# Building a sustainable career during the initial transition to work: a multiple-stakeholder perspective on proactive behaviors and contextual factors

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The initial transition into work has become less predictable. Therefore, emerging adults should take charge and be proactively engaged in their careers during the preparation stage of the school-to-work transition (STWT). We explored which behaviors emerging adults display during the STWT to foster their happiness, health, and productivity, how various contextual factors enable or hinder these behaviors, and to what extent these behaviors can be considered proactive.



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**Design/methodology/approach** – Taking a qualitative approach, we conducted 44 semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students at an Applied Sciences University in the Netherlands six months before graduation. Additionally, we held nine focus groups ($n$ = 55) and four interviews ($n$ = 6) with contextual stakeholders (i.e. parents, faculty/staff, employers, the board of the university, higher education policymakers, and the Ministry of Education).
**Findings** – The students mentioned three main behaviors to foster their health, happiness, and productivity, namely, eating healthy food, maintaining social contacts, and reflecting on their motivations. Our analysis shows that, conceptually, none of these behaviors can be considered truly proactive. Moreover, the findings revealed multiple systemic underlying contextual hindrances to portray these behaviors, such as educational system characteristics, which make proactive behaviors less likely.
**Originality/value** – As the STWT is affected by multiple contexts, adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective is imperative when studying the phenomenon. We adopted the sustainable careers framework as a lens to uncover how emerging adults may build early career sustainability—additionally, we nuance current research on proactivity by concretizing the conceptualization of proactive behaviors.

**Keywords** Contextual factors, Graduate employability, School-to-work transition, Sustainable careers, Proactive behaviors
**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Traditionally, transitioning from school to work entailed a one-off transition into lifetime employment (De Vos *et al.*, 2019). However, today, emerging adults [1] (Arnett, 2000) must adapt to macro trends such as globalization and technological advancement, making their careers more unpredictable than ever (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). To manage these complexities, emerging adults are expected to take ownership of their careers and engage in proactive behaviors (i.e. behaviors that are self-initiated, future-focused, and change-oriented; Parker and Bindl, 2017) from the very start of their careers. In this article, we consider the school-to-work transition (STWT) a crucial period in time as it forms the starting point of building a sustainable career (Blokker *et al.*, 2023), that is, a career in which one's happiness, health, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005) are protected and aligned with one's broader life context (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). However, little empirical research has been done to uncover *how* emerging adults build early career sustainability.

One potential answer to this "how" question is to investigate what behaviors emerging adults engage in during their initial transition into work. Research shows that engaging in proactive behaviors during the STWT is imperative as it can enhance career progression (Seibert *et al.*, 2001), increase person-career fit (Zikic and Hall, 2009), and increase career success (De Vos *et al.*, 2019). However, looking exclusively at an individual's proactive behaviors does not provide a holistic perspective because careers occur in, and are affected by, the context in which they evolve. Thus, to fully understand how the proactive behaviors of emerging adults during the STWT can be stimulated, we should consider both the person and their context (Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). This aligns with the sustainable careers framework, which places the individual at the forefront but adopts a systemic approach to analyze the influence of contextual factors on careers. Applying this framework to the STWT means considering the broader education system, labor market, and social/national contexts in empirical research (Blokker *et al.*, 2023; De Vos *et al.*, 2020).

Focusing on the individual's behavior, studies on the STWT and careers in general have emphasized the importance of proactive behaviors. Although conceptualized in various ways, research on proactivity highlights the combined elements of (1) self-initiation, (2) future focus, and (3) change orientation (Parker and Bindl, 2017). Scholars have introduced a host of proactive behaviors considered critical for success at work and in someone's career (for an overview, see, e.g. Jiang *et al.*, 2023). However, most studies have implicitly assumed that all kinds of career behaviors, such as exploration and planning, are proactive without empirically examining whether these behaviors are *truly* proactive (Akkermans and Hirschi,

2023). For example, although career self-management and job search behaviors are often depicted as proactive behaviors (Seibert *et al.*, 2001), typical examples such as scanning job advertisements or writing a CV are not necessarily proactive. To illustrate, students could be encouraged by their parents or teachers to look for job vacancies. Likewise, an individual may have to apply for a job out of necessity to maintain their living circumstances. This signals a conceptual problem, as it remains unclear whether the proactive behaviors deemed crucial for successfully managing work and careers are actually proactive. Examining when career behaviors are truly proactive will increase our insights into the predictors and consequences of motivations to engage in career behaviors (Akkermans and Hirschi, 2023).

To better understand proactive behaviors and *how* they relate to career sustainability within the context of the STWT, we formulate the following research questions: *What proactive behaviors do emerging adults display during the STWT to foster their happiness, health, and productivity? What contextual influences enable and/or hinder emerging adults' proactive behaviors? And to what extent can these behaviors actually be considered proactive?* We aim to contribute to research on careers, and particularly the STWT, in three ways. First, as Blokker *et al.* (2023) argued, the sustainable careers framework serves as a valuable perspective to organize the STWT. Following Blokker *et al.*'s conceptual suggestions, we add empirical insights into the underlying processes of *how* emerging adults build early career sustainability and work towards an adaptive STWT. Specifically, we will investigate what proactive behaviors emerging adults engage in during the STWT and how these relate to their happiness, health, and productivity as a basis for their career sustainability.

Second, previous research on the STWT has mainly taken an agentic perspective on how emerging adults manage the STWT (Akkermans *et al.*, 2021). Although some contextual parties (e.g. parents, peers, and educators) have received attention in previous research on the STWT (Marciniak *et al.*, 2020; Ruschoff *et al.*, 2022), we advance the field by including stakeholders from all four contexts suggested by Blokker *et al.* (2023), namely: the educational (i.e. faculty members and a board member), social (i.e. parents), labor market (i.e. employers), and national (i.e. policymakers and the Ministry of education) contexts. This holistic lens, which is inherent to the sustainable careers framework (De Vos *et al.*, 2019), allows us to better understand the micro (i.e. individual proactive behaviors) and the macro (i.e. contextual enablers and hindrances) factors involved in navigating the STWT.

Third, Akkermans and Hirschi (2023) noted a discrepancy in current scholarly work between conceptualizing behaviors as proactive and assessing them as such. They suggested that more research is needed to clarify this difference. We address their call by conducting in-depth interviews with emerging adults to elucidate the proactive nature of their behavior. Additionally, by adopting a systemic view, we highlight similarities and differences between stakeholders and their influences on the proactive behaviors of emerging adults. These combined findings will allow us to analyze the nature of certain behaviors more precisely and determine whether they are indeed proactive (i.e. self-initiated, future-focused, and change-oriented).

## Theoretical framework

### *School-to-work transition*

Although the STWT was traditionally considered a predictable path toward stable employment (Super, 1957), it has become ever more challenging in contemporary times (Cebulla and Whetton, 2018). This can be attributed to four key Western European labor market developments: (1) shift to a service-oriented sharing economy, increasing demand for diverse skills; (2) prevalence of flexible contracts and temporary roles challenging emerging adults; (3) outdated focus on stable employment for successful transitions to work; and (4) diminishing link between education and work requiring a flexible career approach (see

Akkermans *et al.*, 2021). These trends signal that the STWT has become a dynamic process of learning experiences in which emerging adults must take charge of their careers to thrive during their initial labor market entry (Blokker *et al.*, 2023; De Vos *et al.*, 2019). Although emerging adults perceive themselves to be more employable with a higher education degree entering the labor market (Donald *et al.*, 2018), we lack process-related clarity on *how* they behave during the STWT to be more employable. To explore this, we use the sustainable careers framework as a lens.

### *Sustainable careers*

To accommodate a systematic and holistic perspective, we use the sustainable careers framework, which refers to "sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual" (Van der Heijden and De Vos, 2015, p. 7). Even though empirical research on career sustainability is still in its infancy (Retkowsky *et al.*, 2023), research has shown the positive effects of proactive behaviors on career sustainability (Plomp *et al.*, 2016).

We define happiness, health, and productivity in line with De Vos *et al.* (2020). Happiness refers to the subjective elements of success or satisfaction with one's life and career trajectory. Health encompasses both physical and mental health and refers to the dynamic fit of the emerging adults' potential career with their psychological and physical capabilities. Productivity means a strong performance in one's current study, internship, or job and high employability or career potential after graduation.

This systemic perspective examines the interaction between person, context, and time (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). In this article, we refer to the *person* to understand how emerging adults, through their actions, experiences, and interpretations of these, affect the sustainability of their future careers. We incorporate the person dimension by interviewing emerging adults about their actions and experiences. Next, *context* refers to how a potential career is affected by the multiple contexts in which it evolves (e.g. educational, social, labor market, and national context). The importance of taking a contextual perspective in STWT research has been a recurring theme in the literature, as can be evidenced by the longstanding seminal contributions of Blustein (1995) and Feij *et al.* (1995). Following this stream of research, we include context by adopting a systemic multiple-stakeholder perspective (Colakoglu *et al.*, 2006). Finally, the perspective of *time* refers to how experiences, viewpoints, and work-related positions are not static and change over time. Time is included by asking both the emerging adults and the contextual stakeholders about inherently dynamic processes.

### *Proactive behaviors*

The literature on proactive behaviors can inform how emerging adults may navigate their STWT. According to Parker *et al.* (2010), proactivity involves taking control to enact change rather than passively observing. Parker and Bindl (2017) outlined three key attributes defining proactive behaviors: behavior must be self-starting, future-focused, *and* change-oriented. Self-starting actions are initiated by individuals, while future-focused behaviors anticipate long-term outcomes. Additionally, proactive behaviors are change-oriented, aiming to alter the status quo.

Although proactive behavior's properties are clear, capturing them accurately is complex. To illustrate, a bibliometric analysis (Jiang *et al.*, 2023) included many concepts that may not all represent actual proactive behaviors, e.g. career adaptability, which is typically considered a resource instead of proactive behavior (Akkermans and Hirschi, 2023). Such issues also apply to studying proactive behaviors during the STWT. Imagine a graduating student actively networking in their field, showcasing a self-starting mindset and future

focus. Yet, external influences or short-term fears may drive this behavior, diluting its self-initiated or future-oriented nature. Similarly, social inclination may merely represent status quo behavior. In short, these kinds of behaviors are typically considered proactive, but conceptually speaking, this is not necessarily the case.

## Method

### *Research design*

This study employed a qualitative quasi-foundationalist approach because we searched for an approximation of reality (Amis and Silk, 2008). The quasi-foundationalist approach proposes that while reality is independent of our understanding of it, there is no theory-free knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). As such, we aimed to generate generic theory that is grounded and scientifically credible while acknowledging the interpretive paradigm (i.e. the lived experiences of those researched are created in the written text by the researcher; see House, 2005). As Denzin and Lincoln (2005) acknowledged, the choice for this approach stems from the idea that a particular research strategy should be practical while allowing for internal reflexivity amongst the researchers and their scholarly work. Specifically, an interpretivist ontology lens (Sandberg, 2005) was used to engage with the socially constructed and relational nature of participants' perceptions and experiences.

To enhance our understanding of the proactive behaviors of students during the STWT, we conducted semi-structured interviews, as these allowed us to study their lived experiences (Richardson *et al.*, 2022). In doing so, we could uncover the "why" in terms of their behaviors and determine whether these behaviors were actually proactive. In the Netherlands, nearly all graduating students at Universities of Applied Sciences start their final bachelor project six months before graduation (Government of the Netherlands, 2023). We conducted interviews at the start of students' graduation projects to capture behaviors crucial for their STWT. This period marks the beginning of their transition to work.

To examine how the context influences the proactive behaviors of students during the STWT, focus groups were held with educational, social, labor market, and national stakeholders (i.e. faculty and staff, parents, employers, policymakers, and a university board member). Our methodological approach did not match the students with their parents in the recruitment (i.e. we did not aim to recruit the parents of the participating students). Therefore, the views expressed in these focus groups may differ from the "private" opinions expressed in one-to-one interviews (Barbour, 2018). However, as this study did not aim to uncover private perspectives but was intended to bring forth multiple stakeholders' different views and discussions, we considered focus groups to be a suitable approach. We conducted multiple focus groups to draw parallels and differences between stakeholders across sessions. Finally, to gather perspectives from educational board members, policymakers, and governmental actors, we conducted semi-structured interviews instead of focus groups due to the small number of individuals in these roles and their limited availability.

### *Samples and sampling frames*

The student interviews were held at one of the Netherlands' top five biggest Applied Sciences Universities. Most students (97%) at this Applied Sciences University attain stable employment within a year and a half after graduation. We chose bachelor students in the field of Economics due to the highly versatile and broad education they receive, which allows for employment in different industries (Times Higher Education, 2022). We used purposive sampling (Black, 2010) for a representative selection. To ensure a representative sample, and considering their influence on career outcomes, we accounted for students' gender (Patton *et al.*, 2002), migration (Clair *et al.*, 2017), and educational background (Wolniak

and Engberg, 2010) in our sampling strategy. We tried to maintain a balanced sample for all these factors to optimize its representativeness (See Appendix A for the final sample). Initially, 50 interviews were scheduled; however, we stopped data collection when saturation was reached due to no new substantial themes emerging (Guest *et al.*, 2006). Our final sample includes 44 graduating students.

To examine contextual perspectives, we organized ten focus groups ($n$ = 55) and conducted four semi-structured interviews ($n$ = 6). To reflect stakeholder diversity (Barbour, 2018), we included individuals of different ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds within each focus group. See Appendix B for the final sample.

*Procedures*

Students were recruited via direct messaging using purposeful sampling to cover various gender, migration, and educational backgrounds. Lists of potential participants were randomized, and recruitment proceeded from top to bottom until the desired numbers were met. Parents were recruited via email sent to all graduating Economics bachelor program students. Teachers, head lecturers, and coaches were approached through an open invitation on the University of Applied Sciences' intranet. The researchers' network contacted recruiters, hiring managers, and policymakers. Policymakers were part of the joint-university advisory organization (UASNL), the board member, and the Ministry of Education and were contacted personally by the first author. None received compensation.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted in Dutch, the participants' and researchers' first language, to facilitate comfortable and in-depth discussions. The first author conducted all interviews and focus groups. The second and third authors each joined different focus groups once to observe data depth (this did not impact session outcomes).

We took several measures to ensure the quality of the preliminary interview guide. Firstly, we grounded it empirically by incorporating indicators of sustainable careers: happiness, health, and productivity (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). Secondly, the research team critically assessed two preliminary interview guides developed by the first author as a pilot; one more structured and one more open. Thirdly, the guides were field-tested among potential participants to ensure relevance and variety in answers, leading to informed adjustments (Chenail, 2011). Fourthly, the research team chose the final interview guide based on criteria for varied and in-depth answers, with adjustments made following field testing. The guide leaned toward openness to facilitate participants' sharing of thoughts and experiences on various topics. A flexible topic guide for focus groups was developed, allowing free discussions among participants (Barbour, 2018). See Appendixes D and E in the supplemental materials for the final interview guides in English.

We adhered to ethical guidelines from the first author's university, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, privacy, and upholding beneficence principles. All participants provided informed consent, and interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Participants were anonymized as R1, R2, etc., to maintain confidentiality and encourage honest responses. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the interviews and focus groups were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams. Student interviews averaged 60 min, focus groups 85 min, and stakeholder interviews around 70 min. Triangulation was employed for validity and credibility instead of conducting a member check, as the findings were socially constructed through multiple-stakeholder perspectives (Motulsky, 2021).

*Data analysis*

The data were coded and analyzed using template analysis (King, 2004), a specific form of thematic analysis (Nowell *et al.*, 2017), to strive for a trustworthy and rigorous manner of

finding meaning and yielding results. Based on the literature study and our key study concepts, we used a deductive approach to determine a set of preliminary codes to initiate the analysis (Flach and Kakas, 2000). For example, the sustainable careers framework (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) provided the overarching themes of happiness, health, and productivity (Van der Heijden, 2005). Next, while studying the transcripts, an inductive approach was used to add and alter codes using ATLAS.ti (Van der Heijden, 2005). In interpreting the final data, an abductive approach was used to optimally explore those observations where traditional theories could not explain what was encountered (Van der Heijden, 2005). Identifying enabling and hindering factors for emerging adults' proactive behaviors are clear examples of this abductive approach. An overview of the final codes used in the analysis is shown in Figure 1.

The analysis of the data consisted of several steps. First, the entire research team coded 25% of the student interviews together in several meetings to cross-validate and discuss thought processes, adding and/or altering codes when quotes did not fit existing codes. Through these meetings, we came to a shared understanding of the coding process, the codes, and the meaning behind the codes. Second, the remainder of the interviews was coded by the first author using the coding scheme formulated by the entire research team while enabling the researchers to add and/or alter codes as previously done by the entire team. All other doubts were thoroughly discussed with the second and third authors to stay aligned with the coding scheme. As the total amount of the stakeholder data was smaller, the first author initially coded them all and double-checked with the entire team. Although this consultation led to increased nuance within the coding process (e.g. specifying whether an enhancing factor was behavior or competence), no fundamental differences between researchers could be detected. See Appendix F for an example of the coding process.

### *Researcher positionality and perspectives*

The authors of this study work at three different Dutch (Applied Sciences) Universities and are therefore familiar with the higher education sector. The authors are in different career phases and have different expertise (e.g. educational sciences, career research, HRM, and psychology). All have received training in qualitative research methods and have experience with qualitative research.

## Findings

Our exploration focused on: (1) emerging adults' reported proactive career behaviors toward their happiness, health, and productivity, (2) how the context influences these behaviors, and (3) to what extent these behaviors can be considered proactive. Importantly, we explored how these behaviors relate to the STWT preparation and emerging adults' future plans. We also explicitly looked at the potential influence of the different demographics within our sample (i.e. gender, education, and migration). However, no salient themes specific to these demographics emerged. Therefore, we decided not to further specify any of these demographic variables when discussing the findings. Additionally, our multi-stakeholder approach allows for triangulation [2]; however, not all related parties discussed all findings (e.g. emerging adults hardly discuss their educational choices). See Appendix C in the supplemental materials for an overview of the self-reported student behaviors in relation to the career sustainability indicators.

### *Happiness*

The students reported a broad range of proactive career behaviors they engage in to foster their happiness. The two most frequently mentioned behaviors they used to foster their

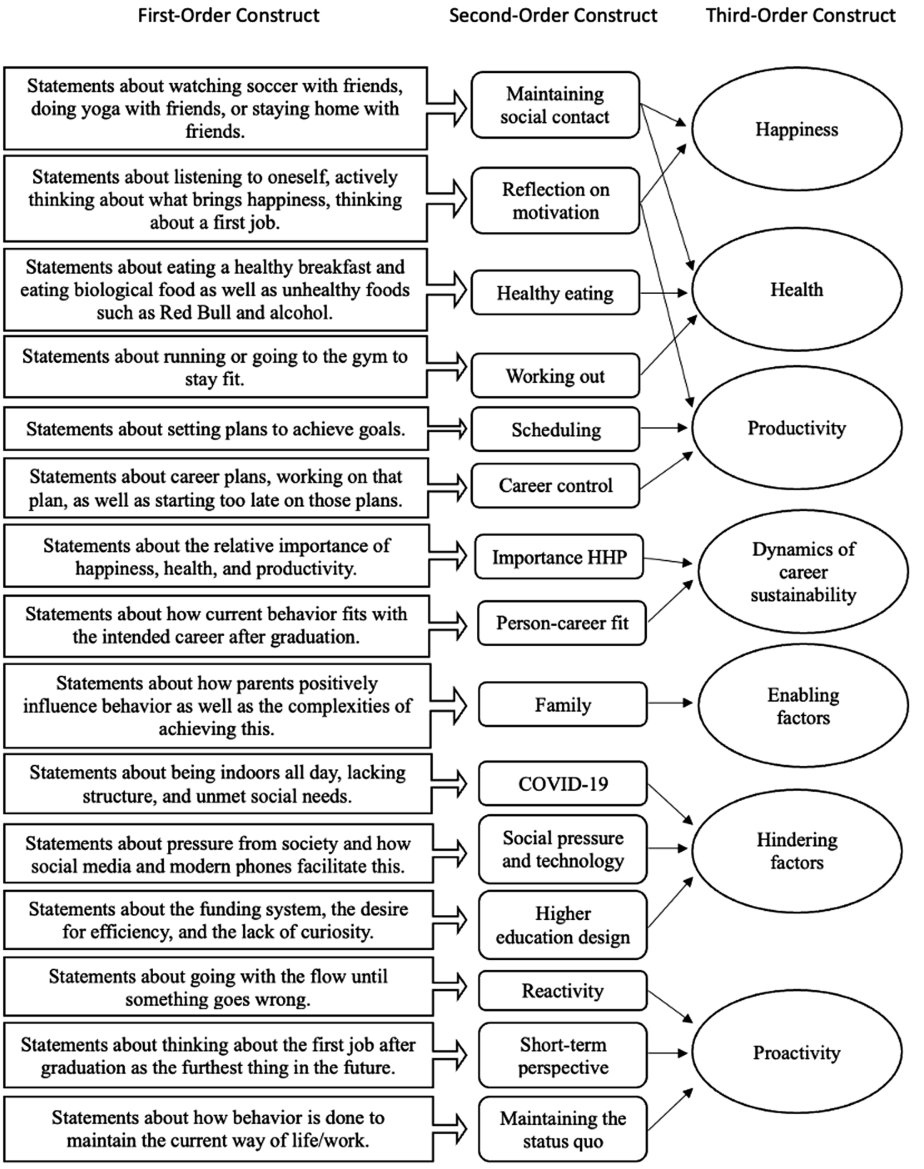


**Figure 1.**
An overview of the final categories used for the student and stakeholder data analysis

**Note(s):** Although the third-order constructs were deductively decided upon beforehand, the first and second-order constructs were inductively found
**Source(s):** Authors' work

happiness during the STWT preparation are (1) maintaining social contacts and (2) reflecting on their motivations.

*Maintaining social contacts.* The students value maintaining social contacts and engaging in behaviors to promote that, such as reaching out to friends and organizing meetings with

them. As R7 put it: "Weekly, on the weekend, with a friend, watch a match of soccer or something like that." We also see this reflected in how parents described this behavior. As one parent (R5) mentioned: "When I look at my kid, she prefers to meet up at home with friends than go somewhere and do something." Even employers indicated how students prioritize their social contact. For instance, R43 noted: "If you're talking about fun and a pot of beer, the comradery, being social, that is what they are busy with." It seems that all parties show how maintaining social contact often comes down to the act of meeting up with friends.

*Reflection on motivation.* The students actively contemplated about what makes them happy. For instance, R43: "What do I do to be happy? Hmm, yes, listen to myself well. So, what do I want and what makes me happy?". This active contemplation was mostly done through thinking for oneself and talking about it with friends and family, herewith further emphasizing the importance of maintaining social contacts. Indeed, employers and faculty also shared this sentiment, as one of the faculty members (R32) stated: "They are definitely concerned with short-term happiness, preferably from day to day or weekend to weekend."

*Health*

Most students discussed physical health behaviors, specifically: eating healthy and working out. Only when asked in a follow-up question would they focus on their mental health-related behaviors. Everything from religion to a daily rhythm was mentioned for protecting their mental health, but one behavior was mentioned most: maintaining social contact. The students also mentioned social contact regarding their happiness, signaling that socially oriented behaviors are critical in preparing for the transition to work.

*Healthy eating.* Eating healthy was the most frequently mentioned behavior. As R20 remarked: "I just eat a healthy breakfast, a healthy lunch, and once a week, I eat unhealthily." Parents (R16) confirmed this, as one noted: "With me, they really watch what's in the meal, is it biological, where did you buy it?" However, as most students still lived at home, R12 noted the role of their parents in influencing healthy eating: "Mom takes really good care of us. Mom makes tasty and healthy meals; she thinks of everything." This was confirmed by parents, such as R1, who said, "we stimulate eating healthy." While students and parents held positive views, other stakeholders were largely negative. A comment by a faculty member (R21) that received much support: "Red Bull goes in by the liters; that is not healthy. And all the stories of beer festivals, alcohol everywhere. And then say that they're in bed by 3 AM. I find that an unhealthy lifestyle." A similar sentiment was also shared by the Board of the Applied Sciences University (R61), who reflected on students' behavior through what the University provides: "What are we serving students in the cafeteria that relates to their health? On a personal note, and please record this, I'm extremely annoyed by all the unhealthy and unsustainable concepts we serve." The UASNL noted they have policies on how all the Applied Sciences Universities in the Netherlands agreed on a prevention accord about excessive alcohol use, but no policies on smoking (beyond existing laws) and overabundant or unhealthy eating. UASNL did not write policies on a healthier food situation because they did not want to be patronizing.

*Working out.* Working out was the second most frequently mentioned physical-health-related behavior. As R21 succinctly phrased: "working out to stay fit," specifically "running, to maintain my physical condition." Although the motive to stay fit (e.g. to look good) was mentioned by students, this was also stressed by the faculty members (R21): "I see that they are busy with sports. And the trigger being they want to look good." Another motive to work out emerged in the focus groups with faculty members, namely, wanting to be part of a group. One faculty member (R36) stated: "You see your friends in the gym making selfies, doing pushups, you get pulled into it. You think, 'I also have to do that,' because, yes, they are inherently herd animals, people. People in that age category want to belong."

*Maintaining social contacts.* The only prominent theme that emerged for mental health was maintaining social contact. Social contact for mental health involves discussing feelings, as mentioned by R28, "meet up with friends, just walk, have a coffee, sometimes at night, have a beer, just talk, empty your head." This way of recharging was also described by several parents, such as R1: "Especially with his group of friends, that's where he gets his energy to recharge."

### *Productivity*

The students reported three frequently used productivity-related behaviors that were related to the STWT preparation: (1) reflecting on their motivations, (2) scheduling, and (3) taking control of their careers. Here, we saw, for the second time, how one behavior (i.e. reflecting on one's motivations) is portrayed as fostering two different indicators (i.e. happiness and productivity), displaying the importance of introspection for students.

*Reflection on motivation.* Although the behavior was the same as when intended to foster happiness, the context differs. Concerning productivity, it became obvious that the interview unlocked students' reflections about what they want in a job and what jobs would allow them to become successful. For example, when discussing their ideal life, R34 shared: "I'm in a company, where from a lot of sides, from up, from down, from the sides, a lot comes my way, and I have to manage that." Our analysis showed that although our questions evoked reflections, the students were already actively thinking about this. Such as R6, who said: "I have plans . . . But I'm doubting, will I start as an online marketer and do that for a year minimally? Or, do that part-time and get another degree next to it and work full-time afterward?" Although contextual stakeholders confirmed seeing the students reflect actively, they highlighted that only a few answers were found. For example, a faculty member (R30) remarked: "If you know what you want and where you want to go, you can consciously work on your employability. But a lot of students simply don't know. Don't know what the right place for them is." Interestingly, the Ministry pointed out how they believe the school-to-school transition as "the initial study choice to be so very important" for laying the foundation for a smooth STWT that follows a few years later.

*Scheduling.* Scheduling emerged as a key behavior for current and future success. Notably, it was the only theme related to current job performance. For example, R8 discussed their scheduling abilities: "I look at what I have to do and make a plan for myself and set a goal for when I want to finish it." It is noteworthy that the contextual stakeholders did not make any scheduling-related remarks, except for one parent (R1) stating the importance, saying: "Scheduling should be a course across all bachelor's degrees."

*Career control.* Taking control of one's career is mentioned by some students in concrete ways, such as R3, who pointed out that: "When I graduate, I will start working directly, making money, probably with the company I'm currently doing my graduation project for. That's the plan." However, we observed abstract terminology that did not correspond with taking control as a *behavioral* strategy. For example, R40 illustrated: "My personal, most important career goal is to have a good job, a steadfast job, one in which I can develop. In which I lay a foundation for my future." Nevertheless, students who mentioned actual behaviors related to career control reported setting and attaining performance goals, as R34 stated: "Setting goals for myself, scheduling successes, so to speak. Forcing success experiences." However, the contextual stakeholders saw entirely different behaviors when focusing on career control; as a parent (R1) described: "At this moment, it is too little or too late. It is too much of a 'head over heels' into the graduation project without looking ahead toward the future." Altogether, we found a fragmented image of students (not) taking control of their careers in time, where students and stakeholders paint different pictures. This emphasizes UASNL's (R59) notion that staff and parents are needed to help students gain awareness: "Be the owner of your career."

*The relative importance of happiness, health, and productivity*

When the students were asked to rank happiness, health, and productivity during the preparation for the transition into work, health was considered to be the most important element. A common belief was that it forms life's foundation. One student (R13) phrased it succinctly when they said: "Health is obviously the most important. Health is the foundation of it all. The one on which you build everything else. If you're healthy, you can start to realize things." Notably, the students who believed happiness to be the most important maintained a similar way of thinking, where one student (R7) stated it as follows: "Happiness is simply the most important thing in life to achieve things. If you're happy, you feel motivated to take on the world." An example of a student (R37) struggling with identifying what was most important to them mentioned how their priorities shifted: "For a long time, I have put productivity first, but I want to put it last now . . .. When my productivity came first, my health and happiness suffered at the expense of that." To conclude, we saw that the importance could change over time, but none of the students stated productivity to be the most important during the STWT. Rather, they mentioned that health and happiness were prerequisites for productivity. As R21 fittingly put it: "To be able to perform well, you must be happy, and you must be healthy." Interestingly, although we framed the interview as a moment to talk about "the development of you as a student, and your life and career," all health and happiness-related behaviors were focused on the private life of the students, while the productivity-related behaviors were focused on the work life of the students.

Another issue that is fundamental to a sustainable career, but was complex to touch upon in the interviews, is maintaining a balance between these indicators. When asked, "What do you do to keep the balance as optimal as possible?" the students reported a range of behaviors specific to one of the indicators, like scheduling and being mindful. Yet, this meta-level question seemed to be difficult for them to answer.

Finally, we asked the students how they would ensure that their happiness, health, productivity, and related behaviors aligned with their intended careers. In doing so, we wanted to explore how these behaviors relate to the STWT and their future plans. Most students noted how their current behaviors fit with their intended careers. For example, R12 said: "I think health matches [with my career] because working out five times a week is just good." Or R20, who noted with a more helicopter view: "I think it matches. I have a busy life now, and in the future, I will probably also have a busy life." These students seem confident that their current behaviors will fit with their future selves.

*Contextual enablers*

We identified various enablers, such as friends and teachers, but the emerging adults named their parents as the main positive external influence in assisting them in transitioning into work. R9 nicely summed up their parents' influence: "My dad stimulates me; he's always there for me. He says I can do it, and that gives me a boost in confidence." The students mentioned how their parents enabled them by having raised them in a certain way, encouraging them, and setting an example.

Parents mentioned how they struggled with guiding their children; one parent (R4) noted: "As a parent, you have a responsibility, but I think it is challenging to give direction to this." A way of doing this for many parents is by setting an example. As R6 mentioned: "You're the example: If you lie on the couch all day, drink two/three bottles of wine, they will copy that behavior." This same parent (R6) added that the complexity lies in that their children are now supposed to be adults and autonomous. One parent (R9) boiled this down to: "We are, I think, past that stadium, whether they do well or not, whether they have success or not, past that feeling of responsibility you have as a parent, or that you had when they were little. Those [feelings] simply no longer play a part. [The students] decide which direction they want to go

and how they want to do it." Although the parents shared this struggle, simultaneously, we saw students highlight the value of the guidance they receive from their parents. As R29 mentioned: "They stimulate me to make the most of myself, more than I would've otherwise done myself . . . My mom stimulates me to go toward a nice career." The tension between parents struggling to step back and students leaning on them may stem from how conversations are initiated. Students often reactively seek advice after something happens, while parents proactively suggest adjustments before events occur.

*Hindrances*

We identified three main themes from the data that hindered the students' proactive career behaviors in their preparation for transitioning to the labor market: COVID-19, social pressure and technology, and higher education design.

*COVID-19.* Students were bothered most by not knowing when COVID-19 would end and the lack of perspective. R34, for example, described the mundanity of everyday COVID-19 life: "Last year I had a lot of days where I thought 'oof, another day.' Not that I was planning on ending my life or anything so extreme, but definitely, 'oof, here we go again.'" As most students still lived at home at this time, parents (R6) reported a similar thing: "When I talk about COVID, I find a lack of happiness . . . the lack of physical contact at school, class, physical class, going out with friends."

The Ministry (R56) also took note and did what it could: "At some point, we started looking at different measures of a lockdown; how can we make sure students are relieved a bit? Last time [of a lockdown], the libraries remained open, and exams were on location." One faculty member reflected (R24): "It was a year when a lot of students became conscious of the effect of not moving, and that's just one aspect of health." Or, as another faculty member (R21) specified: "A lot of students have sleeping problems because they no longer have structure. . . . They lose their structure because they don't have class in the morning and don't have to go to school." COVID-19 has shown us how influential societal events can be an important hindrance during the STWT.

*Social pressure and technology.* We found that there is an inherent need for students to be "on". A faculty member (R35) phrased this clearly: "That pressure for success, right? To be seen, to be successful, to be happy. That really puts a lot of pressure on the students. To continuously live up to that ideal image. And this relates to health, but also to performance at school, and on career opportunities." Technology is the main facilitator of this pressure. All contextual stakeholders mentioned how social media negatively influences students' mental health. Employers (R54) noted that "The digital world is not reality. Yet, the students appeared to worry about it a lot." Parents (R5) described the fear of missing out: "Social media has created a fear. They have to be everything, be liked by everyone, and do many different things." The faculty (R39) was "worried [about] where it is going with society due to influencers," and UASNL (R59) mentioned an almost addictive aspect of it, where students "experience pressure to be on social media all day." Additionally, all parties described how technology, specifically mobile phones, creates more problems because it easily distracts someone from being productive. For example, as a parent (R17) stressed: "That phone with all the messages. I say: 'You know, we didn't have that back in the day.' To speak in those terms, 'put it away to the side and focus.'" An employer (R54) shared a similar sentiment: "The people here can all confirm that the cellphone has a prominent role with the graduates." This same employer (R54) reflected on the social norms within the Applied Sciences University: "Phone use; what is the current way of working at the University? Can someone just grab his phone and do what he wants? Or is there some policy in place?" Admittedly, students recognized the problem but had trouble acting on it, as R33 shared: "The distractions are hard to turn off because you're on the internet to do your work. . . . When do you become a slave of technology?"

*Higher education design.* A final hindering factor that was not mentioned by students but all contextual stakeholders emphasized was the design of higher education. The UASNL (R59) stated: "There are some incentives in our [funding] system that we work with in the Netherlands that encourage us to focus on efficiency." In the Netherlands, the government funds (Applied Sciences) Universities for four years per student. However, if a student takes longer than four years or switches universities to pursue a different degree, there is no additional funding to cover these "losses". As such, higher education is – to some extent – pushed to get students to graduate as efficiently as possible. The educational stakeholders believe this efficiency is hindering the students. The Ministry of Education (R56) also shared UASNL's notion: "I think we are in a bit of a split . . . The complexity is that we want the student to develop, but they cannot take too long doing it." As a result of this desire for efficiency, a faculty member (R39) expressed: "The biggest hurdle we throw at students is overdesigning and locking down courses." However, as the board member (R61) declared, students should be curious and "continually amazed at the world around them. I connect this to the bigger societal questions and keep thinking about this and their careers." Although one can imagine reflecting on one's motivation as *curiously* contemplating about one's future, the external parties see curiosity as a broader open-mindedness. A belief shared by the educational stakeholders was that curiosity, as an example of change-oriented behavior, is interrelated with the design of higher education because there is little room for curiosity when educators design to be efficient and decide on everything beforehand.

*Proactivity*

According to Parker and Bindl (2017), proactive behaviors should be self-initiated, future-focused, *and* change-oriented. When a specific behavior does not comply with one of these three characteristics, it cannot be considered proactive. We found three main aspects of students' behavior at the STWT that prohibit interpreting their behavior as proactive: reactivity, a short-term perspective, and maintaining a status quo.

*Reactivity.* Students described their behaviors passively; for instance, R31 said: "I just go with the flow, and I will see whatever happens." Or R20, when they remarked why they do not work out, commented: "It's a very weak answer, but laziness, really, I think 'yes I should do it, it's good for me,' but I'd much rather read a book than go outside to run." The contextual stakeholders emphasized this latter point, yet all mentioned a reactive state of being. Specifically, faculty members had clear statements, such as: "They will come into action once it becomes a problem" (R23) or, as R30 put it: "Young people never think about being sick when they're not, right, just party," or as R36 phrased it: "I see a large group that doesn't start thinking about it until they walk into a wall, run into the man with the hammer, so when they are overtired or ask too much of themselves, therefore physically run into something."

*Short-term perspective.* Faculty noted how a short-term perspective broadly applies to how students approach life. As one faculty member (R32) stressed: "I hardly see [them considering] happiness in the long term." Quotes like this resonate with what the students mentioned, such as R17, who mentioned: "After everything, I think, gosh, what if there's a good vibe in that company? Maybe I can apply for a job after my studies. But that's about as far as I look into the future, not really far, just a few months, not more, not further." The faculty members confirmed this portrayal of short-term behavior: "At one point, they are graduating, and they think, 'Oh shit, in two months I need to find a job, and how will I do that? . . . They are very focused on their first job. But after that, they have no idea." (R37).

*Maintaining the status quo.* In the coding process, we could hardly code any behaviors as change-oriented. We noted, for example, that all health-related behaviors we report in this

article are done primarily for students to *stay* physically and mentally fit, not to become (more) fit. For example, R15 and R21 phrased it similarly: "I do [workouts] to *stay* in shape." The same theme emerges with productivity-related behaviors. For example, the students actively reflect on what they want, but the action resulting from those reflections aims to maintain the status quo of a conventional life before them. R20 phrased this concisely: "I keep motivating to keep doing what I'm already doing now." In line with this, employers agreed that students have trouble going beyond the job description (i.e. going beyond the status quo) and are sticking to their defined roles.

*Interpreting proactive behaviors.* Proactive behaviors should be (1) self-initiated, (2) future-focused, and (3) change-oriented (Parker and Bindl, 2017). First, in the context of our empirical work, it is hard to determine whether the relevant behaviors that we found can be considered self-initiated due to the influences of parents and the higher education system itself. For example, if the parents are still buying and cooking the meals of emerging adults, this cannot be considered self-initiated behavior toward healthy eating. The same logic applies to over-designed curricula that tell students what, how, and when to do something. Since many behaviors seemed primarily reactive, their self-initiated nature seems limited. Second, proactive behaviors should be future-focused, referring to anticipating and thinking about the longer-term future. We mostly found students contemplating their near future, with hardly any concrete examples of a longer-term future. Similarly, if students are mainly focused on having a good time, graduating, and attaining that first job, they are focused on the short-term and not acting future-focused. Third, proactive behaviors should be change-oriented, aiming to improve or alter the environment or oneself. We could not find prominent themes that displayed this, instead we found the opposite: students maintaining a status quo. Students who stick to a "come-as-it-may" mindset and are set on a predefined path are not change-oriented. Taken together, we see how the students display behaviors opposite to being proactive. In what comes next, we will reflect on these findings.

## Discussion

Our multi-stakeholder approach incorporating data from 44 students and 61 contextual stakeholders resulted in three main findings. First, we showed that emerging adults prioritize their health and happiness over their productivity during their preparation for the STWT and shed more light on their behaviors related to the career sustainability indicators of happiness, health, and productivity (e.g. eating healthy food and maintaining social contacts for their health, and reflecting on their motivations for their happiness). Second, we found what enables (i.e. their parents) and hinders (i.e. COVID-19, social pressure and technology, and higher education design) emerging adults' proactive behaviors. Third, we exhibited that, strictly speaking, none of the reported behaviors can actually be considered proactive (i.e. not self-initiated, change-oriented, *and* future-oriented).

### *Theoretical implications*

Our findings have important implications for research on careers and the STWT. First, previous research on the STWT has included individual contextual perspectives such as parents, peers, and educators (Marciniak *et al.*, 2020; Ruschoff *et al.*, 2022). However, we contribute to the literature by uncovering unique patterns that would have been impossible to find by only looking at the emerging adults themselves. We will illustrate this with two examples. First, analyzing data from all stakeholders revealed the complexities of higher education design, which is impossible to grasp from one perspective alone, such as students' parents. Second, combining stakeholders' voices revealed discrepancies, like students'

reported healthy eating habits versus observed unhealthy diets. While stakeholders may have biases, our approach uncovered overarching themes and discrepancies.

Second, we contribute to the literature on sustainable careers (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) by elucidating which proactive behaviors and contextual influences play a role at the beginning of the STWT in fostering emerging adults' happiness, health, and productivity (see also Blokker *et al.*, 2023). These findings have implications for theorizing about the sustainable careers framework. Specifically, we see how all three indicators emerge in the emerging adults' behavior during the STWT. Some behaviors even fulfill multiple indicators (e.g. reflection on motivation for their happiness and productivity). These findings provide valuable insights into the underlying processes of *how* emerging adults build early career sustainability and work towards an adaptive STWT. Additionally, we conclude that emerging adults stress the importance of their health and happiness instead of being predominantly productivity-oriented. As such, our findings are a practical example of De Vos *et al.*'s (2020) conceptual suggestions regarding how person-career fit may change over time (i.e. is a dynamic process) and how productivity is considered the least important at the start of the STWT.

Third, although proactive behaviors were already extensively researched (Jiang *et al.*, 2023), Akkermans and Hirschi (2023) noted that researchers need to be more precise in conceptualizing something as actually proactive and in translating them into sound measures (i.e. self-starting, change-oriented, *and* future-focused) and make a clear distinction between the more general notion of career self-management and proactive behavior (Hirschi and Koen, 2021). In our empirical work, we have approached this type of behavior from the widely accepted conceptualization of proactive behaviors proposed by Parker *et al.* (2010). It is commonly accepted that research on proactive behaviors should, in some fashion, always be able to account for all three attributes of proactive behaviors (Akkermans and Hirschi, 2023).

We found that all reported behaviors aimed at fostering emerging adults' happiness, health, and productivity lacked at least one of the three key attributes distinguished by Parker *et al.* (2010). That is, these are not *truly* proactive (i.e. self-initiated, change-oriented, or future-focused) yet comprise one or two elements (i.e. a fraction) of the broader conceptualization as proposed by Parker *et al.* (2010). For example, students said they initiate their healthy eating behaviors. However, in most cases where the emerging adult lives at home, the parents provide and cook these healthy meals. Simultaneously, all other contextual stakeholders remarked noticeable unhealthy eating behaviors. Our outcomes challenge the current literature (e.g. Koen *et al.*, 2012; Seibert *et al.*, 2001), wherein, so far, a narrow operationalization of proactive behaviors has been adopted. By including all three elements of the conceptualization by Parker *et al.* (2010), we can show how complex (if not nearly impossible) defining emerging adults' behaviors as being actually proactive can be from a conceptual point of view. This means, for instance, that we should critically examine the measuring instruments and investigate whether they measure proactivity accurately.

### *Practical implications*

First, our study shows that, currently, reflection is top-of-mind, even though stakeholders say that emerging adults do not know what happiness is and are merely thinking short-term. This discrepancy might be a starting point for developing training programs to use reflection skills more effectively during the final phase of higher education (Akkermans *et al.*, 2015). For example, we imagine that an intervention aimed at reflecting on one's long-term happiness, health, and productivity-related goals, also in relation to each other, might foster more sustainable reflection.

Second, our findings reveal that higher education institutions (unintendedly) may hinder the development of proactive behaviors among students by restricting their possibilities for

change-oriented behaviors. Providing students with more space for portraying change-oriented behaviors is crucial to addressing this issue. Although there is no one way to achieve this, shifting higher education design from a compliance point-of-view (i.e. assurance, accountability, audit, and assessment) to a quality point-of-view (i.e. enhancement, empowerment, enthusiasm, and excellence) might be an excellent place to start (Houston, 2008). For instance, accreditation parties for institutions and educational programs could redefine what makes desirable learning outcomes and objectives. Putting the needs of the student above the needs of the organization and focusing on the behavioral and learning outcomes is ultimately what higher education is for.

Third, our findings further show the implications for employers. Employers involved in our study believe that curiosity is an essential skill for their starting employees. As acting on curiosity was framed as a form of proactive behavior in previous literature (Huang *et al.*, 2015), employers are advised to create a culture with ample room for exploration and guidance to facilitate the exploration of these behaviors. This can be done, for example, through leaders actively displaying *creativity self-efficacy,* which is a motivational attitude defined as "a self-belief that one has the ability to produce creative outcomes" (Tierney and Farmer, 2002). Leadership development appears to pay off and leader creativity self-efficacy has been shown to increase follower creativity (Huang *et al.*, 2015). Another example would be to enrich job descriptions (Marinova *et al.*, 2015), for instance, through increasing task significance (i.e. the feeling that one's work impacts others in a significant manner) or autonomy (i.e. the sense of freedom in carrying out one's job).

Finally, our findings suggest that during the STWT, parents play a crucial role in facilitating their children's proactive behaviors yet struggle with their approach to how to do this. Parents might be provided with tools to foster open dialogue, perhaps through reframing Oomen's (2016) suggestions on parent-involved career interventions (e.g. family learning) with high school children and continuing to focus on this once their children become emerging adults. By doing so, parents can help their children develop the necessary skills and confidence to navigate the STWT successfully and to achieve long-term career sustainability.

### *Limitations and suggestions for future research*

Our research has some limitations. First, there are limitations to our sample as this is restricted to a specific higher education context in the Netherlands, potentially limiting generalizability to emerging adults undergoing different transitions, such as from high school to the labor market, as is more common in the United States of America. Furthermore, variations in educational systems may influence proactive behaviors differently. To illustrate, university colleges may offer greater autonomy but potentially increase dropout risks. Moreover, while good grades are traditionally linked to employability (Donald *et al.*, 2018), our findings about not prioritizing productivity suggest differently. This is likely related to the Dutch context of our study, where grades hold less weight in employment decisions. It would be interesting for future research to examine whether our findings hold in contexts where grades are important for employability, such as Portugal (Pinto and Ramalheira, 2017). Finally, it is important to note that our stakeholder sampling relied on self-selection (Mason, 2002), potentially introducing bias (e.g. our sample might include mostly highly invested parents).

Second, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which might have affected our data. For example, the students reported activities related to social contact as essential behaviors for their mental health and happiness. However, given the circumstances (e.g. national lockdowns), society was under such pressure that this behavior might have been valued relatively more strongly than under normal circumstances. Since this pandemic

is no longer a societal disturbance, exploring whether emerging adults are currently displaying various proactive behaviors would be interesting. Replicating our study in post-pandemic times could advance our understanding of whether students' reported behaviors and influences are similar under "normal" circumstances.

Fourth, future qualitative research should employ a longitudinal design to comprehensively explore time's role within the sustainable careers framework (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). This approach could facilitate the examination of dynamic career sustainability dynamics, such as person-career fit over time (Parasuraman *et al.*, 2000) and temporal shifts in priorities regarding happiness, health, and productivity. Additionally, investigating proactive behaviors' evolution throughout the entire STWT process could offer valuable insights into emerging adults' career sustainability trajectories.

Finally, we have shown the complexity of distinguishing between behaviors that are actually proactive and those that are not. We could further examine whether proactive behavior should be conceptualized as posed by Parker *et al.* (2010) at different times. If the concept of proactive behavior has more flexible boundaries, perhaps it does not need to be self-initiated at this time due to the inherent transition or change-oriented due to the emerging adults graduating into their (potentially) desired fields. Then, it would be imperative that future research adopts a wider perspective on proactive behaviors as well to better understand to what extent emerging adults actually consider their longer-term futures and actively engage with them. To illustrate, an emerging adult who chooses a broad traineeship to secure a well-fitting job within a specific company in a few years might not be change-oriented as it is in line with what they are educated for or potentially self-initiated, depending on the initial trigger to act. However, this emerging adult *is* actively engaging with its long-term future. Besides, we might have to reframe our thinking about proactive behaviors and evaluate their value (and the value of their specific elements) over time before simply judging whether certain behaviors are truly proactive or not.

## Notes

1. Emerging adulthood refers to the age period from the late teens through the mid to late 20s (Arnett, 2000), which covers both the period as a student and the first years of employment.
2. Whenever stakeholders are mentioned here forth, it refers to the stakeholders in our sample.

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**Appendix**
The supplementary material for this article can be found online.



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