

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF CRISIS PREPAREDNESS AND RESILIENCE AMONG TRAVEL AGENCIES IN MALAYSIA DURING COVID-19

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted many businesses, including the tourism sector is expected to recover last. This study attempts to examine the crisis preparedness and resilience among travel agencies in Malaysia during COVID-19 by identifying the plan adopted to manage the crisis and its resilience in response to the health pandemic. Semi-structured interviews are conducted with twelve business owners and general managers of the travel agencies situated under the Conditional Movement Control Order regions - Johor, Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Results revealed that travel agencies were least prepared during COVID-19 as many responded that the pandemic was their first crisis and did not even possess a written crisis management plan. Therefore, the government's standard operating procedures acted as their main guidance to survive this volatile environment. The cancellation of trips caused by extended travel bans adversely weakened their economic condition, prompting some of them to cease operation temporarily. However, the majority displayed resilience, with more than half engaged in other side jobs or pursuing digitalisation to sustain the business. The emergence of the new normal significantly changed the tourism landscape and its massive impacts on the tourism sector, further confirming the COVID-19 pandemic as a Black Swan event. Nevertheless, travel agencies are confident that the tourism sector will rebound quickly during the post-pandemic, where demand for travel agencies, smaller travelling groups and luxurious travel packages are predicted to increase in the near future. Importantly, this paper will highlight preliminary insight into crisis preparedness and resilience, especially for the tourism sector.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia, crisis preparedness, resilience, travel agencies, Black Swan Theory

Introduction

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak had triggered the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a public health emergency of a pandemic. Tourism consumption and health disaster risk have urged the government to undertake drastic actions to curtail the widespread of pandemic (Gössling *et al.*, 2020; Yang *et al.*, 2020). In Malaysia, the government introduced four phases of the Movement Control Order (MCO) - MCO, C(Conditional)MCO, R(Recovery)MCO, E(Enhanced)MCO with stringent measures and standard operating procedures (SOP). These measures

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include borders lockdown for interstate and international travel, nationwide curfews, self-or mandatory quarantines, limiting visitor capacity in places and activities (Gretzel *et al.*, 2020).

The tourism and hospitality industry is the third-largest revenue contributor to Malaysia's economy, has been severely hit by the pandemic and is expected to recover last (Bernama, 2020). Citing Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin projected that the Malaysia tourism sector might take about four years to recover (Yunus, 2020). Significant data shows tourist arrivals to Malaysia in 2020 declined dramatically by 83.4%, from 26.10 million to 4.33 million (Tourism Malaysia, 2020). The Visit Malaysia 2020 (VM2020) campaign was called off (Foo *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, tourism receipts plummeted by 80.9%, from RM86.1 billion to RM12.7 billion, reaching the lowest in history (Ganesan, 2021). Neither the key industry players like hotels, airlines, cruises, or retailers could escape unscathed. Companies Commission of Malaysia reveals that ninety-five travel companies ceased their operation either voluntarily or ordered by the court since MCO (Som and Harun, 2020). A survey by Malaysia Association of Tour and Travel Agents (MATTA) 2020 indicated that the retrenchment rate within the traditional travel agency workforce is close to 30%. Nearly 40% of the employees have been told to take unpaid leave or pay cuts (Malaysia Association of Tour and Travel Agents [MATTA], 2021). Many considered ceasing operations within the next two months (Muhammed Ahmad Hamdan, 2020). The continuous disruptions caused by the pandemic have led to recession and depression among industries, specifically in the tourism industry, in surviving this difficult time (Jaipuria *et al.*, 2020).

Literature Review

Crisis in Tourism

A crisis is described as a scenario that happened naturally or to some extent caused by oneself, i.e., the inadequacy of internal management and practises or unable to cope with the change. Meanwhile, disasters are generally associated with natural hazards, pandemic and human-made events that the organization has minimal control over (Anthony and Jacob, 2019). Zenker and Kock (2020) infer COVID-19 as a crisis as its focus on the organizational (political or business) acts despite being a socio-political or human-made disaster. Santana (2004) discussed that the organizations must be aware of the crisis that are likely to occur, prompting a comprehensive, integral and conscientious planning of crisis management. Arguably, crises and disasters are situational-based and its effects may appear far from their original outreach. Hence, lesson learnt and proper crisis management planning is crucial for an organization to better understand the tourist's response to disastrous events and pre-empt them from the worst (Mair *et al.*, 2014). However, previous research on the health pandemics generally focused on the impact by utilising past case studies of epidemics to propose plausible implications for future prevention (Haque and Haque, 2018). Likewise, the recent publications primarily explore the impact of COVID-19 on specific sectors within the hospitality and tourism industry. For example, hotels (Khan *et al.*, 2021), restaurants (Madeira *et al.*, 2020), but most frequently in the airline industry (Maneenop and Kotcharin, 2020; Nižetić, 2020), whereas traditional travel agencies (Lovelock, 2004) were undermined.

The increasing number and intensity of crises also led organizations to seek the ideal approach in dealing with unexpected circumstances. Nevertheless, studies on the proposed recovery strategies and practises may not necessarily fit in every sector, as it is subjected to several factors such as infection

situation, medical supports, surveillance system and each country's social and economic parameters (Han *et al.*, 2020). Besides, Malaysia has less exposure to crises and disasters, but the COVID-19 pandemic is its first. Thus, tourism vulnerability has called for an emphasis on proactive strategies as it appears that tourism in post-crisis is also always tourism in pre-crisis. Apart from that, the online travel agencies (OTA) and the independent individual travel plan dominating the current tourism ecosystem also threatened the travel agencies' position in the market. It raises the question of the resilience of travel agencies during crises.

Crisis Resilience

Organizational resilience is defined as a multifaceted, sociotechnical phenomenon that emphasises collective efforts to address uncertainty and relates to an organization's ability to predict, control, respond, contend, accommodate and seize opportunities in crisis without affecting the operations of the organization (Orchiston *et al.*, 2016). It is divided into two dimensions, which are planned resilience and adaptive resilience. Planned resilience appears in the event of pre-crisis; meanwhile, adaptive resilience emerges in post-crisis that requires leadership, external network and lessons acquired from past crisis experience (Nilakant *et al.*, 2014) and most importantly, recovery plan (Alexander, 2013).

Building adaptive resilience is paramount during the transition period and future sustainability. Existing research showed that both tourism businesses and policymakers need to maintain proper planning and collaborate to share resources in achieving destination resilience (Hall *et al.*, 2018). Lee *et al.* (2013) further imply that organization resilience is the core for tourism stakeholders who seek to build disaster resilience at a destination level. Both organization resilience and disaster management are interdependent. Nevertheless, only a fraction of organizations is resilient in crisis, where large business corporations possess ample liquidated funds or exercise crisis management plans. On the other hand, smaller organizations are swift in decision-making at times of urgency (Burnard and Bhamra, 2011).

Black Swan Theory

Black Swan Theory describes the three main characteristics constituting a Black Swan event: (1) rare, unpredictable outlier; (2) cause extreme impacts on society or to the world; (3) predictable or rationalised with facts and hindsight (McGillivray, 2020). Taleb (2007) argued that COVID-19 was not a Black Swan event but rather a White Swan event since it was wholly predictable. It is evident in many articles and sources issuing dire warnings about its next wave (Walsh, 2020). Meanwhile, experts insist that the COVID-19 pandemic is a Black Swan event, in which the likelihood of natural hazards occurring in any given period and at a given place is less than 1% (McGillivray, 2020). In line with this, humans usually focus on immediate threats than risks that rarely occur.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is not something unknown, the magnitude, spread and impacts are hardly predictable. Many countries face the challenges of paramedic support and medical infrastructure shortage as they cannot keep up with the rapid pace of the contagious virus. Furthermore, the government's intervention of imposing travel bans to contain the outbreaks caused revenue and job losses for the tourism and hospitality, and even some declared bankruptcy. Gursroy and Chi (2020) pointed out that, even with the COVID-19 pandemic crisis coming to an end someday,

at some point, visitors are still insecure to travel, dine-in and even stay at a hotel like before. It exhibits that communities cannot return to normal but to accept the "new normal" and lifestyle changes (Benjamin *et al.*, 2020).

The above research concluded the current challenges faced by travel agencies and further questions about their future in the tourism industry, resulting from the disintermediation and pandemic. The current literature on traditional travel agencies is limited (Kuilis-Bosimin, 2018), with majorities concentrated on OTA (Pinto and Castro, 2019; Talwar *et al.*, 2020). More importantly, consumers engaged in these services are likely international tourists instead of local Malaysian, thus increasing the relevance of this study. The study results would contribute as a guideline to the travel agencies and as evidence for future research on this area.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

The overall objective of this study is to the crisis preparedness and resilience among travel agencies in Malaysia during the health pandemic. It aims to address the following key questions:

1. Is there any plan prepared to manage crisis in the organization?
2. How resilient is the organization in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Materials and Methods

Sampling Design

This study employs a qualitative approach of semi-structured interview with twelve Inbound and Ticketing (IT) travel agencies from three CMCO states — Johor (JHR), Kuala Lumpur (KL) and Selangor (SLGR), listed under the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia (MOTAC) portal. It adopted two sampling methods to source potential participants that meet the above requirements. Purposeful sampling involves identifying and choosing individuals or groups of incredibly knowledgeable individuals about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell and Clark, 2017). Bernard (2017) and Spradley (2016) further annotated the importance of availability and willingness to participate, in addition to the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive and reflective manner matters. Simple random sampling infers that each has equal chances of being selected (Taherdoost, 2016).

Data Collection Procedure

The interviews were conducted between June to August 2021, using web-based video conferencing platforms and phone calls as an alternative. The duration for each is approximately 30 to 45 minutes and is audio-recorded under the participants' consent. They are encouraged to converse in English, later transcribed verbatim with grammar and spelling checks. The data is processed through thematic analysis through reviewing all transcripts to identify recurrent and repetitive themes across all participants' experiences, then grouped and classified accordingly under a common theme. Lastly, a follow-up will be made to the participants to ensure all relevant information at the manifest and latent levels are secured and included in this study or future research. Data saturation in the current study

has reached after the 12th interview, where no new information has been discovered. Thus, the interview has stopped. To protect the respondent’s identity, they are assigned a participant number.

Respondents and Organization’s Profile

Table 1: Participant’s Profile and Organization’s Market Profile

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Designation	Years of Experience	Years of Business Operation	Target Market	State
1	34	Male	CEO	16	3	Malaysia, Singapore	JHR
2	37	Female	Inbound Regional Director	11	12	Malaysia, Indonesia, Korea	KL
3	35	Male	Director	8	3	China	KL
4	36	Male	Director	17	10	Malaysia	SLGR
5	39	Male	Branch Manager	3	5	Malaysia	JHR
6	37	Female	Director	10	15	India	KL
7	43	Male	General Manager	23	8	Malaysia, Vietnam, China, Indonesia	SLGR
8	31	Female	General Manager	4	7	Malaysia, Singapore	JHR
9	35	Female	Director	5	3	Malaysia, Indonesia, Korea, Singapore, Vietnam	SLGR
10	29	Female	Director	10	3	Malaysia	JHR
11	40	Male	Inbound Manager	16	6	Malaysia, Iran	KL
12	62	Male	Manager	30	7	Malaysia	JHR

As seen in Table 1, most of the respondents were in their mid-30s to 40s, holding managerial positions. They have more than three years of experience working in the tourism industry, including their involvement in the current company. Five out of the twelve participants have established their travel agencies and are the director and CEO. Among them, four are newly start-ups and only operated for three years. In terms of the target market, these travel agencies provide domestic travelling services to local and foreign visitors, with their pools of customers consisting of corporates and group tours.

Results and Discussion

Crisis Awareness and Experience

From the analysis, ten participants reported that the COVID-19 health pandemic was their first crisis over the past five years between 2016 and 2021. Two shared that they had encountered other forms of

crises, specifically human-made disasters (plane crashes and Vietnam anti-China protest) in 2014 and financial crisis - Ringgit Malaysia depreciation in 2016. Some were alerted by the early detection of the outbreak in China but assumed that it would not spread to other countries. With the outbreak escalating in many countries following the suspension of flights, Malaysia government officials are forced to implement travel bans and nationwide lockdowns, exposing all tourism stakeholders to greater risks.

“Signal detection on October 2019, that time we still think positively that the virus breakout will be only at China only, but later virus breakout to other country and lot of cancellation, postpone.” (Participant 7)

Crisis Management Plan and Immediate Actions

Among them, only one shared that their organization owned a written crisis management plan and updated it annually, while majorities chose to act reactively according to the government SOP. All participants reported that the pandemic severely weakened their economic condition, consequently posing a threat to the survival of their business. The most common measure adopted is reducing their business expense through labour cuts and other expenditures. Many businesses ultimately resorted to retrenchment as they did not anticipate the pandemic would be elongated and the depletion of emergency funds. In response to the formation of a crisis response team addressing the pandemic, most responded "no" due to the additional hire costs.

“We tried to actually keep our staff as long as we can. But, at the end of the day, we sort of ask them to resign or look for some other job that can actually pay them better.” (Participant 2)

“Can I just come up and tell everybody: “just ignore the SOP, ok then we go travel?”. No! So any plan is actually useless because the pandemic is very very er.. I mean is different from previous.” (Participant 1)

At least two managed to modify their business model in light of the external shock by converting their full-time employees to commission-based employment. The decision was made considering both the company's survival and the employee's welfare in the current period and future.

“What we did from the previous crisis was that we redesign our full-time staffs into freelance, so meaning we er.. empower them to be a business owner or instead of full-time staffs, we share our profits with them.” (Participant 4)

Organizational Resilience

Majorities described themselves as barely surviving and somehow surviving since MCO took effect on 18 March 2020. Organizational resilience varies cases-by-cases and according to Table 1, travel agencies relied on foreign markets are the earliest to be affected due to travel bans. Alongside Malaysians being prohibited from going overseas, inbound tourism is gaining traction, with more locals choosing to travel domestically. However, it started experiencing adverse effects in early August after the Sabah state election contributed to the drastic spike of transmission cases, leading to some states having to undergo CMCO.

“Our government did quite well at 1.0, you can't go to overseas, no outbound travelling, just can cuti-cuti Malaysia and then I remember that time on June to July, every island and resort was fully booked last year.” (Participant 1)

Side Jobs

The MOTAC also gave travel agencies the leeway to work on side jobs such as participating in bazaars and selling perishable goods online to rebuild their financial sources. Some ventured into other service lines, for instance, food delivery, logistics and virtual conferences. Although travel agencies are allowed to operate during the RMCO period, the responses were least favourable for promoting tourism packages.

“Last year um we did discussed and wanted to shift our business orientation to delivery, since we fetch passengers to their destinations. But in the end, we did not proceed because many people are doing it, moreover the cost is also high. Afterwards, we do food delivery lah.” (Participant 8)

Financial Pressure

Among the vulnerabilities identified from the interviews, financial pressures by the deliberate threats of COVID-19 are frequently highlighted. Firstly, domestic tour and transport operators were severely affected by their outstanding transportation loan repayment. Since travel agencies are classified as high-risk borrowers by the bank, they turn to private capital companies that generate higher interest rates. Yet, these companies suffer limited cash flows when dealing with their clients' delayed payments, resulting in a cascading effect. Secondly, investors could not recover their investment after the VM2020 campaign was forced to dismiss.

“Initially our businesses were good, at that time, we also bought in 3 new vehicles. But not long until the pandemic came and many vehicles are parked in the company. If I need retain the vehicles, I also require to pay for the vehicle loans each month.” (Participant 8)

“2020 is Visit Malaysia year Campaign, a lot of companies including me, spent a lot of money to build up our assets or whatever and maybe this and that lah.. All gone..” (Participant 1)

Government Financial Support

All participants expressed that the government's assistance is crucial for them to remain resilient during and at post-pandemic. While the government has allocated partial funds in the PRIHATIN Economic Stimulus Packages (ESP), some are dissatisfied with the policy mechanisms and entitlements. Despite applying for multiple attempts, the funds obtained are generally insufficient to cover their operating expenses and only a handful of them received the aid once. One suggested that the tourism board should be included in the review to ensure that travel agencies benefit equally from other tourism stakeholders.

“This is where I think whether MOTAC, Tourism Malaysia, they must come with one structure to make sure if they want things to be smoother next time la. So, least, er they have to come with one structure, where er this financial burden of only a vehicle.” (Participant 6)

Emotions

Another common emerging factor when discussing is the emotions in decision-making. Employees, including bus drivers, tour guides and administrative staff, faced great depression, especially when

their employment was at stake. As management acknowledged that they should be optimistic and offer moral support to employees, their financial status is also their top concern. Thus, mutual understanding between the employees and employers must be established during decision-making when revolving around different individuals with different perspectives, objectives and goals.

“Every single thing that we do, every single thing that we plan in a sense of financially like how long we can actually survive. Every decision that we make, we still look at our financial distribution wise.” (Participant 2)

New Normal

In line with the vaccination pace and current COVID-19 cases in Malaysia, the participants displayed different sentiments over the Malaysia tourism prospects in the near future. One of them predicted the pandemic would eventually end in December 2022, quoting that the tourism industry required at least six to eight years to stabilise. Some expressed confidence that the tourism industry would bounce back once the pandemic subsided. It can be witnessed in the human tendency to mobile places and the rise of vengeful spending. Additionally, the emergence of the new normal has shaped the travel landscape for smaller travelling groups and demand for customised packages will be on the rise.

“Every business has a cycle actually. There’s a business cycle where you can earn and when you loss.” (Participant 3)

Those who managed to survive will have a more considerable advantage as their resilience and relentlessly reassessing their business plan would ensure them to operate in a better condition. Digitalisation and creativity are critical tools that travel agencies firmly believe will help them become resilient and be in the lead again in the post-pandemic era.

“So now, if you going online right now and you go into the online marketplace, everybody is at the same level as you. So, when the markets open right, is a race - see who runs the fastest.” (Participant 4)

Discussion

Based on the thematic analysis, the result findings revealed that Malaysia's travel agencies are least prepared in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since all of them never experienced the pandemic during their tenure and not all aspects of COVID-19 are novel. Hence, it is natural for them to assume the outbreak followed similar patterns as other past epidemics, such as Spanish Flu, SARS and Ebola (Zenker and Kock, 2020). Furthermore, the accumulated industrial experience and lessons acquired from former crises did not significantly contribute to their crisis preparedness. Prior to the travel bans, travel agencies were aware of the outbreak in China. However, they took no proactive measures to pre-empt themselves from the fast-approaching crisis instead of managing the trip's cancellation and refunds. A similar finding is found in the study by Powles (2020) that envisioning is challenging for most individuals and those imminent low-level threats appear more apparent than high-level threats. Hence, they prioritise dealing with low-level threats first.

Many of them disclosed that neither a written crisis management plan nor a crisis response team would be effective compared to the government's SOP. COVID-19 has a rather complex nature and its characteristics could change over time (Bartik *et al.*, 2020). The uncertainty of the pandemic makes it extremely arduous for businesses to execute their restoration plans since the SOP is subject to

amendments according to the events; at the same time, they must comply to remain functional during the crisis. As such, the SOP acts as their main guide in determining the next course of action, demonstrating a reactive than proactive pertaining to crisis management. The reduction of business expenditures and inadequate government aid only enable travel agencies to sustain within a short period, but many did not anticipate the pandemic would be elongated; therefore, their economic conditions gradually deteriorate day by day. The finding is consistent with the study of Chien and Law (2003) that many countries of Southeast Asia prefer reactive crisis management planning, which encompasses government aid packages, promoting domestic tourism, niche products and establishing new tourism. Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic is established as the Black Swan event with its magnitude, spread and impact are improbable and outsized. Irandu (2020) further asserts that COVID-19 pandemic is the second most challenging tragedy after World War II.

While the travel agencies displayed to be least prepared when addressing external shock, research findings showed that they are indeed resilient. Most of them are private-limited with a simple organizational structure, allowing them to be in unison in decision-making during urgency (Burnard and Bhamra, 2011). Some took advantage to digitalise their business while adapting to remote working in light of the current conditions. The majority chose to engage in other side jobs, hoping to rebuild their finances. Adaptive resilience emerged in this study, evidence that the upper management exercises effective leadership and is working towards the recovery stage (Nilakant *et al.*, 2014). It is in line with the findings that resilient organizations are expected to possess a certain degree of endurance, awareness, preparedness and preserve a robust work environment while managing transition during and following a crisis (Seville *et al.*, 2008). That said, laying low is one of the best ways for travel agencies to build resilience, suggesting that those opting to close temporarily intend to start over during the Post-COVID-era. The present circumstances are unfavourable to them and could lead to business failure.

The study shows that travel agencies appear to be more substantial than before in the new normal, providing safety nets and assurance for travellers to travel with peace of mind (Elliott, 2021). Nevertheless, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is long-lasting and the road to recovery will require collaboration and resource sharing across all tourism stakeholders in achieving destination resilience (Hall *et al.*, 2018). Overall, this research study described travel agencies' inexperience and lack of proactiveness caused them to be least prepared in response to the pandemic in the initial stage. It is not surprising that they can only address the crisis minimally through signal detection and damage containment. Eventually, they have adapted and can grasp the situation with the proper plan, further justifying their resilience in this critical period.

Conclusion

The nature of the tourism sector is highly susceptible to various crises and disasters that manifest unexpectedly, leading most tourism stakeholders to be caught off guard. As the intermediaries between the tourism suppliers and consumers, travel agencies are significantly impaired by crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, which most scholars describe as a Black Swan event of high consequences, low-probability of occurrences, making it one of the most formidable crises to overcome in history. Moreover, crisis management best practises are still in their infancy within the tourism sector. When the pandemic hits, their immediate actions solely revolve around overcoming their organization's financial challenges through reducing business expenses, ultimately retrenchment. The limitation of

government financial support, bank borrowings and deferment of loan repayment further reduces their capability to withstand the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, ceasing operations temporarily are mostly practised by these agencies to rehabilitate them from the external shock. These actions nevertheless led to major job loss, causing the tourism sector to fall into a slump.

Achieving business recovery in post-crisis is the goal of those with a strong will and agility to make changes. In other words, a "new normal" is the objective. However, the tourism sector's performance is still determined by the country's condition and the government's intervention in managing and controlling the COVID-19 crisis. Hence, stakeholder collaboration with the government is crucial for the tourism industry to regain momentum and travel agencies to set foot once again.

The paper provides a new perspective on the crisis preparedness and resilience of the travel agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the preliminary insights discovered may induce travel agencies to consider crisis management best practises even more than before, as an organization that is impotent in coping with the risks arises will likely end up in a corporate crisis. Furthermore, crisis awareness and experience, damage containment and recovery, as three influential components identified from the result findings, can contribute to constructing a written crisis management plan despite multiple scholars having their own inferential of an ideal crisis management approach, in addition to the existing frameworks - Augustine (1995); Mitroff and Pearson (1996); Fink (2002); Coombs (2007) and Olson (2009). Finally, this present study supplements the current crisis management and resilience literature, exploring travel agencies, which remained relevant in the tourism sector until today.

Limitation and Recommendation

The study has a few limitations, which serve as potential opportunities for future research. Firstly, it focused on travel agencies located in the three states of Peninsular Malaysia, excluding Sabah and Penang, who also underwent CMCO at that period, thus limiting exploring other plausible strategies and approaches in addressing the crisis. Secondly, there is a lack of diversity since those suffering from paralysis and business failure were omitted. Hence, a qualitative survey provides concrete measures regarding the crisis preparedness and resilience of travel agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic, given its larger sample size. Moreover, the findings could be further enhanced by involving tourism associations such as MATTA into the discussion. Their input and expertise in the field will be beneficial to those seek restart or enter the industry after the pandemic.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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