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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	FINANCIAL LITERACY AND RETIREMENT PLANNING OF INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS IN HONG KONG <i>AHMAD JULIANA & HAI CHIN YU</i>	1
2.	A CASE STUDY ON OPINION TOWARDS LOW COST PRODUCTS AND IMPACT ON THEIR BEHAVIOUR <i>R. SARANYA & R. RAJENDRA KUMAR</i>	5
3.	STOCK VERIFICATION & AUDIT PROCESS OF WHOLESALE & RETAIL BUSINESS ENTERPRISES OF UDAIPUR DISTRICT <i>DR. DEVENDRA SHRIMALI & MOHAMMED ABID</i>	7
4.	ROLE OF HR FOR SUSTAINABLE TOMORROW <i>ANJALI SHARMA, SWAGATIKA MOHARANA & DR. SURUCHI PANDEY</i>	10
5.	CHANGING TRENDS IN ONLINE SHOPPING IN INDIA <i>DR. PUSHP DEEP DAGAR</i>	16
6.	A RESEARCH STUDY ON PREFERRED INVESTMENT PATTERN OF SALARIED EMPLOYEES WITH REFERENCE TO MANCHERIAL TOWN, MANCHERIAL DISTRICT, TELANGANA STATE, INDIA <i>SUDIREDDY NARENDAR REDDY</i>	18
7.	A STUDY ON VARIOUS OPTIONS AVAILABLE FOR INVESTMENT AMONG SALARIED CLASS INVESTORS <i>KINJAL PATEL</i>	23
8.	ISLAMIC BANKING: A INTRODUCTION <i>MOHD SAZID</i>	26
9.	THE INCIDENCE OF POVERTY AND INEQUALITY IN INDIA: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS <i>DR. P. KANAKARANI</i>	28
10.	A STUDY ON IMPACT OF SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSIONS ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WITH RESPECT TO TELECOMMUNICATION SERVICE USERS IN AHMEDABAD AND NORTH GUJARAT <i>DR. MITESH JAYSWAL & MIHIR H. PATHAK</i>	37
11.	CONSUMERS PERCEPTION TOWARD ONLINE SHOPPING IN DISTRICT KULLU <i>SAPNA THAKUR & INDU THAKUR</i>	41
12.	PRODUCTION PERFORMANCE OF SELECTED POWER GENERATING COMPANIES OF INDIA: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY <i>NASIR RASHID & DR. B. MANIVANNAN</i>	44
13.	LINKAGE BETWEEN FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT AND EXPORT: ISSUES AND TRENDS <i>DR. UPENDRA SINGH & HARSHUL GARG</i>	48
14.	SECTORAL ANALYSIS OF LONG RUN PERFORMANCE OF INITIAL PUBLIC OFFERINGS OF COMPANIES LISTED AT NSE <i>DR. SEEMA MOHINDRA</i>	52
15.	A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ON THE CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR (WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE CUSTOMERS OF DIBRUGARH TOWN) <i>UJJAL BHUYAN</i>	62
16.	PERFORMANCE & EVALUATION OF NON BANKING COMPANIES <i>VANDANA GELANI</i>	68
17.	mHEALTH POTENTIAL IN CHRONIC DISEASE MANAGEMENT WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON DIABETES CARE <i>SURENDRA NATH SHUKLA</i>	71
18.	CRACKING THE GLASS CEILING: A STUDY AT INDIVIDUAL SOCIETAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL <i>SWATI SINGH</i>	77
19.	TRADE STRATEGIES BRITAIN MUST EMBRACE FOR THE WELFARE OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES <i>RITIKA DONGREY</i>	81
20.	IMPACT OF GOODS AND SERVICE TAX ON INDIAN ECONOMY <i>CHIRANJEEV RANGA & NEERAJ</i>	83
	REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK & DISCLAIMER	86

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A STUDY ON IMPACT OF SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSIONS ON CUSTOMER SATISFACTION WITH RESPECT TO TELECOMMUNICATION SERVICE USERS IN AHMEDABAD AND NORTH GUJARAT

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ABSTRACT

After introduction of Mobile Number Portability in India, the telecommunication service providers have felt the heat of customer demands. MNP became available in India from 1st January, 2011. However, the national rollout of MNP across all States and Telecom Circles occurred on 3rd July, 2015. A dissatisfied customer may switch over to some other service provider. The main objective of the study was to study the impact of eight service quality dimensions (Tangibility, Responsiveness, Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, network quality, convenience and complaint handling) and customer satisfaction with respect to users of telecommunication services. Non-probability convenient sampling method was used. Sampling area was selected towns in North Gujarat and Ahmedabad region in Gujarat state of India. Sample size was 1001 respondents. Linear regression models were run to find out impact of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction. Researchers found that Network quality, responsiveness, assurance and reliability were highly important predictors of customer satisfaction. Tangibility and Empathy were also important precedents of customer satisfaction. However, convenience and complaint handling were having weaker impact on customer satisfaction.

KEYWORDS

service quality, service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

In India, telecom regulator TRAI monitors the performance of service providers, including state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) and Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Ltd (MTNL) against the benchmarks for various qualities of service parameters through quarterly performance monitoring reports submitted by service providers. As per a newspaper report in The Economic Times, Telecom operators Airtel, Reliance Communications and Airtel did not meet regulator TRAI's various quality norms for 2G services in multiple licenses areas for the quarter ended December 2016. Telecom Minister Manoj Sinha said in a written reply to the Lok Sabha. "Whereas Airtel is not meeting the various parameters in 27 licenses areas, Reliance Communications in GSM services in 25 service areas and Airtel in 15 service areas," This scenario is just a piece of service quality delivery failures in India. TRAI keeps consulting experts and prescribing minimum quality standards with respect to tariffs and non-tariff dimensions. As such there is intense competition to occupy market share, it is even harder to keep telecommunication service users satisfied. Mobile Number Portability is always a threat when customers feel dissatisfied with their operators' services. Hence, it is important to understand implications of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction.

SERVICE QUALITY

According to Brown (1992), customers prefer organizations that deliver higher service quality, and suppliers can charge a premium for superior service qualities. Bitner and Hubert (1994) argued that service quality is the customers' overall impression of the relative superiority or inferiority of the organization and its services. It is an assessment of the customers from the overall excellence of the service, that is, service quality has an indirect effect on company's performance. Higher-quality service indicates that service quality can be defined only by customers and that it occurs when a service organization provides service that satisfies the customer's needs (Metters & Pullman, 2003).

SERVICE QUALITY DIMENSIONS

Gronroos (1984) stated that "in service environments, customer satisfaction will be built on a combination of two kinds of quality aspects; technical and functional". Lewis (1987) suggested that service quality can be classified as essential and subsidiary. Essential refers to the service offered and subsidiary includes factors such as accessibility, convenience of location, availability, timing and flexibility, as well as interactions with the service provider and other customers. Parasuraman, Zethamal and Berry (1985) conducted researches in several industry sectors to develop and refine SERVQUAL, a multiple-item instrument to quantify customers' global assessment of a company's service quality. Their scale involved expectations-perceptions gap scores along five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibles (Metters & Pullman, 2003). Van-der-Wal (2002) used SERVQUAL to investigate service quality in mobile telecommunications outlet in South Africa. They concluded that the instrument was reliable and could be used to access service quality in telecommunications industry. Cavana, Corbett and Lo (2007) reported that Service Quality dimensions (tangibles, responsiveness, empathy, assurance and reliability) should be considered in order to see its impact on customers of the service provider. Sheth, Momya and Gupta (2008) in their study strived to develop a valid and reliable instrument to measure customer perceived service quality for cellular mobile telephony in the Indian market. They used five dimensions of SERVQUAL scale and two additional dimensions namely convenience and customer perceived network quality in cellular services.

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Service industry depends on continuous cycle of repurchase so retention of customers requires hard efforts by organizations (Anderson, Fornell and Lehman, 1994).

Oliver (1980) defines that Customer satisfaction is a summary psychological state when the emotions surrounding disconfirmed expectations are coupled with the consumer's prior feelings about consumption experience. Yi (1990) opines that the customer satisfaction operates in two different ways transactions specific and general overall. The transaction specific concept concerns customer satisfaction as the assessment made after a specific purchase. However, Parasuraman, Zeithamal and Berry (1994) have put forward the simple and clear definition for satisfaction. They suggest that satisfaction is influenced by service quality, product quality and price. They researched satisfaction on a transaction level, implying that the overall satisfaction is a function of transactions. Gerpott, Rams and Schindler (2001) noted customer satisfaction is measured by that a customer's estimated experience of the extent to which a provider's services fulfill his or her expectations.

A number of benefits are associated with customer satisfaction; satisfied customers buy additional products, are less influenced by competitors and stay loyal longer (Zineldin, 2000). Customer satisfaction is a key indicator of quality of services provided by companies to their customer, but it is not easily definable (Mian Usman Sattar, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oliver (1993) reported that service quality is a casual antecedent of customer satisfaction, due to the fact that service quality is viewed at transactional level and satisfaction is viewed to be an attitude. Dabholkar, Thrope and Rentz (1996) and Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1996) reported that the service quality divisions are related to overall service quality and or customer satisfaction. Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, & Bryant, (1996) expressed that satisfaction is a consequence of service quality. Sureshachander, Rajendran & Ananthraman (2002) observed that service quality and customer satisfaction are highly related and as such claims that service quality is an important antecedents of customer satisfaction. The link between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction has also been a subject of research amongst scholars.

Heskett, Sasser, & Schlesinger, (1997) conducted studies on several service firms, such as airline, restaurants, etc and reported that service quality, solely defined as relational quality, has consistent effect on satisfaction and is regarded as key factor in delivering customer satisfaction. Lai (2004) found positive relationship between tangibles, empathy and assurance and customers' satisfaction. Dimension empathy is negatively related with satisfaction while other four dimensions tangibles, assurance, responsiveness and reliability are positively related with the satisfaction and all the dimensions of service quality have a significant relationship with the satisfaction of customers (Ahmed et al., 2010). Khan, M. A. (2010) investigated the users' perception of service quality of mobile telephone operators in Pakistan using a questionnaire survey covering SERVQUAL dimensions as well as network quality and convenience as an additional dimension. Convenience and network quality was found to be relatively most important dimensions. A study conducted by Aali, Khurshid, Nasir, and Aali, (2011) measured the service quality of mobile phone companies operating in Saudi Arabia by using the SERVQUAL instrument. It was found that there was difference in customers' perceptions in almost all the dimensions. Arokiasamy & Abdullah (2013) studied the impact of service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction using the SERVQUAL model. It was found that customer satisfaction was impacted by all 5 service quality dimensions. Sandhu, Mahasan, Rehman & Muzaffar (2013) researched to find out the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction in the telecommunication sector Pakistan. They found out that service quality has effect on customer satisfaction and that there exists a positive relationship between service quality dimensions (except price fairness & empathy) and customer satisfaction. Sivasubramanian & Balaji (2014) found the service quality dimensions and its Impact on customer satisfaction in the telecommunication sector Tamilnadu. They figured out that service quality has an Impact on customer satisfaction and that there exists a positive relationship between service quality dimensions (except price fairness & empathy) and customer satisfaction. Rahhal, (2015) noted, in the context of Syrian telecommunication services users, "The findings of this study shows the direct significant impact of service quality on customer satisfaction, and this effect had appeared through three dimensions (network quality, responsiveness, reliability) and there are no direct effect of other dimensions on customer satisfaction". Baruah, Nath, & Bora (2015) aimed to find the important service quality dimensions affecting customer satisfaction in telecom sector and found that Tangible, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and network quality were positively and significantly impacted the customer satisfaction. Vasundhara & Jothimurugan (2015) explored reasons why consumers prefer a specific mobile service and to explore the relationship between Service Quality, Customer Satisfaction and Brand Loyalty. They revealed that reliability, responsiveness in service quality, reasonable price and customer satisfaction leads to brand loyalty towards cellular communication providers. Arslan, Iftikhar, & Zaman, (2015) studied two dimensions of service quality in Pakistan and found that there is a significant relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality dimensions of empathy and reliability. Arslan, Iftikhar, & Zaman, (2015) collected data from 400 respondents that were users for 4 main mobile networks of Pakistan (i.e. mobilink, zong, telenor and ufone) and established that there is a significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction. Iddrisu et al. (2015) collected data from 311 mobile users who were subscribers of 5 of the major cellular firms in Accra Metropolis of Ghana and revealed that service quality dimensions such as Tangibles, Responsiveness, Reliability, Assurance and Empathy have a positive influence on customer loyalty through customer satisfaction. Phaneendra, D., Jyothsna, M., & Mahalakshmi, S. (2016) revealed that among the service quality dimensions, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness have greater influence on customer satisfaction. Aydinil & Senyurek (2016) surveyed in Poland and found Tangibles dimension seems the most important factor that the customers emphasize for their satisfaction. They further noted Assurance dimension, Reliability dimension and Empathy dimension follows respectively. The values for responsiveness dimension show that Responsiveness the least important factor. Alhkami & Alarussi (2016) examined the impact of service quality dimensions on the customers' satisfaction in Telecommunication companies in Yemen. They found all the service quality dimensions are positively and significantly associated with customers' satisfaction. Okpara & Nkwede (2017) investigated the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer loyalty in the Nigerian Telecom market with particular interest in identifying if customer satisfaction plays a mediating role. They found that reliability, empathy and assurance showed evidence of strong positive relationship with customer satisfaction whereas network quality had a weak relationship.

RESEARCH GAP

Thorough literature review has brought two important takeaways for the researchers. First, service quality has a significant relationship with customer satisfaction. Second, researchers in the past revealed the relationship between five service quality dimensions (Tangibles, Responsiveness, Reliability, Assurance and Empathy) and customer satisfaction. Moreover, research attempts have been undertaken in Ghana, Syria, Pakistan, South Africa, Poland and even some parts of India also. Majority of the studies have covered five dimensions mentioned above. However, past research in the context of telecommunication services have included three other dimensions to define service quality. These additional dimensions are network quality, convenience and complaint handling. Henceforth, there prevails a research gap here. The current study aimed to contribute to the body of knowledge pertaining to impact of these eight service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction. No such comprehensive research attempt has been located in the geographical parts of Gujarat namely North Gujarat and Ahmedabad.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design was descriptive single cross sectional. The main objective of the study was to study the impact of eight service quality dimensions (Tangibility, Responsiveness, Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, network quality, convenience and complaint handling) and customer satisfaction. Non-probability convenient sampling method was used. Males and females aged 15-60 were included as samples. Sampling area was selected towns in North Gujarat and Ahmedabad region in Gujarat state of India. Sample size was 1001 respondents.

Customer satisfaction (Dagger, Sweeney, Johnson, 2007) was measured using a 5 item scale that included statements "My feeling towards my service provider is very positive", "I feel good about coming to my service provider for the offerings I am looking for", "Overall I am satisfied with my service provider and the service they provide", "I feel satisfied that my service provider produces the best results that can be achieved for me" and "The extent to which my service provider has produced the best possible outcome for me is satisfying". Respondents were asked to give their opinion on a five point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". Similarly, Service Quality dimensions were measured on five point Likert Scale. Respondents were asked to rate their service provider with respect to tangibility (5 items), reliability (7 items), responsiveness (5 items), assurance (5 items), empathy (4 items), complaint handling (2 items), convenience (3 items) and network quality (8 items). The service quality dimension items employed to collect data were adapted from Parasuraman et al. (1991), Sharma and Ojha (2004) and Negi, (2009).

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Among the respondents 72 percent were males and 28 percent were females. 38 percent respondents were below 25 years of age, 39 percent were between 25-40 years of age and 23 percent were of more than 40 years. Less than graduates were 30 percent, graduates were 47 percent and post graduates were 23 percent. As far as family income is concerned, 40 percent respondents had less than Rs. 30 thousand per month, 39 percent were such whose monthly income was between Rs. 30 thousand to 50 thousand, 11 percent had monthly income between Rs. 50 thousand to 1 lakh and 10 percent had more than Rs. 1 lakh monthly income.

For this study, Cronbach alpha was separately calculated to assess the reliability of the scales adopted in the study. All alpha coefficients ranged from 0.68 to 0.91. A linear regression was run to understand the effect of service quality dimensions (Tangibility, Responsiveness, Reliability, Assurance, Empathy, network quality, convenience and complaint handling) on customer satisfaction. To assess linearity a scatterplot of Customer satisfaction against each dimension with superimposed regression line was plotted. Visual inspection of these two plots indicated a linear relationship between the variables. There was homoscedasticity and normality of the residuals. There were no outliers. To test the normality of residuals, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test has been used. The residual is normally distributed and the regression analysis can be executed. Multicollinearity diagnosis was done using VIF and TV. VIF values were well below the cut off values of 10. On the other hand, the tolerance values were above 0.8. Thus, there was no evidence of multicollinearity problem in the regression model. In order to check the correlation between residuals, Durbin-Watson test statistic was computed.

MODEL 1

Tangibility dimension of Service Quality statistically significantly predicted Customer satisfaction, $F(1,999) = 356.121, p < .001$, accounting for 26.3% of the variation in customer satisfaction with adjusted $R^2 = 26.2\%$. A unit's increase in tangibility leads to a 0.583, 95% CI [0.522,0.643] increase in customer satisfaction. The regression equation is; Customer Satisfaction = $0.936 + 0.583 * \text{Tangibility}$.

MODEL 2

Reliability dimension of Service Quality statistically significantly predicted Customer satisfaction, $F(1,999) = 504.555, p < .001$, accounting for 33.6% of the variation in customer satisfaction with adjusted $R^2 = 33.5\%$. A unit's increase in reliability leads to a 0.624, 95% CI [0.570,0.679] increase in customer satisfaction. The regression equation is; Customer Satisfaction = $0.732 + 0.624 * \text{Reliability}$.

MODEL 3

Responsiveness dimension of Service Quality statistically significantly predicted Customer satisfaction, $F(1,999) = 220.028, p < .001$, accounting for 35.2% of the variation in customer satisfaction with adjusted $R^2 = 35.1\%$. A unit's increase in responsiveness leads to a 0.669, 95% CI [0.613,0.725] increase in customer satisfaction. The regression equation is; Customer Satisfaction = $0.710 + 0.669 * \text{Responsiveness}$.

MODEL 4

Assurance dimension of Service Quality statistically significantly predicted Customer satisfaction, $F(1,999) = 202.118, p < .001$, accounting for 32.3% of the variation in customer satisfaction with adjusted $R^2 = 32.2\%$. A unit's increase in assurance leads to a 0.632, 95% CI [0.575,0.689] increase in customer satisfaction. The regression equation is; Customer Satisfaction = $0.768 + 0.632 * \text{Assurance}$.

MODEL 5

Empathy dimension of Service Quality statistically significantly predicted Customer satisfaction, $F(1,999) = 166.450, p < .001$, accounting for 26.6% of the variation in customer satisfaction with adjusted $R^2 = 26.5\%$. A unit's increase in Empathy leads to a 0.523, 95% CI [0.469,0.577] increase in customer satisfaction. The regression equation is; Customer Satisfaction = $0.948 + 0.523 * \text{Empathy}$.

MODEL 6

Complaint Handling dimension of Service Quality statistically significantly predicted Customer satisfaction, $F(1,999) = 139.853, p < .001$, accounting for 22.4% of the variation in customer satisfaction with adjusted $R^2 = 22.3\%$. A unit's increase in Complaint Handling leads to a 0.461, 95% CI [0.408,0.515] increase in customer satisfaction. The regression equation is; Customer Satisfaction = $1.097 + 0.461 * \text{Complaint Handling}$.

MODEL 7

Convenience dimension of Service Quality statistically significantly predicted Customer satisfaction, $F(1,999) = 103.065, p < .001$, accounting for 16.5% of the variation in customer satisfaction with adjusted $R^2 = 16.4\%$. A unit's increase in Convenience leads to a 0.411, 95% CI [0.353,0.468] increase in customer satisfaction. The regression equation is; Customer Satisfaction = $1.218 + 0.411 * \text{Convenience}$.

MODEL 8

Network Quality dimension of Service Quality statistically significantly predicted Customer satisfaction, $F(1,999) = 258.052, p < .001$, accounting for 41.3% of the variation in customer satisfaction with adjusted $R^2 = 41.2\%$. A unit's increase in Network Quality leads to a 0.672, 95% CI [0.622,0.722] increase in customer satisfaction. The regression equation is; Customer Satisfaction = $0.603 + 0.672 * \text{Network Quality}$.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Researchers found that network quality is the most crucial predictor of customer satisfaction in telecommunication services. Network quality dimension of service quality must be considered and attended by service providers if they were to win customer satisfaction. It was found that a unit's increase in Network Quality leads to a 0.672 unit's increase in customer satisfaction.

Responsiveness concerns the willingness or readiness of employees to provide service (Parasuraman et al., 1985). Responsiveness dimension of Service Quality significantly predicted customer satisfaction. It was found that a unit's increase in responsiveness leads to a 0.669 unit's increase in customer satisfaction.

Assurance entails the knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence. The trust and confidence may be represented in the personnel who connect the customer to the organization (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Assurance dimension of Service Quality significantly predicted customer satisfaction. This study revealed that a unit's increase in assurance leads to a 0.632 unit's increase in customer satisfaction.

According to Zeithaml et al. (2006) reliability is "the ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately" or "delivering on its promises". The accuracy in billing, proper record keeping and performing the service at the designated time all constitute an attempt to achieve reliability (Iddrisu et al., 2015). Reliability dimension of Service Quality has an impact on customer satisfaction. A unit's increase in reliability leads to a 0.624 unit's increase in customer satisfaction.

Tangibles entail the physical evidence of the service. Tangibles are used by firms to convey image and signal quality (Zeithaml et al, 2006). Tangibility dimension of Service Quality significantly predicted Customer satisfaction. It was found that a unit's increase in tangibility leads to a 0.583 unit's increase in customer satisfaction.

Empathy entails caring and provision of individualized attention to customers by personnel of the firm (Zeithaml et al., 2006). In this respect, the customer feels unique and special. Empathy dimension of Service Quality predicted customer satisfaction. Researchers found that a unit's increase in Empathy leads to a 0.523 unit's increase in customer satisfaction.

Convenience and Complaint Handling dimensions of service quality had the lesser impact on customer satisfaction. It was found that a unit's increase in Complaint Handling leads to a 0.461 unit's increase in customer satisfaction whereas a unit's increase in Convenience leads to a 0.411 unit's increase in customer satisfaction. Summarizing the results, researchers found that Network quality, responsiveness, assurance and reliability were highly important predictors of customer satisfaction. Tangibility and Empathy were also important precedents of customer satisfaction. However, convenience and complaint handling were having weaker impact on customer satisfaction. Thus, telecommunication service providers have to emphasize and prioritize their resource allocation to enhance network quality first. They must also work on responsiveness, assurance and reliability aspects with utmost care since they have significant impact on customer satisfaction.

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