

PIPELINE PROBLEM: FACTORS INFLUENCING THE UNDERREPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE TOP LEADERSHIP POSITIONS OF SPORT ORGANISATIONS

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Abstract

National Sport Associations, National and International Sport Federations and even the International Olympic Committee continue to struggle with meeting the 20% representation quota of women in executive boards. Although women's representation as athletes, coaches and officials has increased in national and international sport competitions, this does not hold in leadership, particularly in top positions. In sport leadership, empirical research showed statistical figures that women have gained access in leadership pipeline however, they still lack representation on executive boards. This study is a part of a larger phenomenological investigation intended to identify the factors that influence the persistent underrepresentation of women in top leadership positions. From a purposive maximum variation sampling of seven participants, top women leaders in Malaysia national sport organisations were interviewed about their career paths and experiences concerning how and why women top leaders continue to lag behind their male counterparts. Results suggest that self-limiting behaviors, work-life conflict and interpersonal relationships among other women contribute to the underrepresentation of women in top positions. Factors attributed to social perception of gender and leadership roles incongruence also limited women leaders' access in organisations, which subsequently contribute to the pipeline problem. Moreover, participants offered suggestions in overcoming the challenges and personal strategies in advancing opportunities and career development.

Keywords: Barriers, gender, pipeline problem, underrepresentation, women in sport leadership

Introduction

The underrepresentation of women in sport leadership is a phenomenon that receives constant attention in international and local platforms (Goslin & Kluka, 2014) which open a way to more opportunities of participation and involvement of women in sport at all levels. The increase of women athletes by 44% in the 2012 Olympics and the two consecutive women's inclusion in all sport in 2012 and 2016 London and Brazil Olympic, respectively (Factsheet London Facts and Figures, International Olympic Committee, 2016), as well as the FIFA reform for the compulsory inclusion of women as decision makers in the executive committee (http://resources.fifa.com/mm/document/affederation/footballgovernance/02/72/23/75/201510fifareforms submissionwftffinal_neutral.pdf), are examples of rational manifestations for essential career advancement in women's leadership. Nevertheless, while these opportunities, laws and policies have been established, women remain significantly underrepresented in top leadership. Hence, women in sport leadership positions like administrators and decision-makers still faced obvious challenges that significantly limit the advancement for greater opportunities. Despite these advances in women's equity and empowerment in leadership positions, women are still underrepresented (Burton, 2014; Adriaanse, 2016; Tammy, 2016; Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2017).

The pipeline theory (Turkel, 2004) which posits that few women ever reach to the top level of leadership because there have been few women in the lower level. This standpoint often assumes that the reason for underrepresentation of women in a traditionally male dominated field is the lack of women preparing to enter those fields (Mariani, 2008; Soe & Yakura, 2008). This is also attributed to variety of causes, including women's family responsibilities and inherited tendencies for women to display fewer of the traits and motivations that are necessary to attain and achieve success in top level positions (Browne, 1999; Goldberg, 1993). Explanations for this sparse representation of women in top leadership positions have traditionally focused on the idea that a lack of qualified women created a "pipeline problem" (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). In the context of sport, the career path of higher level leadership includes coaching and lower administrative level, but because of the scarcity of women at the lower level thus, the career to move into the higher positions of leadership become more difficult (Massengale, 2009). The increase participation of women as athletes and officials as the potential leadership hiring pool should have helped solve the pipeline problem, but underrepresentation is still prevalent in higher level of management. This pipeline analogy can be acknowledged by a "leaky pipeline" phenomenon. Whereby, women-athletes and officials as the potential pool for selection and hiring who enter the pipeline subsequently leave the career field due to such reasons as personal priorities and limitations, feelings of isolation, lack of support, and lack of self-esteem (Helfat, Harris, & Wolfson, 2006; Pell, 1996; Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; White, 2004).

The consequence of pipeline theory in sport organisations is the lack of opportunity for women to mentor and to create a social network among other women. Social networking and mentoring create a forum for the exchange of knowledge and experiences among women in sport leadership roles (Lough, 2001). Through social networking and mentoring, women role models in sport administration lend their voices to women in

sport, show women in decision-making positions, and realistically portray the possibility that women are qualified to be sport leaders and possess the ability of leading from female to female (Coakley, 2001; Lough, 2001). The secondary consequence of pipeline theory is that men believe that there have not been visible women long enough in the organisational pipeline wanting to advance in leadership (Turkel, 2004), thus taking the opportunity to take advantage of reproducing only themselves (i.e., other male leaders). Subsequently, this study examined the problem in the pipeline of leadership in sport organisation and eventually provides an understanding and explanation on how and why women are persistently underrepresented in top leadership position in sport organisations in Malaysia.

Women in Sport and Leadership in Malaysia

Malaysia is a large primarily Islamic nation with diverse cultural groups of Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Malaysia is made of a multiracial society that preserves an interesting traditional values and cultural attributes while adopting increasingly international views (Kennedy, 2002; Jogulu & Wood, 2008). The blend of British colonial management philosophies and Chinese and Indian culture and religion is an addition to the Islamic beliefs that formulate a unique Malaysian society (Kennedy, 2002), which aims to bring together an understanding of respect and harmony between its multiracial society (Jogulu & Wood, 2008). Within its multiracial society (Khor & Lim, 2013), Malaysia is characterized as collectivist (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), where shared and mutual living is vital in order to sustain conformity and harmony within society. Moreover, in collectivist societies like Malaysia, hierarchies and acceptance of authority figures are acknowledged as part of the formation of the different levels of society like in the family, in the village and the government structure. By traditional social arrangement, the position of power and authority has inherently placed males as the heads or leaders (Jogulu & Wood, 2008). It is apparent therefore that behaviours such as assertiveness, confrontation and aggressiveness are more likely discouraged in women in a collectivist society (Abdullah, 2001). However, in contemporary Malaysia, more attention and interest have been focused on women's rights. Alongside issues on violence, stereotyping, gender discrimination, safe environment, and religion, Malaysian women have fought for the advocacy of equal rights and higher representation in the decision making (Nagaraja, 1995; Ariffin & Abdullah, 1997; Ariffin, 1999).

Sport as an institution is also an avenue for women to carry out leadership abilities and capabilities, and an environment where women can be a catalyst for a more effective and productive organization. However, women's participation and involvement in sport and sport leadership in Malaysia also traverses social and cultural impediments, where women still need to juggle and strive to be visible and recognised in the system. This setback is likely attributed to the complex societies of the country which contributed to the low representations of women in top sport leadership in particular. A remarkable event to consider in Malaysian women's advancement in leadership position is the appointment of the first and youngest ever appointed woman full minister in the Ministry of Youth and Sport in 2004 which followed a change in the Malaysian Cabinet post. To this date, more women are becoming visible in sport organisations both at the mass and competitive levels (Megat Daud et al., 2013). As Malaysia is developing towards a sport

culture nation (Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010), more women are entering into the stream of sport as athletes, officials and leaders. The consistent participation of women over the years as athletes in the four major international sport competitions, namely; Olympic Games, SEA Games, Asian Games and Commonwealth Games can be the potential hiring pool (Everhart & Chelladurai, 1998) for leadership positions. However, most sport organizations' administrations, particularly at the top level, are still predominantly dominated by men. Whereby, women's representation is traditionally aligned with the unspoken and unwritten agreement to position as subordinates unless for specific position specified for woman or an all-women sport organisation. This underrepresentation of women was supported in Megat Daud and colleagues' (2013) study pointing out that women partaking in organized sport and sport associations specifically in top level positions are still fewer than their male counterparts. It is rather imperative to take feat on this issue in order to provide greater understanding in the persistent underrepresentation of women and eventually cease the pipeline problem in top sport leadership position. Moreover, as the nation is reaching towards a sport culture, diverse gender and leadership in the organisation can work together for a more productive and positively driven sport organisation.

Pipeline Problem of Women in Sport Leadership

The social construction of gender describes a woman as weak, fragile and not as capable as men in physical or intellectual demanding activities (Couturier & Chepko, 2001). Gender role socialization enhances the subordination of women to men (Greendorfer, 2001). Gender stereotypes formed throughout one's life's experiences may be difficult to separate from the person. Abdela (2000) emphasizes that self-limiting behaviors reinforce the gendered stereotypes about women's ability to lead and negatively affect their self-confidence. Consequently, lack of confidence is cited as a pipeline problem and considered as a barrier to women's progress or promotion to leadership. Women rarely apply for leadership positions due to a lack of confidence (Mairtin-Cairncross, 2009). To some extent, some are just being forced to apply for leadership positions (Eddy & Cox, 2008; Sperandio & Kagoda, 2010). It is noted that while self-promotion behaviors are rare in women, men use these self-promoting behaviors to access leadership positions and gain economic rewards. Generally, men tend to have well-planned career plans that target leadership positions, while women lack career plans and had no intentions or confidence to apply for leadership positions (Sperandio & Kagoda, 2010). Coleman's (2001) study revealed that men would confidently apply for jobs in which they were less qualified, but women would only do so upon confirming that they had all the required qualifications. This behavior negatively impacts society's perception of women and enhances the notion that women are incapable of leadership. Pfister and Radtke (2006) explained that the low power status assigned to women causes them to perceive themselves as incapable of leading, hence their reluctance to apply for leadership positions. In the context of sport, a study by Henry et al. (2004) revealed that women were reluctant to apply for positions of leadership. The lack of women in national sport federations was attributed to women's lack of interest in leadership positions, and one of IOC's struggles of not being able to enhance the number of women in sport leadership around the world.

Other personal limitations that hinder women to seek or ascend in leadership position include family-work related responsibilities. Women have been found to perceive themselves as facing dual expectations of not only succeeding in their professional careers but also fulfilling their family responsibilities (Inglis, Danylchuk, & Pastore, 2000). Personal sacrifices in time and energy for the sake of the program were equated with contributing to high levels of work-life conflict. Women's roles as mothers and professionals are intertwined due to a dual identity and a connection between mother and child in terms of their private and public being (Evetts, 1988). Most women plan their careers to coincide with their family situation, taking into consideration the needs of their children and spouse (Eddy & Cox, 2008). This is particularly true and challenging for women in different careers because they have to resolve existing tensions that may arise at the peak of their careers, when job promotion or tenure track decisions may coincide with their childbearing years (Dominici et al., 2009). Despite advocacies and policies changed in providing women equal opportunities, research indicates that women still take the largest domestic responsibilities, including taking career breaks, and even deferring job promotion for the sake of the family, when compared with men (Branson, 2007). Essentially, women make these decisions based on their values for the family and also based on the traditional gender roles, where child rearing and other domestic responsibilities are considered to belong to women. Such decisions have negative implications on the progress of women into leadership and result in a low representation of women in leadership positions. It is apparent that amidst the changing trends of increased entry of women into formal employment, traditional gender roles still are upheld, as Branson (2007) pointed out: "one thing has stayed the same: it is still women who adjust their lives to accommodate the needs of children, who do what is necessary to make a home, who forego status, income, advancement and independence." However, for contemporary career women, postponing marriage or parenting and choice of career over family becomes the only way to sustaining career growth and progress, especially those who are in the executive positions and elite occupations (Coleman, 2001; Blair-Loy, 2001; Nelson & Burke, 2000).

Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological-qualitative research design which is deemed appropriate for the purpose of examining the leadership pipeline problem of sport organisations which contributed to the underrepresentation of women in top position. This qualitative methodology is also appropriate due to the conviction that through open-ended and semi-structured questions women are encouraged to tell their stories and experiences. Sport researchers have suggested that offering an opportunity to underrepresented populations such as women leaders in top sport organizations to voice their experiences is radically important (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Inglis et al., 2000; Walker & Bopp, 2011) which is ideal in revealing and understanding what lays behind the issues (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Participants

The selection of participants for this study involved a purposive sampling of seven women who are in top leadership position in sport organisations. Participants represented a maximum variation-based selection (List, 2004) to ensure acquiring the best people to provide information about the phenomenon. The participants were in the national sport organisation with a range of three to nine years in the position. It was required that the participants should have at least two years' experience because they have a range of experiences to discuss organisational issues. Table 1 shows the demographic data of the participants. To ensure confidentiality, the participants' names and organisation affiliation were replaced with pseudonyms. A majority of the participants were in professional sport careers while others were at some point involved in sport for leisure and participation but actively empowering and advocating women's equity and opportunities in sport, particularly.

Table 1: Background information of the participants.

Participants	Age	Organisation	Years of experience in top leadership
Anna	62	Women and Sport	9
Su	48	PBJM	4
Fitri	40	Malaysia Xtraordinaire	5
Naughty Girl	57	Kita Juara	5
Puan Yang Tipah	47	Kelab Sukan Sri Chempaka	4
Amaci	56	Wild Cats	3
Begum	55	White House	6

Procedure

Prior to the study, a panel of experts reviewed the questions protocol. The wording and order of questions of the interview guide were refined based on the theoretical perspective and purpose of the study. Seven participants were interviewed with their career path and experiences related to the problem of lack of women in the sport organisations pipeline. The interviews were done face-to-face, with semi-structured and open-ended questions which lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Each interview addressed three key areas such as career path, barriers influencing women's underrepresentation in sport organisation pipeline, and suggestions in overcoming challenges and personal strategies in advancing opportunities and career development. In addition to interviews, observations were employed. Whereby, the researcher done field notes during interviews and followed the participants in organisational meetings and events such as Annual General Meetings (AGM), sport competitions, and state functions. Through observations the researcher was able to take part of the social setting, learn firsthand on how the actions of the participants correspond to their words, see patterns of behaviors, experience the unexpected, and most importantly develop a quality of trust, relationship, and obligation with the participants and others in the research setting. Data collection lasted for 10 months, with three sessions of interviews and two observations for each participant.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Creswell's (2007) six steps process in phenomenological analysis and presentation, which begins with the researcher's full description of her experiences with the phenomenon under study to set aside the researcher's personal experiences so that the focus is directed to the participants in the study. The data was then prepared and organized through a verbatim transcription where initial codes were formed. Followed by taking the significant statements and grouped them into larger units of information as themes. This was followed by writing textural and structural descriptions of what and how the participants in the study experienced the phenomenon associated to the theoretical perspective of the study. In making sure that the data analysis is done with credibility and validity, the researcher relied heavily on the identified theory and concepts.

Results and Discussion

Career path

As part of a multicultural society, the career path of the participants traversed social and cultural impediments. Women still need to juggle a great deal of effort, making their leadership abilities and capabilities visible and recognised in the system. Nevertheless, a few women have paved their way to establish their career in top sport leadership pipeline.

Interest and participation in sport

All of the participants participated and competed in sport at some point in their lives. However, the diversity of sport and the level of competition differ from one to the other. Four of the seven participants started their careers in sport as athletes. Their sport skills were discovered in their early days during primary grade which brought them to national and international platforms of competitions. The other three participants were at some point involved in sport for leisure and participation but their passion and interest toward sport and sport development is undeniably overwhelming. All of them talked about the significance of sport to women and the essence of women in sport. Emphasizing that regardless of one's capacity either as an athlete or spectator if one has the passion and interest in sport, there is no hindrance that limits the empowerment of women.

Leadership involvement

All of the participants are currently among the top leaders of the organisations they are affiliated. They are involved directly in the planning, management, administration and policy making. Aside from the position they held in the sport organisations, the participants are also involved in other leadership responsibilities such as in the community and government institutions. The diverse involvement of the participants in different organisations and settings of the society contributed to their understanding of the issues and needs of women in terms of opportunities and rights. Their leadership

Women in the top leadership

involvement has also enhanced and equipped them to better facilitate the sport organizations they lead.

Access to organisational position

The processes of entry of the participants in the organisation differs with the processes of each organisation in terms of how they hire or employ them. A majority of them contested for the position while others were appointed. However, most of the participants who contested for the position were contesting for a position specified only for woman or in a solely women's organisation. This organisational practice limit them to advance and occupy other position in the organisation. Accordingly, participants felt that their access to the organisation is still limited and the hiring process is still unfair. On the other hand, those who were appointed felt that they were appointed because of the name they established as sportswomen. Nevertheless, all of them proved that regardless of their background in sport, they work hard to represent the voices to empower women in sport leadership and sport in general.

Pipeline problem in top leadership

In sport, pipeline problems are considered as barriers that impede women leaders in advancing to top positions in the leadership pipeline of an organisation. Participants talked about three areas that they experienced and perceived as pipeline problems: self-limiting behavior, work-life conflict, and interpersonal relationship.

Self-limiting behavior

One of the pipeline problems participants discussed is the self-limiting behaviors of women. The participants emphasized that women do not offer themselves to be seen as leaders or capable of becoming a leader. All of the participants indicated that most women are not confident to take the lead, even though they are qualified than their male counterpart in the position. This scenario in the setting is supported by Mairtin-Cairncross, (2009), indicating that lack of confidence is a barrier to women's progress or promotion to leadership. Subsequently, the participants believe that this lack of confidence among women contributed problem in the sport leadership pipeline, wherein top leaders acknowledge that they have no one to mentor and guide to take the path. This reality in the setting further advances the consequence of pipeline theory, indicating that the lack of aspiring women in sport organizations has limited the opportunity for women top leaders to mentor and to create a social network among other women (Turkel, 2004). Another manifestation that shows less confidence among women is uncertainty in contesting for a position against men in the organisation. Accordingly, the participants indicated that there is no such "black-and-white" policy that prohibits women to contest for top position in the organisation but still no one is confident enough to step-up and contest against men. This self-limiting behavior of women towards leadership affirm the study of Sperandio and Kagoda (2010) stating that women lack career plans and has no intention or confidence to apply for leadership positions which consequently negatively impact society's perception of women thereby, enhances the notion that women are incapable of leadership (Coleman, 2001).

Work-life conflict

Another personal limitation that hinders women when seeking and ascending in leadership position includes family-work related responsibilities. Most women need to deal with roles as a wife, a mother, and as a head at work. Women have been found to perceive themselves facing dual expectations of not only succeeding in their professional careers but also fulfilling their family responsibilities (Inglis, Danylchuk, & Pastore, 2000). This is likely happening in the local setting of the study. Most of the participants emphasize that they were lucky because their husbands had supported their leadership career in sport. However, at some point in their lives, they also struggled to balance their time and energy and deal with the pressing demands of both organisation and family. Moreover, the participants stressed that the lack of women leaders in the pipeline of sport leadership is primarily due to work-life conflict between personal life and career. Wherein, women tend to leave career over family responsibilities. They pointed out that most of the athletes who have the potential for leadership could not be seen in the pipeline after sporting career because they chose life's responsibilities over their careers, especially after they got married. It is apparent that amidst the changing trends of increased entry of women into formal employment, traditional gender roles are still upheld, as Branson (2007) pointed out that, "one thing has stayed the same: it is still women who adjust their lives to accommodate the needs of children, who do what is necessary to make a home, who forego status, income, advancement and independence." Thus, women are rarely seen in the higher leadership pipeline because of such priorities of options.

Interpersonal relationship

Another barrier in the pipeline of sport leadership are the relationships among women themselves. Participants believed that among women, politics do exist in the organisation. As emphasized by the participants, instead of promoting women in the position, it is women themselves contest for the same position even though as emphasized earlier that there is no such policy that prohibit women contesting for other position. Participant Fitri emphasized this issue, stating "*Because there is politics that is being played within the organisation that happens a lot of time, just like within organisation women will fight each other [in one post].*" Hence, it limits women being perceptible in other position. Moreover, participant Amaci also emphasized that she is more comfortable working with other men stressing-out; "*I prefer to work with men than women because sometimes of women's attitude*". These two situations cited by the participants somehow affect interpersonal relationship among women and likely inhibit the process of building a mentor-mentee relationship. Similar concern also emerged in studies by Tiessen (2008) and Goslin and Kluka (2004), which themed this issue as "women being their own enemies" in the leadership advancement. In fact, one of the participants in Goslin and Kluka's (2004) study referred this as the "*PhD syndrome*" (Pull her Down), and this is also considered to widespread among women in sport leadership.

Overcoming pipeline problem

The participants were aware that women's representation in the pipeline of leadership is low and thus requires serious attention and support in order to eradicate if not at least minimize the pipeline problem. They know that there are many impediments and challenges, but they showed optimism that women can work through and become better than they were. Based on the responses of the participants, the following theme emerged in overcoming the barriers in the pipeline of leadership in sport organisation.

Mentoring

All participants in this study placed a great emphasis on the value of mentoring. Mentoring is crucial in the development of one's social and even professional life because they provide direction, guidance, counselling, inspiration and motivation, as well as emotional support (Lovett & Lowry, 1994). In Hancock and Hums (2015) study, showed that women are more comfortable speaking with female mentors regarding difficulties associated with family responsibilities. The participants believed that through mentoring, they can help the aspiring women leaders to be in the position where they are most capable and competent. They can also show that it is possible to break through barriers and reach the top. They believe that with strong social support, women in higher positions do not feel lonely and they are confident that somebody is there to assuage them in doubts and uncertainty of decisions. The participants offer themselves to give talks and forum for the aspiring women leaders and showed willingness for support. They also emphasize that women should not wait for men to help women; instead, women should first help other women.

Networking and social support

Involvement and commitment in programs for sport development is another way the participants believed that help women increase in number in the pipeline of sport leadership. As far as participation level is concern, women are increasing compared in previous years, but suggested that women should step forward in advancing to leadership roles after their sporting careers. Through involvement in sport programs and activities, their social networking will be stronger and able to provide social support for peers. Strong networks also give women the potential to move around in the profession and allow them to carry out their best potentials and attain higher level of leadership positions (Borland, 2008). The participants positively believe that networking opens more opportunities and establish relationships in the system, providing relevant support for women who are willing to take the challenges in the pipeline of sport leadership.

Develop self-efficacy and confidence

Self-efficacy and confidence are neither a gift nor an overnight process of development. Rather soft skills that need to be developed with persistent positive socialization and equipping oneself with sufficient and precise knowledge. These leadership skills include other strategies that the participants believed that help overcome the problems in sport leadership pipeline. Self-limiting behavior is one of the pipeline problems, the

participants strongly suggest that women should come out, offer themselves, and show interest in applying for positions in the organisation. One of the participants, Puan Yang Tipah emphasized that women should learn to “*act like a man and think like a man.*” Just likely as men tend to have well-planned career plans that target leadership positions (Sperandio & Kagoda, 2010), so should women exhibit the same attitude straightforwardly. Showing such confidence like the way men act and think is not about taking out one’s femininity and being a woman, rather speaking the minds and exhibit assertive attitude like how the society perceive men do. However, the participants emphasized that being a leader in the top position of an organisation dominated by men and in a culture where leadership is traditionally inherited by men is not easy or simple. Thereby, one should equip herself with knowledge and competence; hence, when they talk they should have sense and quality.

Conclusion

This qualitative investigation has provided the opportunity to explore leadership experiences and perception of women in top leadership position in sport organisation. The purpose of the study was to provide an in-depth understanding of the persistent underrepresentation of women in sport leadership from the pipeline theoretical perspectives. The results have confirmed that there is a problem in the leadership pipeline of sport organisations. Findings on the barriers and challenges experienced by women in the current setting of the study cohere to the global issues and problems women are facing. The results suggest that women’s self-limiting behavior contributes to the pipeline problem in sport organizations. Likewise, the perceived norms of gender roles contributed to the demanding nature of being a woman and a leader, thus creating a conflict among women in balancing duties and priorities. Moreover, politics among women in the organisation also distracted interpersonal relationships and created gaps and conflicts among them. These three barriers manifest that pipeline problem does exist in the sport organisation in Malaysia. Therefore, provided an opportunity for men to multiply themselves because there have been no women willing to come out and advance in leadership. Furthermore, the findings of the study are consistent with the consequences of pipeline theory. The lack of women leaders in the leadership pipeline minimizes the opportunity of the top leaders to mentor. Likely, there is no strong networking and few women get to involve in programs and sport activities. Although this study is the first to explore women’s underrepresentation in top leadership in sport organisation in Malaysia, the findings are also consistent with earlier studies done globally in various sport institutions (e.g Goslin & Kluka, 2004; Borland & Bruening 2010; Massengale & Lough, 2013). The results of this study serve as the baseline information of related research in the future. The great challenge is to determine the practical implications of the study for seeing women progress not only in numbers but as empowered women in a dynamic sport organisation. Therefore, future studies should determine how to encourage a greater impact of women’s significance in the realm of sport.

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