Assignment Again! Investigating the Psychological Perspectives of Assignment and Assignment Deadlines among Tertiary Level Students

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Abstract

This paper aims to study university students' psychological perspectives on assignment deadlines. The purpose of this study is to investigate the issues faced by students before assignment submission and their relation to the education system, programme of study, personalities of teachers, and the importance of assignments. All in all, this paper delves into students' psychological barriers regarding assignments and the problems teachers face while assigning assignments. A mixed method is applied to conduct the research. The quantitative data has been collected using a survey among students from 8 different universities, and the qualitative data has employed interviews with teachers from 2 different universities. Procrastination, task management, pressure, and stress have been found to play the greatest role in facilitating the obstacles students face while completing an academic task. From the collected data, it is also recorded that students take into account multiple factors when it comes to assignments and their deadlines, i.e., not enough practical knowledge gain, the teaching style of the teacher, length of the assignment, time allocation, methods used in different programme of study, lack of interest in a course, demotivation, discouragement, and hard courses. A common view among the interviewees is that teachers' lack of exposure to technology and deficient knowledge of teaching may be the reasons that students develop such attitudes toward assignments. In addition, this paper also addresses feasible solutions and recommendations to this very issue for the betterment of students and enhancing the education system.

Keywords: *psychology, psychological barriers, assignment deadlines, education system, mental health.*

Introduction

Students make up a vast percentage of the population of any country. As education is realized as the backbone of a nation, students are the planners and executors of the advancement of a nation. Nonetheless, being a student is not all about studying hard and taking exams on time. Being a student takes more than that, and psychological barriers are one of the hardest obstacles they must tackle along the way. Every phase of education is tough and equally important for students. However, higher education, or the tertiary level, is thought to be the most important phase of education in a student's life because it tends to facilitate students to acquire new expertise and preparation for the workplace. (Chan, 2016). However, this is also the most critical period, which acts as the onset of psychological problems (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018), mostly because this phase comes with tonnes of study loads, responsibilities, and pressures. Studies showed that a great number of students in higher education are dealing with well-being issues, i.e., psychological, and emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and a high risk of burnout (Baik et al., 2019), and such numbers and research in this field suggest that the well-being of students in higher education is a crucial factor in their academic performance and drop-out rates (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018). That being said, Evans et al. (2018) said that among universities, students' well-being and mental health are of increasingly high priority. Quite a few works have been done on the psychology of students, but little to no work has been done, particularly on the perceptions of students on assignment deadlines, and Douwes et al. (2023) mentioned that to date the well-being of students in higher education is under attention, which makes sense when the highlights on stress, anxiety, pressure, and other issues are prevalent in studies, but not a particular mention on the relationship between assignment and academic stress, which contributes vastly to students' psychological well-being in higher education, has been made. Then again, the term psychological well-being comes with complexity in its definition. Psychology presents two main approaches to well-being. One is related to happiness (hedonic well-being) and another one is related to the development of human potential, eudemonic well-being is what it is called (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Both hedonic and eudemonic well-being play a role in a student's life, especially students in higher education. However, hedonic well-being is related to the satisfaction of life, and eudemonic well-being is explored through the dimensions of positive functioning, which are perceived when one understands the human potential concerning psychological well-being. Hedonic well-being and eudemonic well-being are interconnected as both play an equal role in facilitating a person's overall well-being. As such, students' satisfaction with life is related to perceived stress, anxiety level, and burnout (Alleyne et al., 2010). Nonetheless, there's a common misconception between mental illness and mental well-being as most of the time both are seen as one. Mental illness and mental well-being are related but these belong to different dimensions (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). Now that the distinction has been pointed out clearly in studies, the concept of mental well-being took a turn to where many scholars established the relationship between students' mental well-being and the study load, in other words the academic works. The question of what are the factors that influence students' mental health comes in highlight now. Ipatova (2019) said that the psychological attributes of students, including self-discontent, concerns, anxiety, and diminished self-worth, are interconnected with their traits. Jones and Blankenship (2019) presented that assessment is particularly found in the literature as a potential barrier to the well-being of students; the author of this paper also is set to

share some feasible recommendations. This research highlights the psychological issues students face while dealing with assignment deadlines. Also, an insight into the reasons behind it, and students' perspectives of the deadlines are described in here. Assignments or homework are thought to help increase students' engagement in learning but how helpful the students think it is when it comes to learning is little explored. Likewise, the sort of psychological effects deadlines can have on a student's mind and whether it only makes students more engaged in their studies, or has other negative aspects to it, is less talked about. Thus, this paper of work addresses some of the prevalent issues students go through while dealing with deadlines. This paper attempts to address the comparability of the merits and demerits of assignment deadlines. The purpose of the search is to identify challenges and issues faced by students in prior academic tasks and to find possible solutions to those issues to enhance the learning environment for the better. As such, this research is carried out based on one central question: What are the psychological issues faced by students before assignment deadlines, and how do students and teachers deal with those? The central question then addresses the sub-questions: 1) Is assignment a potential culprit that triggers mental issues in students? 2) How do students and teachers feel about assignments then?

Review of Literature

Assignments or assessments are of paramount importance in an education system and most of the time students are categorized by their progress and their input of what they have learned in the form of assignments. In this case, it is crucial to explore and identify issues relating to this issue. Among all types of assessments, assignment is the one that students find most nerve-wracking because of the difficulties it comes with, such as coping with deadlines; which itself comes with multiple mental issues: meeting word limits, printing out the assignments (offline assignments), and facing technological issues during online assignment submission and so on. Falkner, K and Falkner, N. (2012) stated that the at-risk students and the high rate of course withdrawal could be identified by understanding the pattern of assignment submission, The speed at which assessments are conducted shows a noteworthy connection with the academic performance of students (Asarta & Schmidt, 2013). However, Gregory and Garcia (2009) found that students are not good at managing their time well initially and tend to let deadlines control what to do and when to do it. This is where the assignment deadlines as a reminder come in handy, but it so happens that time management is a hard skill to be mastered by an enormous quantity of students. As a result, it generates stress, and mental health greatly influences students' likelihood of success, especially when it comes to their likelihood of completing studies, academic attainment, and progress (Richardson, 2015). Now it is clear that assignment-related issues are deeply connected to students' mental health. Ribeiro et al. (2018) argued that "Psychological suffering is inherent in academic life", (p. 6). and Bewick (2010) said that typically, students' mental health tends to decline as they progress through their university years. To address these issues Weller et al. (2018) mentioned that feeling "overwhelmed" is connected to students' withdrawal and non-success. The fear of failure is also a major reason for students' academic stress and distress (Whittle et al., 2020.).

The examination of students' mental states encompasses various factors such as academic pressure, university culture, and systems, which collectively contribute to the impact on students' mental well-being (Lee and Kim, 2019). Not to mention the challenges faced by students were intensified and

generated by systemic problems and structural issues within the higher education system (Tinklin et al., 2005). Students' difficulties cannot merely be measured by the factors above because different researchers over the years, especially researchers who work in the field of psychology, have tried to understand students' psychology and they have found quite a few external factors and mental states that are not discussed broadly. Several types of research over the past few years have shown that 80% to 95% of students are involved in regular procrastination when it comes to completing academic tasks (Steel, 2007), and what significantly contributes to the procrastination problem are personal factors (Nordby et al. 2017). Thus, self-regulation is an important trait, and it can be found in effective learners (Kara et al. 2019). To help students overcome academic procrastination deadlines are the most effective and commonly used commitment devices (Koch et al. 2015). However, not all types of deadlines are effective because some deadlines are "evenly spaced and externally set" and these types of deadlines do not help in increasing the rates of completion of any assignments or tasks (Burger et al., 2011), and Miller et al. (2019) addressed that rigid deadlines might be a problem in adaptive learning assignments but the assignments still can contribute positively to the performance in exams. This being the case, Ariely and Wertenbroch (2002) discussed in their paper how the types of deadlines do not have any effect on the rate of completion of assigned tasks. Then again, even though types of deadlines do not affect the completion rate of tasks, Dowling et al. (2003) said that attention, and time given to a certain course might be influenced by the demands on the students' time from another course. Assignment or assessments brings difficulties for them. Nonetheless, how insightful an assignment is and whether it is helping students to learn any skills at all can be determined and understood from the feedback of it. Feedbacks have an impactful influence on learning (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), only if learners can make use of it (Winstone et al., 2017). Explaining that Boud and Molloy (2013) said that if students do not find feedback useful and they do not use it then it is not effective. In this case, Kleij and Lipnevich (2021) suggested that learners need to understand the potential of feedback as it is very important. However, it depends on students as the importance of something cannot be taught to someone if they refuse to comprehend it. However, if the grade allocation option should still be there after students receive their feedback and get to work on their assignments again, then there is a fair chance that students would engage in feedback more. Likewise, understanding students' rate of response in a classroom is a good indicator for teachers in deciding the teaching pattern and activities to add in the classroom.

Methodology

This paper attempts to explore the psychological perspective of tertiary-level students regarding assignments. The research has followed a mixed method, where both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to collect information. The setting of this study is in Bangladesh. An online-based survey questionnaire is run to collect the primary data for this paper. Additionally, two in-person interviews with university lecturers have also been conducted to get the teachers' perspective as well, which is addressed in this paper. Overall, the internet, Google Scholar, Google Form, Audio clips, and North South University Library research sources are used to collect data, and more than 15 peer-reviewed journal articles are used to support this paper.

The participants in this study included 50 students from 8 urban and semi-urban universities in Bangladesh who participated in filling up the survey questionnaire. Furthermore, 2 interviews have

been conducted where 2 teachers from 2 different universities attended. To maintain privacy and identification, the participants' institutions are kept confidential.

Two instruments have been employed to generate data from the participants: 1) a survey questionnaire and 2) two semi-structured interviews. The survey which was distributed among 50 participants consisted of 6 close-ended questions, 6 short-answer questions, and 1 long-answer question. The first question and the second question were as basic as their name, age, and the name of their university to make sure the participants felt comfortable upon answering the next questions and to make sure all the students were tertiary-level students. Likewise, learning the location of the university was needed to better address the topic of the research during the quantitative data collection. The third question was about whether the students think assignments are important. The fourth question was asked about students' perspectives of assignments and how would they rate assignments out of a scale of 100 in the learning course material, if they do not think assignments help at all, then why do they think so. The fifth question then addressed the central question of this research and that is whether they face mental issues before assignment deadlines or after being assigned an assignment they feel pressured about it every time. The sixth question then accumulated more information about the fifth question, the sixth question was – What exactly goes on in your mind during the period assigned for an assignment/before the submission date? The seventh question gathered information about the relation between the major or program of study, and the types of assignment and their difficulties. The eighth question again brought back first question to light and this question was to know about their perception of assignment over the study period and age. Questions number nine, ten, and twelve were close-ended and those were to explore students' perceptions of the importance of deadlines as reminders of the due date, assignment, whether they prefer to submit assignments at the eleventh hour, and the relationship between assignment, and mental issues respectively. Question number 13th was the only long-answer question and students were requested to put their opinion on feedback and how they feel after getting it. Likewise, it asked for their opinion on the variation of feedback after submitting the assignment and after submitting it late. Semi-constructed interviews with 2 tertiary-level teachers from 2 universities were conducted and those took around 15 minutes each to collect qualitative data.

To collect quantitative data, Google form has been used to create the questionnaire to make it convenient, time-saving, and easy for every student who participated. To collect responses, the link to the form was distributed via WeChat, Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, and Mail among the participants. After accumulating the data, the authors of this work have analyzed the data which is the answer to the research question. All the answers to the survey questions and the semi-structured interview are critically analyzed and categorized according to the themes that fit it to perform the thematic analysis.

Results

The results have been presented into two section. First, the results of quantitative data are presented and then qualitative.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Table 1 and 2 present the results of quantitative data.

Table 1

Importance of assignment and mental issues related to assignment

Age	Importance of assignment	How much assignments help with learning course material on a scale of 100	Mental issues faced during before assignment/ assignment deadlines	Some self-reported reasons/ issues
2 2 - 27	Yes-96% , No -4%	Above 50 - 96% , Below 50- 4%	Yes- 72% , No -28%	28% - I do know sources from where you can copy assignments, but the teacher cannot catch you, I am good at assignments, copying friends' assignment and copying from internet helps- why take pressure, practical knowledge, 72%- Time management, too much pressure, nervous, habit of completing it just before the deadlines, lack of ideas , time allocation – long assignment, How the teacher will react if the assignment doesn't meet his standard, How the classmates will react if I get low grade on the assignment, stress, doubt,less time, re-checking and proofreading is difficult, assignments are boring – no practical work, lack of punctuality, Must meet the deadline- affect other works, need a lot of practice , laziness, business, uninterested in the course, tiresome.

Table 1 demonstrates that although the survey section was only for the students, the distinction in thoughts, attitudes, personalities, and points of view is presented vividly there. The first question was about the importance of assignments. Even though students find assignments tiresome, 96% agreed that assignments are important whereas 4% disagreed.

According to the percentage of students who agreed that assignments are important, they pointed out that assignments help with learning discipline and responsibilities, help with achieving skills, and give exposure to practical knowledge. They also stated that it helps to cope with the world as it allows students to apply what they learn in the classes to real-world scenarios. Likewise, assignments allow students to demonstrate the achieved learning goals, help with the increase in knowledge by requiring brainstorming and research on the topic, improve critical thinking skills, help with developing communicative skills as it requires attention and dedication, make the course material easy for the students, and improve time management skills. Students said assignments help with learning course

material 50 to 90% on a scale of 100. However, the 4% that find assignments unhelpful said that they never really get to learn anything from the assignments as those assignments mostly require writing only, not practical knowledge. In that sense, the usefulness of assignments depends on a lot of other factors, such as the teaching style, course material, and so on. The idea of assignments being helpful is quite seen from a different angle to this 4% of students. They rated assignments as a helpful element in learning only 5 to 20% on a scale of 100.

Answering the question of whether they face mental issues before assignment submission, 72% said that they face mental issues while 28% mentioned that they do not face any issues regarding assignment submission. However, while answering the next question, the 28% that mentioned that they face no problems while dealing with assignments presented some contradictory opinions to their previous answer. All the participants agreed that either they do not care about the assignments at all because they gave up on getting a good grade or they are always pressured and stressed thinking about when and how they should complete the task. However, for some students, it is always the eleventh hour that they take the initiative to complete the task, and for others, it is after the due date. They pointed out that the main culprit here is procrastination but Nordby et al. (2017) stated that procrastination is nothing but an intentional delay that students do. Also, some students mentioned that they sometimes complete the assignment way before the deadline as they believe that sometimes helps them to get a good grade on the assignment.

Table 2

Assignment and program of study, and perception of assignment with age

Age	Difficulties of assignment and program of study	Perception of assignment with age and study year	Self-reported reasons	Students' remarks
22-27	Yes- 72%, No- 28%	Yes- 50%, No- 50%	Yes- Mature with age, severe case of procrastination, more serious towards the end of the study year, better management of time. No- No idea about it, haven't noticed, depends on an institution's curriculum.	-Interest in a course, a teacher's teaching style, and classroom environment define students' perception of assignments - Bangladeshi curriculum doesn't enable students to complete assignments as something fun -Teachers' lack of knowledge of technology gives students chances to complete academic tasks illegally.

Table 2 indicates that 72% feel that submission of assignments is related to the program of study because according to them, students majoring in a different field of study have different interests

and a different struggle. Some fields of study do not require as much effort as others do. Even though students get lessons before coming across an assignment in every field of study, still the struggles of students of the different departments are different. Students' perception of assessment is related to the kind of methods used in different programme of study and it has a huge impact on students. Some of them also think that it happens often that students get some courses that they are utterly not interested in. In that case, if a student is not interested in a subject but still they are forced to study it for some reason, they tend to not take any tasks of that course seriously. Also, 78% of students think that types of assignments play a big part in the submission pattern. According to them, if assignments are broad enough, there is a tendency to start earlier and be more stressed about it as long assignments require a broad range of information that cannot be collected and written down at a time. 78% agreed to face mental issues such as procrastination and pressure prior to the assignment submission. To our surprise, 70% of students are a huge percentage of students said that they submit assignments at the last moment. It is either because of the mental issues faced by them or because they simply want their teachers to extend the deadlines. Nevertheless, 84% of students find assignment deadlines important as a reminder of the due date. They said that sometimes they forget the assignment due, but a reminder helps them to remember it and work on it. Also, though deadlines tend to control when to do the assignment, it is important. Upon asking how much they think assignments help with learning course material on a scale of 100, the majority voted for 50%. When they were asked about why it is only 50%, maximum students pointed at technology and said that any smart student who knows how to use search engines and software can get a good grade on any assignment without actually studying or knowing anything about what that particular assignment exactly deals with. Also, they said that they can copy their friends' work and modify it before submitting and if a class has a huge number of students, teachers tend to not read the whole assignment before grading it. Upon asking about the technology that can be used to detect copied assignments, students pointed out the lack of training and lack of exposure of teachers to the technology. Quite many teachers do not belong to this technology-favored generation. As a result, most of them still do not know how to make the best use of technology and there is a huge gap in knowledge of digital technology and the modern world. They also mentioned that they only get grades after submitting an assignment, but not the chance to fix the assignment according to the feedback they get. Therefore, students do not even check the feedback even if they get some. Students said that their perception of assignments changes with time as they become more skilled at managing time and maybe more serious about their careers. Gregory and Garcia (2009) mentioned that with the progress in the course, the time management of students improves.

Qualitative Data

In the interview section, 2 lecturers from 2 different universities were interviewed. The questions were related to assignment deadlines, the psychological barriers of students, and the possible solution for these issues from the teachers' end.

The Need for More Practical Lessons

Both of the interviewees said that before setting an assignment deadline, they always talk it through with the students and try their best to put the deadlines that are most feasible to the students as they know students have psychological barriers like procrastination, anxiety, and so on. I1 (Interviewee 1) added:

However, even though I try it talk it through with the students, some assignments are just not the ones some students want to complete. I do not blame them about it because I, myself sometimes feel some assignments are not needed for that course and we could add some practical work there instead, and no matter how uninterested a student is in a class, practical lessons just get students together, and from my teaching experience, everyone loves it more or less and the classroom gets livelier, but nothing is in teachers' hand, we must go as per the institution's guidelines. What's worse is that students ought to get different treatments in the classroom and outside of the classroom based on their performance on their academic tasks, not to mention the fact that assignment makes up a huge percentage of a student's grade. (I1, age 31, male, teaching experience 5+ years, M.A. in TESOL).

However, when a student misses the deadline and the teacher extends the due date, it has been observed by both of the teachers that students do not study or try to complete the task meanwhile so extending deadlines does not help students complete the task at all. In that case, both of the teachers ask the student for counseling and try to understand the exact reason why they missed the deadlines and if the reason is valid, the teachers give them some more time to complete the task.

Exclusion of Century-Demand Training

I2 (Interviewee 2) has added some insights about this and said:

Students know exactly which teacher lacks of technology knowledge and Bangladesh is still not a technologically advanced country. This being the case, even though students nowadays are smart enough to excel in the field of technology, teachers are still left behind because in our time we didn't have much access to technology and even though we, teachers are trying to learn about technology adaptation takes time and it is uncomfortable. Thus, one thing for sure we need is training, we still do not get enough training. (I2, Age 35, Teaching experience 8+ years, M.A in Literature and Linguistics)

From the survey of the students and the interview with the teacher, one thing has been understood clearly, both of the parties think that teachers need to get more training and be exposed to technology because this is one of the ways to ensure that students are studying before showing up with their assignments.

Need a Change for Classroom Environment and Teaching Style

I1 also mentioned that teachers need to be friendly and at the same time strict because students learn in an environment where either one of these qualities of the teacher is missing. As he was talking about the effectiveness of feedback, he mentioned that how students make use of the feedback depends on teachers as well.

The Role of Effective Feedback that Facilitates Learning

Educators play a pivotal role in facilitating students' active involvement with feedback which means how a student is going to take feedback is heavily influenced by the teacher (Zhang & Hyland, 2022). The one difference that has been noticed during the interview between the teachers is that interviewee 2 thinks the program of study has nothing to do with the assignment submission pattern whereas interviewee 1 thinks that program of study plays a vital role here. However, both of the teachers agreed that some courses might be harder than others and thus it can create a struggle for students and can impact the assignment submission pattern.

The Need of Encouraging Students

I2 stated that the academic background of students might influence the assignment submission pattern. For instance, if a student is from a Bengali background, he/she might find it hard to get along with the students of English background and to keep up with the university courses, which might affect the students' confidence in asking questions in a classroom. Also, if a student comes from a rural area, even her local accent and way of speaking might hinder her flow of being active in the classroom. Hence, the student might not be able to ask questions when they do not understand the lessons. While addressing these issues, he commented:

> These things are not explored or talked about in our country. Psychological issues are still not seen as something important, and all students are not encouraged enough to talk or take part in the class discussion which is another reason why students go through some of these issues before an assignment submission. Lack of confidence is another reason.

Discussion

Every human being is unique with different ideas and perceptions. Thus, nothing is universal when it comes to human beings. However, the researchers have tried to bring out some of the prevalent issues faced by students nowadays. After discussing the issues, it is clear that some of the changes can improve students' condition which can help both teachers and students to create a better academic environment together. Giving proper feedback and encouraging students to use the feedback properly comes first. Sadler (2010) stated that feedback is mandatory as it can improve learners' expertise and capabilities, such as "study habits, motivation, and self-regulation". However, for feedback to be useful, activation of feedback and testing new understanding is needed by students (Gibs & Simpson, 2005). Teachers also have a role to play here. It is often seen that feedback by the teachers is given but students do not understand the feedback at all. Students may not always understand the feedback given by their teachers (Henderson et al., 2019). If a student does not understand the feedback, he/she cannot make use of it. Eventually, they give up on understanding feedback and using it in their assignments. The same mistake is thus made in all of their assignments. Progress does not happen in this scenario.

Another important thing that needs consideration is the proper training of teachers, especially teachers' need to be able to go hand in hand with technological advancement, otherwise, the teaching environment can never improve. The more the teacher is technologically advanced, the thinner the chance is for students to copy an assignment or not to study. When students get to know the teacher is not technologically intellectual, students do not even give it a second thought to fake their assignments because they do not feel that their grades can be endangered by it. While giving lessons the teacher should also give attention to every student and ensure everybody feels welcomed enough to ask questions and participate in the class activities. In this way, students will not have much confusion about any lessons or about any instructions from the teachers. Not strict nor too friendly behavior of teachers is a must here.

Students should try to manage their time well from the start of the semester. As long as they can manage their time well, they will not face procrastination as much as they do before completing an academic task. They also should try to overcome their nervousness to ask questions and participate in classrooms. A positive outlook on life, and work is also mandatory. Students should learn from their mistakes and use it the next time they do an assignment.

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, students have a crucial role in the progress and development of a nation as they represent its promising future. However, a student's journey is not easy, and the psychological barriers are such a difficult issue that poses a significant challenge. While all stages of education are important, higher education, specifically the tertiary level, holds special significance as it focuses on students' potential expertise and prepares them for successful careers. Consequently, this phase imposes heavy study loads, responsibilities, and pressures, which can significantly impact students' mental health and overall well-being.

Recognizing the paramount importance of students' mental health, universities are increasingly prioritizing their well-being. Students' psychological attributes, including self-dissatisfaction, concerns, internal anxiety, and diminished self-worth, are intricately linked to their traits. Assessment, particularly through assignment deadlines, has been identified in the literature as a potential obstacle to students' well-being. Hence, the purpose of this research is to shed light on the psychological issues students face when dealing with assignment deadlines. It aims to provide insights into the underlying reasons for these issues and explore students' perspectives on deadlines.

Although assignments and homework are intended to enhance students' engagement in learning, there is limited exploration of how students perceive their effectiveness in facilitating learning. Additionally, the psychological effects of deadlines on students' minds and whether they solely increase engagement or have other negative consequences are topics that lack sufficient discussion. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by examining prevalent issues students encounter when managing deadlines and assessing the advantages and disadvantages of assignment deadlines.

The ultimate objective of this research is to identify the challenges and issues students face and propose practical solutions to improve the learning environment. By addressing these concerns, we aim to create a supportive educational system that not only promotes academic growth but also prioritizes students' mental health and well-being. Empowering students to overcome psychological barriers and providing them with the necessary support and resources will enable them to thrive academically and personally. In doing so, they can make positive contributions to society and shape a brighter future for the nation.

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