am transferring the subjectivity thought to be possessed by the body into the clothing to attempt to hear its voice. I asked each of my models to ask their clothes the following questions: What is your intention? How do you interpret my reality? How does you express my identity? What are you trying to achieve? Who are you? Are you a visual representation of my identity? What do you want to say?

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<sup>24</sup> Nina Felshin, *Clothing as Subject*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel Miller, *Stuff*, 13.

Below are the narratives that create a textual landscape for the photographs I have created:

#### PHOTO 1.

I am constructed in direct relation to my body. The colors, silhouettes, and fabrics I wear depend on how they physically make me feel which then impacts how they mentally make me feel. If a pair of jeans don't fit right or a top feels itchy on my skin, I end up feeling terrible! The evolution of my style is a result of the evolution of my understanding of my body and my ability to respond to this sensibility -- which is constantly in flux. I tend to wear things that are oversized, and I love a good t-shirt. The t-shirts I wear are often a peek into my current pop culture/social media obsessions, and I (obnoxiously) use them as a way to outwardly communicate that "I know about something that might not be within the mainstream."

#### PHOTO 2.

My outfits vary from day do day; sometimes, I dress in a way that codes me as an athlete, and other days I dress in more everyday clothes. Often, my outfits are based on function and comfort, depending on what I need to do that day, and sometimes that means wearing an outfit that is easily transformable into something else. Though I love when I can dress in an outfit I think is cute just for that reason, and not for work or for practice, those days are rare. I tried to represent this in this outfit, wearing one of my favorite skirts which used to be my mother's, as well as one of my favorite rugby shirts. At the same time, I am wearing spandex under my skirt so when I got to practice that day, I just had to trade in the skirt for a pair of shorts and my outfit says "I'm was ready to go."

#### PHOTO 3.

Currently, I'm trying to move away from a long-standing habit of conflating beauty with showcasing sexualized parts of my body, and now I'm trying to figure out how to express myself in a way that doesn't center around my body. Fashion is one way I get to show myself to the world, and I want it to say something about my who I am while still complimenting my shape. Essentially, my fashion choices and personal style are how I want people to see me. When I'm choosing an outfit, I want it to look effortless and flattering. This outfit is simple: blue high waisted jeans to flatter my shape, the black cap-sleeve shirt is basic and sleek; it says "I'm easy-going, confident, and comfortable."

#### PHOTO 4.

I'm finally coming to an understanding of what my style is and this outfit is the closest I can get to representing it. I love earth tones, something comfortable but stylish, and gold accents. As a black woman, I'll always embody some physical aspect of this identity in my attire whether it be through earrings, head wraps, hair styles or prints. I'm pretty particular when it comes to my outfit choices and I use it as a mode of expression. I'd rarely wear something I don't think I truly connect with or I feel represents my current style and fashion interests. After having to wear a school uniform until starting here at Vassar, my style has become an important form of expressing myself that was denied to me for so long. It has taken me a while and a lot of trial and error to find my footing, but I think I've developed a solid idea of what my style entails. My outfit says I'm black, I'm confident, but I'm still evolving."

#### PHOTO 5.

Style, in my opinion, is all about one's identity-it's your opportunity to present yourself in whatever you feel best shows who you are. In my opinion, differentiating between fashion and style is very important. Fashion trends come and go, and are largely dependent on trends in society as a whole. Style, on the other hand, is personal and can either be stagnant or evolve in conjunction with how you evolve as a person. The leather jacket and jeans I'm wearing in the picture are comfortable and best depict my personal style. The best thing about this outfit is it can be worn pretty much anywhere- I can rock it to class or bring it out with dress boots at a nicer event. My outfit says "I am a singer."

PHOTO 1.



PHOTO 2.



PHOTO 3.



PHOTO 4.



PHOTO 5.



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