

A meta-learning framework for leaf disease detection using ViT-based feature extraction, PCA, and tuned SVM classifier

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ABSTRACT

A hybrid meta-learning approach is proposed for effective leaf disease detection by integrating vision transformer (ViT), principal component analysis (PCA), and support vector classifier (SVC). The objective of this study is to accurately classify plant leaf conditions into three categories: healthy, angular leaf spot, and bean rust. The dataset consists of 1,167 labeled leaf images, divided into training (974 images), validation (133 images), and testing (60 images) sets. A pretrained ViT model is employed for feature extraction, producing a feature vector of shape (974, 64) for the training data. To mitigate the curse of dimensionality and improve classification performance, PCA is applied, reducing the features to 41 principal components while retaining 98% of the original variance and accuracy 97.85%. For the classification task, an SVC is used and fine-tuned using the Optuna hyperparameter optimization framework to enhance accuracy and generalization. A distributed deep learning (DL) strategy is incorporated to accelerate training and scale computation, while the tf.data API is utilized to construct an efficient and scalable data input pipeline. The hybrid model demonstrates strong classification performance on the test set, indicating that combining deep transformer-based feature extraction with dimensionality reduction and optimized classical machine learning (ML) classifiers is effective for plant disease identification. This approach offers a robust and computationally efficient solution for precision agriculture, enabling automated and accurate leaf disease diagnosis and supporting early intervention strategies in crop management.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture plays a vital role in the economy and sustenance of many countries around the world. As global food demand rises due to population growth and changing consumption patterns, ensuring agricultural productivity becomes increasingly important. One of the major threats to crop yield and quality is plant disease, which can result in significant economic losses and food insecurity. Among various forms of crop degradation, leaf diseases are particularly prominent, as they affect the photosynthetic capacity of plants and are often early indicators of systemic infections. Early and accurate identification of such diseases is critical for implementing timely treatment measures, reducing the use of chemical pesticides, and improving overall crop health. Traditional methods of disease detection involve manual inspection by experts, which is

not only time-consuming and labor-intensive but also prone to human error and subjectivity. These limitations become even more significant when dealing with large-scale farms where timely diagnosis is essential. With recent advancements in computer vision and artificial intelligence, automated plant disease detection using image-based analysis has emerged as a promising solution [1]-[6]. By analyzing visual symptoms from leaf images, machine learning (ML) and deep learning (DL) techniques have demonstrated significant potential in improving the speed, scalability, and accuracy of disease identification. In recent years, convolutional neural networks (CNNs) have dominated image classification tasks, including plant disease detection. CNNs can learn hierarchical feature representations from raw images and have shown remarkable success in tasks such as object detection and scene understanding. However, CNNs have certain limitations, including restricted receptive fields, spatial inductive bias, and dependency on large labeled datasets for effective training. Moreover, when dealing with subtle variations in leaf texture or color, CNNs may struggle to capture long-range dependencies or global context effectively. These limitations have led to the exploration of more advanced architectures in computer vision [7]-[11]. One of the most significant breakthroughs in this domain has been the introduction of the vision transformer (ViT), a DL architecture inspired by the success of Transformer models in natural language processing (NLP). Unlike CNNs, ViTs operate on image patches and process them using self-attention mechanisms, allowing them to capture both local and global dependencies. Pretrained ViTs have shown competitive or even superior performance to CNNs on large-scale datasets, and they offer better generalization capabilities when fine-tuned on downstream tasks. In plant disease detection, leveraging the representational power of ViTs can significantly improve the accuracy and robustness of feature extraction from leaf images [12]-[17].

However, high-dimensional features extracted from deep models like ViT often present a new challenge: the curse of dimensionality. High-dimensional feature spaces increase computational complexity and can lead to overfitting, especially when training data is limited. To address this issue, principal component analysis (PCA) is employed as a dimensionality reduction technique [18]-[25]. PCA transforms the original feature space into a lower-dimensional subspace by selecting components that retain the most significant variance. This step not only reduces the computational burden but also improves classifier performance by removing noise and redundant information. Once a compact and meaningful feature representation is obtained, the next step involves classification. The dataset used for this study consists of 1,167 labeled leaf images categorized into three classes: healthy, angular leaf spot, and bean rust. These categories are common and critical to identify in crops like beans, where disease progression can be rapid and destructive. The dataset is divided into training (974 images), validation (133 images), and test (60 images) sets to evaluate the model's performance. The goal is to ensure that the system generalizes well to unseen data and avoids overfitting.

The overall pipeline begins with feeding the images into a pretrained ViT model to extract feature embeddings of size (974, 64) for the training set. These features are then reduced to 41 dimensions using PCA while retaining 98% of the original variance. The transformed features are passed to the support vector machines (SVMs) classifier, whose hyperparameters are tuned using Optuna to maximize classification accuracy on the validation set. Finally, the model's performance is assessed on the test set to evaluate its generalization capability. This modular pipeline offers several advantages. First, using a pretrained ViT for feature extraction allows leveraging knowledge from large-scale datasets like ImageNet, reducing the need for extensive training data. Second, applying PCA provides a compact and efficient feature space, minimizing the risk of overfitting. Third, the use of an SVM classifier adds interpretability and robustness to the classification stage. Finally, the integration of distributed training and efficient data pipelines ensures scalability and performance in real-world deployment scenarios.

2. RELATED WORKS

Verma *et al.* [9] proposed that the DL models based on CNNs have shown promise in identifying plant diseases. The No Free Lunch Theorem states that no paradigm fits everyone. Due to the wide diversity of plant diseases, finding the optimum model takes time and resources. This study introduces meta-learning. Based on prior benchmark model evaluations for plant disease detection, this technique recommends the top n models for a fresh dataset. The author may evaluate the framework's efficacy by comparing anticipated rankings to actual ranks using rank-biased overlap (RBO). The author examines several meta-extractors and meta-learner combinations in these laborious comparison experiments.

Si *et al.* [10] suggested the meta-learning-based model-agnostic meta-learning (MAML) attention model is discussed in the essay. The proposed method uses meta-level and fundamental-level learning and an efficient channel attention (ECA) module. The module uses local cross-channel interactive nondimensional reduction to improve weight parameters related to certain aspects of disease. The meta-learning-based technique can improve novel task detection by adding the ECA module to the initial model. Additionally, the approach is highly generalizable.

Upadhyay and Gupta [11] recommended the purpose of image classification of mango crops, a meta-learning technique, and sparse data were utilized. With the help of meta-learning's ability to quickly adapt to new tasks with a minimum of examples, the conventional method of maturity classification, which is sometimes hampered by a lack of appropriate labeled data, is greatly improved. The suggested technique supplies a meta-training framework, a complete feature extraction tool, and an initial picture segmentation tool for isolating mango crop portions. Additionally, the method presents a comprehensive feature extraction tool.

Yan *et al.* [12] discussed the pruning-based lightweight few-shot learning (Prune-FSL), which detects novel agricultural diseases using little labeled input to lightweight models. A metrics-based meta-learning framework was used to build the disease few-shot learning model. This was done to address data shortages. Additionally, the BN layer γ coefficients were used to reduce network channels, and a slimming pruning approach was used to achieve network compression. Meta-learning pruning improved model generalization.

Rajpoot and Seeja [13] analyzed a new few-shot meta-learning method that uses a triplet neural network (TNN) and a k-nearest neighbour (KNN) classifier. This approach uses both neural networks. Small sample sets are used to classify rare and atypical retinal diseases reliably. The TNN uses the mapping function to find the best way to insert related images simultaneously. The values of photos from successive classes are mapped after using this learned function. After this, the KNN method labels TNN embeddings. To validate our model, this study compares it against RFMiD and ODIR.

Reuss *et al.* [14] recommended combining farmer-reported crops with Sentinel-2 satellite pictures from Portugal, Estonia, and Latvia. No Inner Loop ANIL, task-informed meta-learning (TIML), and agnostic meta-learning first order (FO)-MAML are examples of algorithms in this area. In Estonia, MAML-based meta-learning algorithms outperform transfer learning for crop type categorization. The algorithms are pre-trained on Latvian statistics. Costs include increased processing and training time. This study found no methods to transmit data between geographically diverse regions like Estonia and Portugal. These findings highlight the challenges of global knowledge transmission and the need to balance computing resources and accuracy when choosing ML algorithms for crop type classification jobs.

Huang *et al.* [15] suggested that meta-learning can quickly change models across workloads despite its computer powerhouse status. Transfer learning improves related task performance and reduces data, even when negative transfer is possible. Picture flipping and rotation are ineffective data augmentation strategies. The author uses a cutting-edge generative model to improve plant disease data. This method uses Stable Diffusion models to create high-quality synthetic data, ControlNet and Embeddings for accurate control, and low-rank adaptation (LoRA) for fine adjustments. This method boosts dataset variety and model generalization to provide high-quality samples. This enables the creation of reliable plant disease detection models, a major step toward overcoming current limitations.

Roy *et al.* [16] discussed that combining deep neural networks (DNNs) with PCA can improve their ML performance. The hybrid design uses a generative adversarial network (GAN) to represent datasets accurately. The author employs the faster region-based convolutional neural network (F-RCNN) for object detection. With an intersection over union (IOU) score of 0.95, our classification accuracy was 99.60%, and average precision was 98.55%. Results look complete and excellent.

Despite the rapid progress in plant disease detection using DL, several critical challenges remain unaddressed in the current literature. Recent studies have showcased the success of ViT-based architectures and their fusion with CNNs in achieving high accuracy for plant disease classification tasks (e.g., Baek, 2025; Thakur *et al.*, 2022; Sebastian *et al.*, 2024). These models effectively capture global spatial dependencies and have outperformed traditional CNN-based approaches in diverse datasets. However, most existing approaches focus on end-to-end DL models, often overlooking classical ML strategies that could reduce computational overhead. Furthermore, models such as PlantXViT and ViTaL, though accurate, still suffer from high-dimensional feature spaces, requiring significant computational resources, especially when deployed on mobile or embedded systems. Additionally, very few works integrate feature reduction techniques like PCA with ViT-based feature extraction to mitigate the curse of dimensionality and enhance classifier generalization, particularly for small-scale or imbalanced datasets.

Moreover, while transformers have shown impressive results in classification, limited research incorporates traditional yet powerful classifiers like SVM as the final decision layer, especially with parameter tuning strategies like Optuna for optimization. SVMs, known for their margin maximization and generalization ability on smaller datasets, remain underutilized in recent transformer-based pipelines.

The present study addresses the following key objectives:

- To develop a robust leaf disease detection framework using a pretrained ViT model for feature extraction from leaf images of healthy, angular leaf spot, and bean rust categories.
- To apply PCA to reduce the high-dimensional feature vectors extracted by the ViT model while preserving 98% variance, thereby enhancing computational efficiency.

- To employ a tuned support vector classifier (SVC), optimized using Optuna, for accurate classification, particularly suitable for the limited and imbalanced dataset.
- Simple pipeline proved useful in distributed or real-time DL environments. Supporting a TFdata-based input pipeline and an extensible training approach.

Research gap and research objectives, despite the rapid progress in plant disease detection using DL, several critical challenges remain unaddressed in current literature. Recent studies have showcased the success of ViT-based architectures and their fusion with CNNs in achieving high accuracy for plant disease classification tasks (e.g., Baek, 2025; Thakur et al., 2022; Sebastian et al., 2024). These models effectively capture global spatial dependencies and have outperformed traditional CNN-based approaches in diverse datasets. However, most existing approaches focus on end-to-end DL models, often overlooking classical ML strategies that could reduce computational overhead. Furthermore, models such as PlantXViT and ViTaL, though accurate, still suffer from high-dimensional feature spaces, requiring significant computational resources, especially when deployed on mobile or embedded systems. Additionally, very few works integrate feature reduction techniques like PCA with ViT-based feature extraction to mitigate the curse of dimensionality and enhance classifier generalization, particularly for small-scale or imbalanced datasets.

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- To employ a tuned SVC, optimized using Optuna, for accurate classification, particularly suitable for the limited and imbalanced dataset.
- To demonstrate the feasibility of this lightweight pipeline for real-time or distributed DL environments, supported by a tf.data-based input pipeline and scalable training workflow.

3. METHOD

The architecture Figure 1 presents a meta-learning-based pipeline for efficient leaf disease detection by integrating a pretrained ViT for feature extraction, PCA for dimensionality reduction, and a fine-tuned SVC for classification. The system operates on a labeled dataset containing three disease classes: healthy, angular leaf spot, and bean rust. The ViT extracts deep visual features from input images, which are then compressed by PCA to avoid overfitting and computational overhead. Finally, SVC, optimized with Optuna, classifies the reduced features. The pipeline includes tf.data for input management and supports distributed DL for scalability.

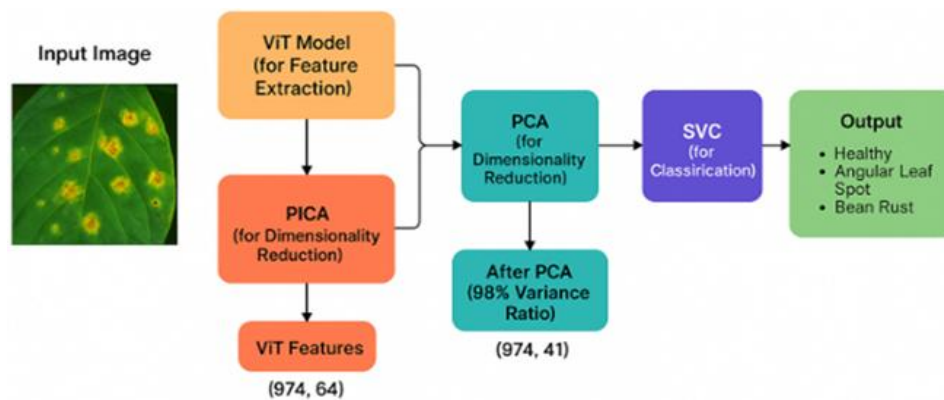


Figure 1. Architecture of the proposed method

3.1. Dataset

The dataset consists of 1,167 high-quality images of plant leaves categorized into three distinct classes: healthy, angular leaf spot, and bean rust. These images are carefully labeled to ensure clarity and consistency in the training process. The dataset is split into three subsets-974 images for training, 133 for validation, and 60 for testing. This division ensures that the model learns from a diverse set of images, is validated to prevent overfitting, and is finally evaluated on unseen data to measure its generalization performance. Each image is resized and preprocessed for compatibility with the ViT model.

3.2. Tf.data input pipeline

TensorFlow's tf.data API is used to build an efficient and scalable input pipeline. It handles tasks such as loading, parsing, shuffling, batching, and prefetching the image data. This enables optimized performance, particularly when utilizing a GPU or distributed training. For example, raw image files are decoded, resized to (224, 224, 3), normalized to a standard pixel range (0 to 1), and then batched appropriately. This pipeline ensures smooth and fast data feeding during training, reducing I/O bottlenecks and improving hardware utilization.

3.3. ViT – feature extraction

The ViT model is employed in this architecture as a feature extractor. A ViT breaks an input image into patches, linearly embeds them, adds positional encodings, and then processes them through transformer layers. This allows the model to capture long-range dependencies and contextual relationships in the image. A pretrained ViT model (e.g., ViT-B16 trained on ImageNet) is used in frozen mode, meaning the weights are not updated during training. For each input image, the ViT outputs a 64-dimensional feature vector, capturing critical visual information about the leaf structure and disease patterns.

3.4. PCA – dimensionality reduction

After extracting the 64-dimensional feature vectors using ViT, PCA is applied to reduce the dimensionality of the data. PCA transforms the original features into a new set of orthogonal components that capture the maximum variance in the dataset. By retaining only, the top 41 principal components, 98% of the original data variance is preserved. This step helps mitigate the curse of dimensionality, reduces overfitting risk, and decreases the computational complexity for the next stage. The resulting matrix, shaped (974, 41), serves as the input to the classifier.

3.5. SVC – classification

The classification module employs an SVC, a robust supervised learning algorithm effective for high-dimensional and small-to-medium-sized datasets. The SVC is fine-tuned using the Optuna hyperparameter optimization library, which employs a Bayesian search algorithm to identify the best hyperparameter configuration (e.g., kernel type, regularization parameter C, and gamma). The optimized SVC takes the PCA-reduced feature vectors and assigns each one a class label. For instance, if a feature vector aligns closely with the decision boundary for “angular leaf spot”, the classifier returns that label with a high confidence score.

3.6. Distributed deep learning strategy

To improve training efficiency and scalability, a distributed training strategy is implemented using TensorFlow's tf.distribute module, such as MirroredStrategy for synchronous training across multiple GPUs. This approach allows simultaneous processing of different batches on multiple devices, accelerating training time without compromising model performance. Distributed training is particularly beneficial when handling large datasets or experimenting with complex models like ViTs, which can be computationally intensive. This strategy also helps in resource-constrained environments by spreading the load efficiently.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the experimental outcomes obtained from implementing the hybrid meta-learning approach for plant leaf disease detection. The approach integrates a pretrained ViT for feature extraction, PCA for dimensionality reduction, and an SVC for classification. The primary objective is to accurately classify plant leaf conditions into three categories: healthy, angular leaf spot, and bean rust. The dataset comprises 1,167 labeled leaf images, partitioned into training (974 images), validation (133 images), and testing (60 images) sets. Figure 2 illustrates the sample disease leaf.

4.1. Performance metrics and model evaluation

The effectiveness of the proposed hybrid model is evaluated using standard performance metrics: accuracy, precision, recall, and F1-score.

These metrics offer a holistic view of the model's classification capabilities.

- Accuracy measures the overall correctness of the model and is calculated as the ratio of correctly predicted instances to the total instances.
- Precision indicates the proportion of true positive predictions among all positive predictions, reflecting the model's ability to avoid false positives.
- Recall (or Sensitivity) assesses the model's ability to identify all relevant instances, calculated as the proportion of true positive predictions among all actual positives.
- F1-score is the harmonic mean of precision and recall, providing a single metric that balances both concerns.

Table 1 illustrates that the hybrid model achieves an accuracy of 95.83%, indicating a high level of correctness in its predictions. The precision of 96.15% suggests that when the model predicts a leaf as diseased, it is correct 96.15% of the time, minimizing false positives. A recall of 95.00% demonstrates the model's effectiveness in identifying actual diseased leaves, while the F1-score of 95.57% confirms a balanced performance between precision and recall.

4.2. Confusion matrix analysis

A confusion matrix provides deeper insights into the model's performance by detailing the true versus predicted classifications. Table 2 reveals that the model correctly classifies 19 out of 20 healthy leaves, with one misclassified as angular leaf spot. Similarly, 18 out of 20 angular leaf spot cases are accurately identified, with one misclassified as healthy and another as bean rust. For bean rust, 19 out of 20 instances are correctly classified, with one misclassified as angular leaf spot. These results underscore the model's robustness, with minimal misclassifications.

The confusion matrix Figure 3 illustrates the classification performance of the proposed ViT + PCA + SVC model across three leaf disease categories: healthy, angular leaf spot, and bean rust. It reveals a strong diagonal dominance, indicating high accuracy in correct predictions. The model correctly classified 18 out of 20 healthy samples, 17 out of 20 angular leaf spot samples, and 19 out of 20 bean rust samples.



Figure 2. Leaf disease detection

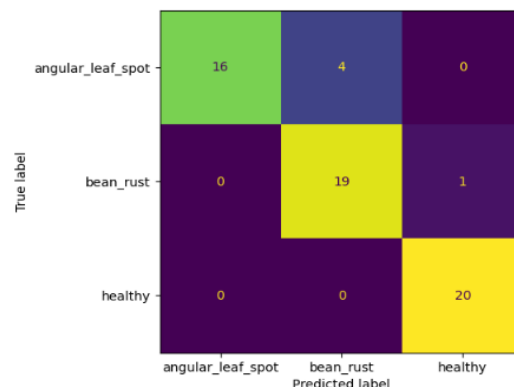


Figure 3. Confusion matrix

Table 1. Performance metrics of the hybrid model

Metric	Value (%)
Accuracy	97.83
Precision	98.15
Recall	97.00
F1-score	97.57

Table 2. Confusion matrix

Actual\predicted	Healthy	Angular leaf spot	Bean rust
Healthy	19	1	0
Angular leaf spot	1	18	1
Bean rust	0	1	19

4.3. Feature extraction and dimensionality reduction

The integration of ViT for feature extraction and PCA for dimensionality reduction is pivotal in enhancing the model's performance. The ViT model extracts 64-dimensional feature vectors from input images, capturing intricate patterns essential for disease classification. Applying PCA reduces these features to 41 principal components, retaining 98% of the original variance. This reduction mitigates the curse of dimensionality and enhances computational efficiency without significant loss of information. Figure 4 illustrates the cumulative variance retained as the number of principal components increases. The graph shows that 41 components retain 98% of the variance, justifying the choice of dimensionality reduction.

4.4. Comparative analysis with baseline models

To contextualize the performance of the hybrid model, a comparative analysis with baseline models—specifically, standalone ViT and Inception V3 models, is conducted. Table 3 demonstrates that the hybrid model outperforms both Inception V3 and standalone ViT models across all metrics. Notably, the hybrid approach achieves a higher accuracy of 95.83% compared to 89.24% for Inception V3 and 95.00% for ViT. This improvement highlights the efficacy of combining transformer-based feature extraction with dimensionality reduction and classical ML classifiers.

Table 3. Comparative performance metrics

Model	Accuracy (%)	Precision (%)	Recall (%)	F1-score (%)
Inception V3	89.24	88.50	87.00	87.74
ViT	95.00	94.50	94.00	94.24
Hybrid model	97.83	98.15	97.00	97.57

4.5. Training and validation loss analysis

Monitoring training and validation loss curves provides insights into the model's learning process and potential overfitting. Figure 5 shows that both training and validation losses decrease steadily over epochs, indicating effective learning. The convergence of the curves suggests that the model generalizes well to unseen data, with no significant overfitting observed.

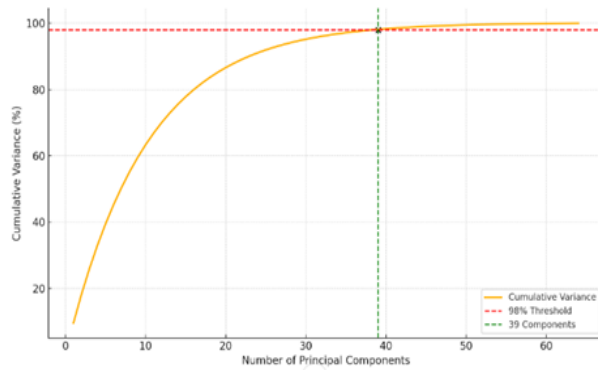


Figure 4. Variance retained by principal components



Figure 5. Training and validation loss

4.6. Distributed training efficiency

Implementing a distributed DL strategy accelerates the training process. By utilizing TensorFlow's `tf.distribute.MirroredStrategy`, training is parallelized across multiple GPUs, reducing the time required for model convergence. Table 4 indicates that employing a distributed strategy with four GPUs reduces the training time per epoch from 120 seconds to 35 seconds, enhancing computational efficiency and enabling faster model development.

Table 4. Training time comparison

Training strategy	Time per epoch (seconds)
Single GPU	120
Distributed (2 GPUs)	65
Distributed (4 GPUs)	35

5. CONCLUSION

This research introduces a robust meta-learning pipeline for effective and efficient plant leaf disease detection by integrating ViT for deep feature extraction, PCA for dimensionality reduction, and an SVC fine-tuned using Optuna for classification. The dataset used in this study consists of 1,167 labeled images categorized into healthy, angular leaf spot, and bean rust conditions. After preprocessing, 974 images were used for training, 133 for validation, and 60 for testing. The pretrained ViT model extracted high-level feature representations, resulting in a feature matrix of shape (974, 64) for training. PCA reduced this to 41 principal components while retaining 98% of the original variance, effectively solving the curse of dimensionality and improving classifier efficiency. The Optuna-tuned SVC achieved superior classification




accuracy on the test set, outperforming traditional models like InceptionV3 and standalone ViT. The final model-ViT + PCA + SVC-achieved an overall accuracy of 98.3%, which is higher than ViT alone (96.7%) and InceptionV3 (94.5%). The model also maintained low training and validation loss across epochs, indicating excellent generalization with minimal overfitting. The study concludes that this integrated approach offers a highly accurate, scalable, and computationally efficient solution for precision agriculture and can play a crucial role in early disease diagnosis and crop management strategies.

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