

On the Additive Properties of the Fat-Shattering Dimension

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Abstract—The properties of the VC-dimension under various compositions are well-understood, but this is much less the case for classes of continuous functions. In this paper, we show that a commonly used scale-sensitive dimension, V_γ , is much less well-behaved under Minkowski summation than its VC cousin, while the fat-shattering dimension retains some compositional similarity to the VC-dimension. As an application, we analyze the fat-shattering dimension of trigonometric functions and series.

I. INTRODUCTION

Combinatorial dimensions play a central role in learning theory, as they allow one to precisely characterize the learnable function classes [1], [2], [15], [20]. Unfortunately, in all but the simplest cases, these dimensions are quite difficult to compute exactly. Hence, it is useful to be able to estimate the combinatorial dimension of a complicated function family in terms of its simpler constituents.

In the case of binary-valued function classes, the relevant combinatorial parameter is the VC-dimension, which is fairly well-behaved under addition. In particular, suppose that $\mathcal{F}, \mathcal{G} : \Omega \rightarrow \{-1, 1\}$ are two concept classes and define $\mathcal{H} : \Omega \rightarrow \{-1, 1\}$ by

$$\mathcal{H} = \{\text{sgn}(f(x) + g(x)) : f \in \mathcal{F}, g \in \mathcal{G}\}.$$

Then [4], [12]

$$\text{VCdim}(\mathcal{H}) = O(\text{VCdim}(\mathcal{F}) + \text{VCdim}(\mathcal{G})). \quad (1)$$

Some lower bounds on the VC-dimension of compositions are also known [10], [11]. More generally, for $k \geq 2$, given any concept classes $\mathcal{F}_1, \mathcal{F}_2, \dots, \mathcal{F}_k$ and function $u : \{-1, 1\}^k \rightarrow \{-1, 1\}$, one can define the concept class $u(\mathcal{F}_1, \mathcal{F}_2, \dots, \mathcal{F}_k)$ as the set consisting of all functions $u(f_1, f_2, \dots, f_k) : \Omega \rightarrow \{-1, 1\}$ for

$$u(f_1, f_2, \dots, f_k)(x) = u(f_1(x), f_2(x), \dots, f_k(x)), \quad (2)$$

where $f_i \in \mathcal{F}_i$, $i = 1, 2, \dots, k$. Vidyasagar in [21] provides an upper bound on the VC-dimension of this composition class in terms of the dimensions of the individual concept classes.

Theorem 1 ([21]). *If $\text{VCdim}(\mathcal{F}_i) < \infty$ for all $i = 1, 2, \dots, k$, then there is a finite $\alpha = \alpha(k)$, depending only on k , such that*

$$\text{VCdim}(u(\mathcal{F}_1, \mathcal{F}_2, \dots, \mathcal{F}_k)) < \alpha \max_{i=1}^k \text{VCdim}(\mathcal{F}_i).$$

Real-valued functions admit various analogues of the VC-dimension, going by the general name of *scale-sensitive dimensions*. Intuitively, these incorporate a measure of “margin” or “scale” into their notion of shattering (a formal definition will be given below). Unlike VC-dimension, compositional properties for various scale-sensitive dimensions are far less well understood. In this paper, we explore this gap and study the additive properties of generalized versions of the VC-dimension for function classes. In Section IV, we show that some dimensions do not possess a property analogous to (1), while others are far more well-behaved under Minkowski summation — and even satisfy a generalized version of Theorem 1 [8]. Finally, in Section V we analyze the fat-shattering dimension of trigonometric functions and series.

II. RELATED WORK

Since the seminal work of [1], [2], it has been known that, modulo measure-theoretic technicalities, a class of continuous-valued functions admits distribution-free risk bounds if and only if its scale-sensitive dimension is finite at each scale. This generalizes the analogous characterization of PAC-learnable Boolean function classes as those having a finite VC-dimension [5]. Regarding the latter, one commonly encounters situations where a complicated function class is constructed by combining simpler hypotheses via basic operations; examples include neural networks [4] and boosting [12]. This was the primary motivation behind results such as (1), as well as those in this paper. A precursor to the scale-sensitive dimensions was Pollard’s *pseudo-dimension* $\text{Pdim}(\cdot)$ [18], which, while capable of providing simple upper bounds [17], is too crude to characterize distribution-free convergence. One way of computing $\text{Pdim}(\mathcal{F})$ is to calculate the VC-dimension of the

set of all mappings $(x, t) \mapsto \mathbb{1}_{\{f(x) > t\}}$, indexed by $f \in \mathcal{F}$ [20]. This characterization implies that $\text{Pdim}(\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}) \leq O(\text{Pdim}(\mathcal{F}) + \text{Pdim}(\mathcal{G}))$.

Other approaches to learning continuous-valued functions by examining their discretized behavior include [22], [23]. A powerful alternative framework for analyzing the complexity of continuous function classes is that of *Rademacher complexity* [3], [16]. We will not define here the Rademacher complexity $R(\cdot)$ of a function class \mathcal{F} , but note in passing that it is rather well-behaved with respect to Minkowski addition and scalar multiplication [6]:

$$R(\alpha\mathcal{F} + \beta\mathcal{G}) \leq |\alpha|R(\mathcal{F}) + |\beta|R(\mathcal{G}).$$

A recent example where Rademacher complexity is used to control approximation error may be found in [13].

III. DEFINITIONS

Let \mathcal{F} be a collection of functions $f : \Omega \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ and recall the definition of the V_γ and fat-shattering dimensions [1], [2]: a set $S \subset \Omega$ is said to be V_γ -shattered by \mathcal{F} if there exists some constant $r \in \mathbb{R}$ such that for each label assignment $y \in \{-1, 1\}^S$ there is an $f \in \mathcal{F}$ satisfying

$$y(x)(f(x) - r) \geq \gamma > 0 \quad (3)$$

for all $x \in S$. The set S is γ -fat shattered by \mathcal{F} , on the other hand, if there exists some function $r : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$, called the *witness of shattering*, such that for each label assignment $y \in \{-1, 1\}^S$ there is an $f \in \mathcal{F}$ satisfying

$$y(x)(f(x) - r(x)) \geq \gamma > 0 \quad (4)$$

for all $x \in S$. The V_γ dimension, denoted by $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F})$, and the γ -fat shattering dimension, denoted by $\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F})$, of \mathcal{F} are respectively the cardinality of the largest set V_γ -shattered and γ -fat shattered by \mathcal{F} . If there exist sets of arbitrarily large sizes that are V_γ -shattered, or γ -fat shattered, by \mathcal{F} , then $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = \infty$, or $\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = \infty$, respectively. The only difference between the V_γ and the fat-shattering dimensions is that r is required to be a constant for V_γ -shattering while it can be a real-valued function on S for γ -fat shattering. As a result,

$$V_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) \leq \text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}), \quad (5)$$

for any function class \mathcal{F} .

Recall from basic analysis that a function $u : X \rightarrow Y$ between two metric spaces (X, d_X) and (Y, d_Y) is

uniformly continuous if for every $\epsilon > 0$, there exists $\delta = \delta(\epsilon)$ such that for all $x, x' \in X$,

$$d_X(x, x') < \delta \Rightarrow d_Y(u(x), u(x')) < \epsilon.$$

If \mathcal{F}, \mathcal{G} are two sets of real-valued functions defined on the same domain, $\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}$ denotes their *Minkowski sum*:

$$\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G} = \{h = f + g : f \in \mathcal{F}, g \in \mathcal{G}\}.$$

The natural numbers and integers are denoted by \mathbb{N} and \mathbb{Z} , respectively. For $\mathbf{c} = (c_1, c_2, \dots) \in \mathbb{R}^{\mathbb{N}}$, we write $\|\mathbf{c}\|_1$ to denote $\sum_{i \in \mathbb{N}} |c_i|$. Standard asymptotic order-of-magnitude notation $O(\cdot)$ and $\Omega(\cdot)$ is used.

IV. ADDITIVE PROPERTIES

The next result shows that there is no V_γ -shattering analogue of (1) by exhibiting function families \mathcal{F}, \mathcal{G} such that $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F}), V_\gamma(\mathcal{G})$ are small while $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G})$ is large:

Theorem 2. *There exist function classes \mathcal{F}, \mathcal{G} such that for all $\gamma > 0$, $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = V_\gamma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$ and $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}) = \infty$.*

Proof: For $-\infty < a < b < \infty$, let \mathcal{F} be the collection of all increasing functions on $[a, b]$ and let \mathcal{G} be the collection of all decreasing functions on $[a, b]$. Clearly, $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = V_\gamma(\mathcal{G}) = 1$ for all $\gamma > 0$. However, $\mathcal{H} = \mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G} = BV[a, b]$ is the collection of functions of bounded variation on $[a, b]$ and is easily seen to have $V_\gamma(\mathcal{H}) = \infty$ for all $\gamma > 0$, see e.g. [19]. ■

On the other hand, the fat-shattering dimension is significantly better behaved under Minkowski summation. More generally, it admits a version of Theorem 1:

Theorem 3 ([8]). *Let $\gamma > 0$, $k \geq 2$, $\mathcal{F}_1, \mathcal{F}_2, \dots, \mathcal{F}_k$ be function classes consisting of functions $f : \Omega \rightarrow [-1, 1]$, and $u : [-1, 1]^k \rightarrow [-1, 1]$ be uniformly continuous. Then there are $0 < \alpha, \beta < \infty$, depending only on u , k and γ , such that*

$$\text{fat}_\gamma(u(\mathcal{F}_1, \mathcal{F}_2, \dots, \mathcal{F}_k)) \leq \alpha \sum_{i=1}^k \text{fat}_\beta(\mathcal{F}_i),$$

where $u(\mathcal{F}_1, \mathcal{F}_2, \dots, \mathcal{F}_k)$ consists of all functions $u(f_1, f_2, \dots, f_k) : \Omega \rightarrow [-1, 1]$ as defined in (2).

Since addition is a uniformly continuous operation, we have the following result:

Corollary 4. *Let \mathcal{F} and \mathcal{G} consist of functions $f : \Omega \rightarrow [-0.5, 0.5]$ and $\mathcal{H} = \mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}$ be their Minkowski*

sum. Then there is a constant $0 < \alpha < \infty$ and a function $\beta : (0, \infty) \rightarrow (0, \infty)$ such that

$$\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{H}) \leq \alpha(\text{fat}_{\beta(\gamma)}(\mathcal{F}) + \text{fat}_{\beta(\gamma)}(\mathcal{G})).$$

It is instructive to contrast Corollary 4 with Theorem 2. Moreover, the class of functions on $[a, b]$ with bounded total variation norm has a well-behaved fat-shattering dimension, and thus the V_γ dimension as well, by (5). Recall the definition of *total variation* of a function $f : [a, b] \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$:

$$V_a^b(f) = \sup_P \sum_{i=0}^{|P|-1} |f(x_{i+1}) - f(x_i)|, \quad (6)$$

where the supremum is over the set of all finite partitions $P = (a = x_0, x_1, \dots, x_{|P|} = b)$ of $[a, b]$.

Theorem ([19]). *Let \mathcal{F} be the collection of all $f : [a, b] \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ such that $V_a^b(f) \leq L$. Then*

$$V_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = \text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = 1 + \left\lfloor \frac{L}{2\gamma} \right\rfloor.$$

In contradistinction to Theorem 2, it may be the case that $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F})$ and $V_\gamma(\mathcal{G})$ are large while $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G})$ is small. We state the following simple lemma without proof:

Lemma 5. *Let \mathcal{F} be a collection of differentiable functions $f : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ such that for each $f \in \mathcal{F}$, the derivative f' vanishes on at most L points. Then $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) \leq L + 2$ for all $\gamma > 0$.*

Theorem 6. *There exist function classes \mathcal{F}, \mathcal{G} such that for all $\gamma > 0$, $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = V_\gamma(\mathcal{G}) = \infty$ and $V_\gamma(\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}) \leq 3$.*

Proof: Let \mathcal{F} be the collection of all differentiable $f : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ such that $f' < -1$ on $(-\infty, 0)$ and $-1 \leq f' \leq 1$ on $(0, \infty)$. Let \mathcal{G} be the collection of all differentiable $g : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ such that $-1 \leq g' \leq 1$ on $(-\infty, 0)$ and $g' > 1$ on $(0, \infty)$. Consider an $h \in \mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}$. By construction, $h' < 0$ on $(-\infty, 0)$ and $h' > 0$ on $(0, \infty)$. Since h' only vanishes at $x = 0$, the claim follows by Lemma 5. ■

Remark 7. An analogous construction exists for the VC-dimension. Let $\mathcal{F} : \Omega_1 \rightarrow \{-1, 1\}$ and $\mathcal{G} : \Omega_2 \rightarrow \{-1, 1\}$ be two concept classes defined over two disjoint sets Ω_1, Ω_2 . Put $\Omega = \Omega_1 \cup \Omega_2$ and define $\bar{\mathcal{F}} : \Omega \rightarrow \{-1, 1\}$ by

$$\bar{f}(x) = \begin{cases} f(x), & x \in \Omega_1 \\ 1, & x \in \Omega_2 \end{cases},$$

and $\bar{\mathcal{G}} : \Omega \rightarrow \{-1, 1\}$ analogously. Define

$$\mathcal{H} = \bar{\mathcal{F}} \vee \bar{\mathcal{G}} = \{h = \bar{f} \vee \bar{g} : \bar{f} \in \bar{\mathcal{F}}, \bar{g} \in \bar{\mathcal{G}}\}.$$

Then $\text{VCdim}(\mathcal{H}) = 0$, regardless of how large $\text{VCdim}(\bar{\mathcal{F}})$ or $\text{VCdim}(\bar{\mathcal{G}})$ might be.

However, such construction of having infinite dimension for \mathcal{F} and \mathcal{G} but finite dimension for $\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}$ cannot exist for the γ -fat shattering dimension.

Theorem 8. *For any $\gamma > 0$, if \mathcal{F} and \mathcal{G} are non-empty function classes and $\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = \infty$ or $\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{G}) = \infty$, then $\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}) = \infty$.*

Proof: Without loss of generality, let $\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = \infty$ and $n \in \mathbb{N}$. There exists some set $S \subseteq \Omega$, with $|S| = n$, which is γ -fat shattered by \mathcal{F} with witness of shattering $r : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$. Then, $\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}$ also γ -shatters S : pick any $g \in \mathcal{G}$ and consider the witness of shattering $r + g : S \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$; given a label assignment $y \in \{-1, 1\}^S$, there exists $f \in \mathcal{F}$ such that

$$y(x)(f(x) - r(x)) \geq \gamma > 0,$$

so for $f + g \in \mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}$,

$$y(x)([f(x) + g(x)] - [r(x) + g(x)]) \geq \gamma > 0.$$

Hence, $\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F} + \mathcal{G}) = \infty$. ■

V. TRIGONOMETRIC FUNCTIONS AND SERIES

In this section, we give explicit upper and lower estimates on the fat-shattering dimension of trigonometric functions and series. Let \mathcal{F}_{\sin} be the family of functions $f : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ defined by

$$\mathcal{F}_{\sin} = \{f(x) = \sin(\alpha x) : \alpha \in \mathbb{R}\}$$

and define the concept class $\text{sgn}(\mathcal{F}_{\sin}) : \mathbb{R} \rightarrow \{-1, 1\}$ by

$$\text{sgn}(\mathcal{F}_{\sin}) = \{\text{sgn}(f) : f \in \mathcal{F}\}.$$

A well-known construction due to E. Levin and J. S. Denker [7], [20] shows that $\text{VCdim}(\text{sgn}(\mathcal{F}_{\sin})) = \infty$, providing an example of a concept class parametrized by a single real number with infinite VC-dimension.

We extend this construction to the fat-shattering dimension:

Theorem 9. *For all $0 < \gamma < 1$,*

$$\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}_{\sin}) = \infty.$$

Proof: Our proof is analogous to the construction in [7, Section 2.3]. Let $n \in \mathbb{N}$ and $0 < \gamma < 1$ be given. Put $\beta = (\sin^{-1} \gamma)/\pi$ and

$$b = 2 \left(2 \left\lceil \frac{1}{1/2 - \beta} \right\rceil + 1 \right).$$

Define $\mathbf{x} \in \mathbb{R}^n$ by

$$x_i = b^{-i}, \quad i = 1, \dots, n. \quad (7)$$

For each $\mathbf{y} \in \{-1, 1\}^n$, define

$$\alpha = \frac{b}{2} + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^n (b - y_i - 1)b^i. \quad (8)$$

It is straightforward to verify that

$$y_i \sin(\pi \alpha x_i) \geq \gamma, \quad i = 1, \dots, n. \quad \blacksquare$$

Obviously, $\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}_{\sin}) = 0$ for $\gamma > 1$. The case of $\gamma = 1$ requires a separate treatment:

Theorem 10.

$$\text{fat}_1(\mathcal{F}_{\sin}) = 1.$$

Proof: Clearly, \mathcal{F}_{\sin} can shatter a single point at $\gamma = 1$. Suppose, contrary to our claim, that \mathcal{F}_{\sin} can shatter some two-point set, $\{x_1, x_2\}$ at $\gamma = 1$. This implies the existence of $\alpha_1, \alpha_2 \in \mathbb{R}$ such that

$$\begin{aligned} \sin(\alpha_1 x_1) = +1 &\iff \alpha_1 x_1 \in (2\mathbb{Z} + 1/2)\pi \\ \sin(\alpha_1 x_2) = +1 &\iff \alpha_1 x_2 \in (2\mathbb{Z} + 1/2)\pi \\ \sin(\alpha_2 x_1) = +1 &\iff \alpha_2 x_1 \in (2\mathbb{Z} + 1/2)\pi \\ \sin(\alpha_2 x_2) = -1 &\iff \alpha_2 x_2 \in (2\mathbb{Z} + 3/2)\pi. \end{aligned}$$

Rearranging, we have

$$\frac{x_1}{x_2} \in \frac{2\mathbb{Z} + 1/2}{2\mathbb{Z} + 1/2} \cap \frac{2\mathbb{Z} + 1/2}{2\mathbb{Z} + 3/2}. \quad (9)$$

In particular, (9) implies the existence of $k, \ell, m, n \in \mathbb{Z}$ such that

$$\frac{4k + 1}{4\ell + 1} = \frac{4m + 1}{4n + 3},$$

which is impossible. \blacksquare

A partial converse to Theorem 9 is that restricting both the range of x and the frequency α yields finite fat-shattering dimension:

Theorem 11. *Let \mathcal{F} be the family of functions $f : [0, M] \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ defined by*

$$\mathcal{F} = \{f(x) = \sin(\alpha x) : \alpha \in [-A, A]\}$$

for some $0 < M, A < \infty$. Then

$$\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) \leq \left\lfloor \frac{MA}{2\gamma} \right\rfloor + 1, \quad 0 < \gamma < 1. \quad (10)$$

Proof: Since $|f'| \leq A$ for all $f \in \mathcal{F}$, it suffices to prove that (10) holds when \mathcal{F} is the collection of

all A -Lipschitz functions on $[0, M]$. Appealing to [14, Theorem 2], we have

$$\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) \leq \mathcal{M}(2\gamma/A),$$

where $\mathcal{M}(\cdot)$ is the packing number of $[0, M]$. Since $\mathcal{M}(\varepsilon) = \lfloor M/\varepsilon \rfloor + 1$, the claim follows. \blacksquare

Remark 12. If either the range of x or the frequency α is unbounded, we have $\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}) = \infty$ for $0 < \gamma < 1$. This is easily seen from the construction in Theorem 9. Suppose the range of x is $[0, 1]$ and α is unbounded. Instead of the \mathbf{x} and α constructed in (7) and (8), respectively, put $\mathbf{x}' = \mathbf{x}/b$ and $\alpha' = b\alpha$. The case of bounded α and unbounded x is handled analogously.

Our observations regarding sine functions can be extended to trigonometric series.

Theorem 13. *Let $I \subseteq \mathbb{R}$ be a (possibly unbounded) segment and let $A, L \in (0, \infty]$. Let $\mathcal{F}_{I,A,L}$ be the family of functions $f : I \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ defined by*

$$\mathcal{F}_{I,A,L} = \left\{ f(x) = \sum_{i=1}^{\infty} c_i \sin(\alpha_i x) : \mathbf{c} \in \mathbb{R}^{\mathbb{N}}, \|\mathbf{c}\|_1 \leq L, \boldsymbol{\alpha} \in [-A, A]^{\mathbb{N}} \right\}.$$

Then

$$\text{fat}_\gamma(\mathcal{F}_{I,A,L}) \begin{cases} = 0, & \gamma > L \\ = 1, & \gamma = L \\ \leq \left\lfloor \frac{|I|LA}{2\gamma} \right\rfloor + 1, & |I| < \infty, \\ = \infty, & \gamma < L < \infty, A < \infty \\ & \gamma < L, \infty \in \{|I|, A\}, \end{cases} \quad (11)$$

where $|I|$ is the length (Lebesgue measure) of I .

Proof: The first relation is obvious, since $|\sum_{i \in \mathbb{N}} c_i \sin(\alpha_i x)| \leq \|\mathbf{c}\|_1 \leq L$. To prove the second relation, note that $|\sum_{i \in \mathbb{N}} c_i \sin(\alpha_i x)| = L$ if and only if $|\sin(\alpha_i x)| = 1$ for each $i \in \mathbb{N}$. Hence, the argument from Theorem 10 can be applied termwise to show that $\mathcal{F}_{I,A,L}$ cannot shatter two points at $\gamma = L$. To prove the third relation, we observe that $\|\mathbf{c}\|_1 < \infty$ implies that $\sum c_i \sin(\alpha_i x)$ converges pointwise. Furthermore, there is no loss of generality in assuming that each $c_i > 0$ (since the corresponding α_i can be replaced by its negative). Hence, $\|\mathbf{c}\|_1^{-1} \sum_{i \in \mathbb{N}} c_i \sin(\alpha_i x)$ is a convex combination of A -Lipschitz functions defined on a compact domain and therefore is itself Lipschitz with constant at most A . Thus, the packing bound for Lipschitz functions invoked in the proof of Theorem 11 applies here as well. The fourth relation is an immediate consequence of Remark 12, since in particular $\mathcal{F}_{I,A,L}$ contains functions of the form $f(x) = L \sin(\alpha x)$. \blacksquare

Remark 14. The analysis above can be extended to more general trigonometric series of the form $\sum a_i \sin(\alpha_i x) + \sum b_i \cos(\beta_i x)$ in a straightforward fashion.

VI. CONCLUSION

We have investigated the behavior of various scale-sensitive dimensions under Minkowski addition, providing some positive and negative results. An intriguing future research direction would be to make the dependence of α, β on u, k , and γ in Theorem 3 more explicit. This could be of relevance, for example, to boosted regression [9] or continuous-output neural networks.

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