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Developing A Theoretical Framework for Compassionate Pedagogy: An Exploratory Study of Human Connection in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: In the current context of higher education, learning environments are facing an increasingly evident crisis regarding student mental health. Pressures from individualistic competitiveness, performance demands, and high-paced learning have contributed to heightened feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and stress among the student community.

A notable issue is that student support systems (such as psychological counseling and academic support) often operate separately from classroom pedagogic practice. Simultaneously, the trend toward the commodification of education has given rise to a compassion gap, where human elements and empathy have not been fully integrated into the teaching and learning process. Although the concept of compassion is gaining increasing attention in educational research, the field still lacks a consistent definition and a theoretical framework capable of practical application.

In light of this reality, this article aims to conceptualize Compassionate Pedagogy and develop a multi-level theoretical framework to guide practice within the higher education context.

The primary contribution of this study is the proposal of a framework comprising four core components of compassionate pedagogy, alongside the development of an implementation model that spans from the institutional level to the individual level. This theoretical framework not only facilitates the integration of compassion into teaching practices but also affirms its role in improving student mental health and enhancing student engagement.

KEYWORDS: Compassionate pedagogy, higher education, mental health, student engagement, humanizing pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the mental health of university students has become a prominent concern in educational research and public policy. Numerous domestic and international surveys indicate an increasing proportion of students experiencing states of anxiety, stress, and depression. Notably, some studies point out that university students exhibit higher levels of anxiety compared to young people of the same age who are not attending university. This reflects a paradox: an environment expected to be a space for cultivating knowledge and competence is instead becoming a significant source of psychological pressure. Furthermore, social isolation in student life, manifested through feelings of alienation and a lack of meaningful connections with peers and lecturers, is becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly in highly competitive learning contexts and large class sizes.

One of the core causes of this reality lies in the current organization and operation of higher education. Many educational models still heavily emphasize individual achievement, rankings, and competition, while failing to adequately address the socio-emotional factors of learners. Learning activities are often designed to maximize cognitive performance, sometimes becoming high-pressure forms of assessment that lack consideration for the human experience of the students. Consequently, instead of promoting collaborative critical thinking, this environment can diminish teamwork capabilities, restrict sharing and empathy, and thereby hinder the holistic development of learners. In other words, when the human element is marginalized, the very foundation of critical thinking, which necessitates dialogue, listening, and respect for differences, is also negatively affected.

The context of the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted these limitations and simultaneously raised an urgent need to restructure the approach to higher education. The prolonged shift to online learning not only disrupted the educational process but also undermined the social relationships that play a crucial role in providing psychological support for students. In the post-pandemic era, the need to "humanize" education has become clearer than ever: students are not merely recipients of knowledge but, foremost, human beings with emotions, circumstances, and a need to be understood. This requires educational institutions to shift from a purely academic approach to an integrated model, where human elements, care, and connection are considered the foundation of the teaching and learning process.

In this context, the concept of Compassionate Pedagogy has emerged as a potential approach to re-establish the balance between knowledge and

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humanity in higher education. However, at present, compassion in education often remains at the level of slogans or stated values; it has not yet been concretized into a clear and viable theoretical framework for implementation in teaching practice. This is precisely the research gap that needs to be filled.

Therefore, the question posed in this study is: how can compassion be transformed from a guiding value into a core, structured, measurable, and applicable pedagogical method in the higher education environment? Developing a theoretical framework for Compassionate Pedagogy not only contributes to narrowing the academic achievement gap among different student groups but also enhances student engagement, improves mental health, and promotes the holistic development of learners. Thereby, the study aims to reaffirm the role of human connection as an indispensable foundation in contemporary higher education.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUALIZATION

From Empathy and Caring to Compassion

To build a solid theoretical foundation for the pedagogical approach, it is necessary to clearly differentiate among concepts that are often used interchangeably in education, particularly "empathy", "caring", and "compassion". The core distinction of compassion lies in its capacity to prompt intrinsic action; that is, it does not stop merely at understanding or sharing emotions, but creates an urge to act to alleviate suffering (Schantz, 2007; Killingback et al., 2025).

Studies in psychology and educational sciences, prominently those by Gilbert (2016) and Potvin et al. (2021), consistently agree that compassion comprises two inseparable components: (1) recognizing the suffering of others and (2) a commitment to act to mitigate that suffering.

This difference is not only conceptual but also generates distinct empirical impacts. When compassion, specifically the ability to recognize and support learners' disadvantages, is integrated into teaching activities and group assessments, studies show that the achievement gap in critical thinking among student groups can be eliminated (Gilbert, 2016). Simultaneously, research by Ampofo et al. (2025) indicates that teacher empathy helps reduce stress and anxiety, wherein student engagement plays a crucial mediating role in translating this impact into sustainable mental health outcomes.

Foundations of Humanizing Pedagogy

Compassionate pedagogy is not an isolated trend, but is inherited from the critical pedagogy tradition of Freire (1972). According to this perspective, education is not a process of "filling" "empty vessels" with knowledge, but rather a dialogical process where learners are viewed as subjects with lived experiences and voices, shaped by their socio-political contexts.

In this approach, lecturers become transformative agents, responsible for dismantling polarized thinking and encouraging authentic dialogue, rather than maintaining a defensive "polite silence" (Vandeyar & Swart, 2016).

This shift is further conceptualized by Tan (2022) through the concept of "heartware". Accordingly, education must move beyond a sole focus on "hardware" (facilities) and "software" (curriculum), to aim toward nurturing qualities such as empathy, kindness, and compassion. This is the very foundation for building an equitable, inclusive, and comprehensively supportive learning environment, especially in the context of increasing academic pressure (Maratos et al., 2019).

Proposed Definition for Compassionate Pedagogy

Although the concept of compassion is gaining increasing attention, academic literature still lacks a consistent and practically applicable definition. Based on the systematic review by Killingback et al. (2025), this study proposes a definition of Compassionate Pedagogy encompassing four core components:

Noticing: The ability to recognize forms of stress, disadvantage, or suffering within the learning environment.

Commitment to Action: The proactive intervention aimed at mitigating those difficulties.

Promoting Flourishing: The orientation toward enhancing the mental health and well-being of both learners and educators.

Holistic Concern: Viewing students as whole human beings, moving beyond mere academic metrics or grades.

Complementing this definition, from the perspective of learning design, Gachago et al. (2022) emphasize that compassionate pedagogy also demands a continuous awareness of power dynamics, positionality, and a commitment to action for social justice.

Thus, conceptualizing Compassionate Pedagogy with a clear structure not only helps to elucidate the theoretical foundation but also lays the groundwork for a more in-depth analysis of the impact mechanisms and levels of implementation in the subsequent sections of the study.

3. A PRACTICAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMPASSIONATE PEDAGOGY

Based on the established definition comprising four core components (noticing suffering, commitment to action, promoting flourishing, and holistic concern), the next challenge for higher education does not lie in understanding Compassionate Pedagogy, but rather in the ability to translate this concept into specific teaching practices. As Gilbert (2016) has pointed out, actualizing compassion in education often encounters numerous barriers, ranging from institutional pressures and a competitive culture to limitations in lecturers' pedagogical capacities.

To address this gap between theory and practice, the study builds upon the multi-level approach of Killingback et al. (2025) to construct a practical theoretical framework. This approach allows for compassionate pedagogy to be viewed not merely at the classroom level, but as a multi-layered system where institutional factors, training programs, lecturers, and learners interact with one another.

The breakthrough of this study lies in not viewing these levels as operating according to a linear logic or a top-down imposition, but rather as a mutually supportive ecosystem. Within this ecosystem, the concept of "heartware" proposed by Tan (2022) acts as the connecting thread, ensuring that compassion exists not merely in policy slogans but is nurtured consistently, from macro-level orientations down to every micro-level interaction in the classroom.

On this basis, the practical theoretical framework for Compassionate Pedagogy is structured into four closely interconnected levels, reflecting its systemic nature and the potential for synchronized implementation within the higher education context. The theoretical framework is structured

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across the following four levels:

3.1. Institutional Level

At the macro level, the implementation of Compassionate Pedagogy requires higher education institutions to integrate this approach into their development strategies, governance policies, and core leadership competencies. When compassion is institutionalized, it can contribute to diminishing the dominance of a purely competitive academic culture, while simultaneously serving as an evidence-based tool to mitigate biases, particularly gender inequality in student evaluations of teaching (Niemann, 2024). In other words, compassionate pedagogy at the institutional level is not merely a value orientation, but also a strategy for improving educational equity and quality.

However, a significant contribution of this study is expanding the focus from learners to encompass educators. We argue that a truly compassionate institution cannot solely aim at caring for students while neglecting the working conditions of its faculty. Discourses on compassion are unlikely to be actualized if the teaching staff are confronted with overwhelming workloads, assessment pressures, and the depletion of emotional resources (Andrew et al., 2023).

In this context, protecting the mental health of and rebalancing the workload for lecturers must be considered a foundational condition. Lecturers can only practice empathy, listen to, and support students when they themselves possess sufficient time, energy, and institutional support. Therefore, building a compassionate institution is not only about designing student-oriented policies, but also a process of restructuring the working environment to nurture the emotional capacity and professional sustainability of educators.

3.2. Program Level and Instructional Design

At the program level, Compassionate Pedagogy needs to be purposefully integrated into the curriculum design structure, rather than merely appearing as a supplementary element. According to Gachago et al. (2022), an alternative instructional design model should situate empathy and compassion in relation to the awareness of power, social positionality, and the responsibility to act for justice. This approach helps shift the focus from the mere transmission of knowledge to the creation of a more inclusive and humanizing learning environment.

Furthermore, the integration of methods such as those proposed by Maratos et al. (2019), notably Compassionate Mind Training, can support students dealing with the negative psychological impacts caused by academic pressure. This indicates that program design should not solely aim at achieving academic learning outcomes, but must also proactively nurture the emotional competencies and self-regulation capabilities of learners.

The novel contribution of this study lies in proposing a fundamental shift in program design thinking. Specifically, compassion should not be viewed as an extracurricular or supplementary soft skill, but must become a mandatory design standard. This requires program developers, during the syllabus writing process, to continuously engage in critical reflection with the core question: *Is this program structure inadvertently creating barriers, pressures, or exclusion for vulnerable student groups?*

Consequently, compassionate pedagogy at the program level is not merely about adding new content, but is a comprehensive restructuring process of learning design towards a more equitable, inclusive, and learner-centered approach.

3.3. Module Level and Assessment

At the module level, where specific learning interactions take place, particularly in group work activities, pressures from individualistic competition often generate significant psychosocial stress, thereby hindering students' thinking processes and collaboration. According to Gilbert (2016), a learning environment lacking the element of compassion can diminish the effectiveness of critical thinking, especially for vulnerable or minority student groups.

To create substantive change, compassion must be directly integrated into the module assessment system. When criteria such as recognizing and supporting peers when they face difficulties are incorporated into group work assessment scales, research results show that the critical thinking achievement gap among different student groups can be narrowed, or even eliminated (Gilbert, 2016). This indicates that assessment not only reflects learning outcomes but can also shape learning behaviors and culture.

The contribution of this study is the proposal of a new approach to redefining the role of assessment. Instead of serving as a tool for categorizing or exerting pressure, assessment should be designed as a mechanism to promote compassion in learning. Specifically, incorporating criteria related to compassionate behaviors into grading rubrics (such as inclusive communication, the ability to support vulnerable members, and a positive collaborative attitude) will help transform compassion from an abstract moral value into a specific academic competency.

Thereby, compassionate pedagogy at the module level not only changes how students learn, but also changes how they are assessed towards a more equitable and inclusive approach that encourages holistic development.

3.4. Individual Lecturer Level

At the micro level, the lecturer plays a central role in actualizing Compassionate Pedagogy through daily interactions with students. According to Conklin (2008), lecturers need to proactively model compassion, practice mindfulness, and continuously reflect on their personal biases during the teaching process. This is the foundation for building a safe, respectful, and open learning environment.

Recent empirical evidence strongly reinforces the role of this element. Research utilizing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) by Ampofo et al. (2025) shows that the level of teacher empathy has a direct impact on reducing student stress and anxiety. Notably, student engagement plays a crucial mediating role: the more empathetic the lecturer is, the more engaged the students become, and it is this engagement that leads to positive improvements in mental health.

Furthermore, the application of compassionate pedagogy helps break down communication barriers in the classroom, especially in diverse and socially sensitive contexts. According to Vandeyar & Swart (2016), this approach contributes to dismantling the defensive polite silence, encouraging authentic dialogue and multidimensional thinking.

A significant contribution of this study is the repositioning of the lecturer's role in the context of 21st-century education. Lecturers are not merely transmitters of knowledge or transformative intellectuals, but can also be viewed as academic healers. When combining compassionate pedagogy with the trauma-informed education approach of Culshaw & Bodfield (2025), empathy does not diminish academic standards; conversely, it becomes a powerful catalyst that fosters engagement, creating a safe learning space for students to experiment, take risks, and develop their

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thinking.

The proposed 4-level theoretical framework goes beyond merely describing a value system; it provides a systemic practical roadmap. By forging tight connections among institutional policies, program design, assessment methods, and the role of the lecturer, this framework contributes to building a more healing, equitable, and inclusive higher education system where compassion becomes the core driving force of the teaching and learning process.

4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPASSIONATE PEDAGOGY, STUDENT ENGAGEMENT, AND MENTAL HEALTH

After establishing a multi-level theoretical framework for Compassionate Pedagogy, a core issue is to elucidate the impact mechanism of this approach on learners. The integration of compassion into higher education does not stop merely at moral values, but has been proven by empirical studies to have a direct, measurable impact on both the learning outcomes and mental health of students.

4.1. Direct Impact: Compassionate Pedagogy as a Protective Factor for Mental Health

One of the greatest challenges in current higher education is the rise of psychological issues among students. Research utilizing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) by Ampofo et al. (2025) has shown that the level of lecturer empathy has a direct and statistically significant correlation with the reduction of stress, anxiety, and depression in students. This indicates that empathy in teaching is not merely supportive, but also acts as a psychological protective factor in a high-pressure academic environment.

Furthermore, Kirby et al. (2023) argue that compassion provides a crucial motivational framework for implementing Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), thereby improving mental health not only at the individual level but also at the collective level within the classroom. When students learn in an environment rich in empathy and support, they tend to feel safer, experience reduced stress, and are more willing to actively engage in learning.

The contribution of this study is the proposal of a new perspective on the role of compassionate pedagogy. Instead of being viewed merely as a support tool when students are already facing psychological difficulties, compassionate pedagogy needs to be repositioned as a preventive academic immune system. That is, by integrating compassion-based methods, such as Compassionate Mind Training developed by Maratos et al. (2019), into teaching activities, educational institutions can equip students with early self-regulation and resilience capacities.

This approach helps students not only to cope with stress when it occurs but also to proactively build resilience against academic pressure, thereby minimizing the risk of developing severe psychological issues in the long term.

4.2. The Crucial Mediating Role of Student Engagement

The relationship between compassion and mental health does not occur in a direct, one-way manner, but rather through a crucial mediating mechanism: student engagement. Research by Ampofo et al. (2025) demonstrates that engagement serves as a mediator in this relationship. Specifically, when lecturers demonstrate empathy and sensitivity to students' emotional needs, they contribute to creating a sense of safety and belonging, thereby fostering the level of learning participation (Soto, 2005). It is precisely this positive engagement that serves as the direct factor leading to improvements in mental health.

The contribution of this study is the proposal of the concept of Compassionate Engagement. Distinct from traditional measurement methods (attendance rates, speaking up in class, submitting assignments), engagement within a compassionate pedagogical environment must be understood more deeply: it is the students' readiness to share personal difficulties, remain open to differing opinions, and participate in dialogue without falling into a defensive state. This is a process of academic transformation, wherein the care and empathy from the lecturer (Tan, 2022) are internalized into the students' intrinsic learning motivation.

4.3. Dismantling Polarized Thinking and Unleashing Cognitive Capacity

In the higher education environment, particularly during group work activities, individualistic competition often generates psychosocial pressures that diminish the ability to focus on learning tasks. According to Gilbert (2016), incorporating the criterion of recognizing and supporting others when they face disadvantages into assessments has helped eliminate the critical thinking achievement gap among different student groups.

From the perspective of educational sociology, Vandeyar & Swart (2016) demonstrate that compassionate pedagogy helps dismantle polarized thinking (“us” vs. “them”) and shatter the polite silence, a common form of defense in diverse classrooms. This opens up a space for authentic dialogue, where students can exchange perspectives more sincerely and profoundly.

The contribution of this study is advancing a counter-argument: compassionate pedagogy does not soften academics, but conversely, acts as a cognitive catalyst. When students feel socially safe and do not have to expend mental resources on defense mechanisms (fear of being judged or excluded), they can unleash their full cognitive capacity for critical thinking and creativity.

Therefore, compassion does not lower academic standards; rather, it helps learners achieve those standards more effectively and sustainably.

Compassionate pedagogy, student engagement, and mental health form a mutually reinforcing loop. Within this loop, compassion from the institutional system and lecturers creates a foundation of safety; engagement acts as a mediating transformational mechanism; and mental health alongside cognitive capacity are the resulting outcomes. This provides the basis to affirm that compassionate pedagogy carries not only humanistic significance but is also an effective academic strategy in modern higher education.

5. DISCUSSION

The multi-level theoretical framework, alongside empirical evidence, has demonstrated that Compassionate Pedagogy is not a supplementary trend, but a core intervention aimed at maintaining the quality and humanity of higher education. However, for this approach to truly take root and have the capacity to reorient education, it is necessary to dismantle deep-seated cognitive barriers and reshape the traditional boundaries among educators, learners, and institutions.

5.1. Dismantling the Boundary between Compassion and Academic Rigor

One of the greatest barriers when implementing compassionate pedagogy is the perception that it diminishes academic rigor, making education

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soft (Andrew et al., 2023). However, research evidence indicates the exact opposite. Compassionate pedagogy is not synonymous with coddling or eliminating students' academic responsibilities. According to Stephens (2023), compassion can still coexist with clear boundaries and rigorous academic expectations. Simultaneously, Sellnow et al. (2022) emphasize that this approach helps students achieve high expectations even in difficult personal circumstances.

Notably, evidence from Gilbert (2016) demonstrates that integrating compassion into assessments does not diminish academic quality, but rather helps narrow the critical thinking achievement gap among different student groups. This affirms that compassion can accompany and even elevate academic standards.

The contribution of this study is the proposal to reposition the concept of compassion in education: not as academic leniency, but as a catalyst for academic grit. This means that lecturers simultaneously maintain clear standards while establishing transparent supportive boundaries. For instance, explaining the reasons why certain requests cannot be accommodated, instead of imposing an outright rejection.

This approach helps students learn to cope with failure and disappointment within a safe environment, thereby developing their adaptability and resilience. More importantly, it dismantles the polarization between strictness and leniency, creating an academic space where students dare to accept intellectual challenges because they know they are evaluated as whole human beings, not merely as score-generating machines.

5.2. Shattering Polite Silence and Awareness of Power

In the increasingly diverse higher education context, differences in culture, class, and gender are often accompanied by implicit power dynamics, creating a polite silence, a defensive state that makes students hesitant to express their views. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, Gachago et al. (2022) emphasize that compassionate pedagogy demands a profound awareness of power and positionality within the classroom. When applied correctly, it helps dismantle polarized thinking ("us" versus "them") and paves the way for authentic dialogue (Vandeyar & Swart, 2016).

The contribution of this study is the proposal to shift from a passive inclusion model to Intersectional Compassionate Inclusion. In this model, personal experiences, including trauma and difficulties, are not viewed as weaknesses but are recognized as funds of knowledge (Soto, 2005). The role of the lecturer is no longer to impose consensus, but to utilize academic power to amplify the voices of marginalized groups, thereby creating a truly democratic and inclusive learning space.

5.3. Reorienting Lecturer Competencies: Upgrading Heartware

The transition to compassionate pedagogy cannot occur without the development of lecturers' intrinsic capacities. According to Conklin (2008) and Andrews et al. (2019), lecturers need to practice continuous reflection to recognize their personal biases and privileged positionalities.

Particularly, Tan (2022) emphasizes the necessity of developing “heartware”, where empathy, mindfulness, and kindness are viewed as core pedagogical competencies, transcending “hardware” (tools) and “software” (instructional design). When combined with the trauma-informed education approach of Culshaw & Bodfield (2025), lecturers can maintain positive relationships with students even in conflict situations.

The contribution of this study is affirming that “heartware” must be recognized as a professional competency that can be trained and evaluated. This requires lecturer professional development programs to mandatorily integrate compassionate micro-skills of communication and emotion regulation skills. Consequently, lecturers will not merely “know” about compassion, but will be able to practice it consistently and intentionally in the classroom.

5.4. Institutional Responsibility: Eliminating the Compassion Gap

Any efforts at the individual level will be difficult to sustain without institutional support. Waddington (2018) warned that the market-driven, competitive academic culture is creating a compassion gap within universities. Work pressures, audit culture, and continuous assessment requirements deplete lecturers' emotional resources, forcing them to maintain a distance from students as a self-defense mechanism (Andrew et al., 2023).

The contribution of this study is the proposal of the Top-down Compassionate Flow model. Accordingly, compassion cannot solely be the responsibility of lecturers, but must be guided by academic leadership. As Waddington (2018) emphasizes, leaders are the carriers of culture of the organization.

This requires universities to redesign policies towards a more humanizing approach, particularly by restructuring workloads to create margins of time for lecturers to listen to and connect with students. Only when the institution takes good care of the mental health of educators will they have sufficient resources to practice compassion toward learners.

The discussion demonstrates that reorienting education is not merely about changing teaching methods, but is a comprehensive restructuring process ranging from cognition and personal competencies to institutional policies. When the boundaries between rigor and compassion, between power and dialogue, and between the individual and the system are reshaped, compassionate pedagogy will become the foundation for a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable higher education ecosystem.

6. CONCLUSION

Drawing the study to a close, it can be affirmed that higher education is at a crucial turning point. In the context of increasing competitive pressures and commercialization trends, issues of student mental health and isolation are no longer individual phenomena, but reflect a systemic compassion gap. Therefore, the integration of compassion into education cannot stop at slogans or external support services, but needs to be established as a core pedagogical method.

The article has conceptualized Compassionate Pedagogy with four foundational components: noticing suffering, commitment to action, promoting flourishing, and holistic concern for the learner. On this basis, the study proposes an ecosystemic practical theoretical framework comprising four levels: Institutional, Program, Module, and Individual Lecturer. These levels do not operate independently but are closely interconnected, wherein "heartware" plays a continuous connecting role.

The core contribution of this study is the repositioning of the role of compassion in academics. Contrary to the perception that compassion diminishes rigor, the study affirms that it is a cognitive catalyst. When the learning environment creates a sense of safety, dismantles polarized

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thinking, and reduces psychological defense mechanisms, students can focus their entire intellectual resources on critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. Consequently, student engagement is not merely compliance, but evolves into compassionate engagement, where learners proactively confront challenges and mature from their own experiences.

Simultaneously, the study also emphasizes the institutional responsibility in nurturing compassion. Lecturers cannot practice empathy if they are depleted by work pressures and rigid assessment mechanisms. Therefore, a top-down compassionate flow is a prerequisite: the institution needs to care for the mental health and working conditions of its lecturers, thereby creating a foundation for them to care for their students in return.

In conclusion, compassionate pedagogy is not a compromise with educational quality, but a pathway to enhance it. This approach reshapes the understanding of academic success, transforming the classroom into a space that is both academic and humanizing. In the future, continuing empirical validation, developing measurement tools, and implementing this theoretical framework in practice will be crucial steps, contributing to building a more equitable, sustainable, and humanizing higher education system.

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