# Investigating the effects of service recovery quality elements on passengers' behavioral intention

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A B S T R A C T

This study intends to analyze how the elements of restoring the quality of airline service influences the airline image, recovery satisfaction, and behavioral intentions of airline passengers. For this testing, a survey was conducted on passengers with an experience of dissatisfaction of airline services. A total of 240 responses were analyzed by using structural equation modeling. The results revealed that among the recovery quality elements, promptness had a positive influence the image of the airline. Additionally, a recovered image of the airline had a positive influence on the recovery satisfaction and behavioral intention. The findings of this study may improve our understanding of consumer responses to the airline company's efforts to recover service failure.

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## 1. Introduction

CS is an abbreviation of customer satisfaction that started being used when the CEO of Scandinavian Airlines, Jan Carlzon, mentioned about 'customer-oriented sales strategies.' As the trend became oriented towards customers, and with development of Internet, customers tended to acquire power. Therefore, it is a general trend to pursue customer satisfaction management in all areas for companies, public organizations and the airline industry which all rely on good quality of customer service. Consumer Reports has posted data containing the majority of complaints flight passengers have experienced in the airline industry in America in 2006. The complaints are about fees for baggage, additional expenses, attitude of employees, support provided not in a timely manner, and unknown reasons for delay on flight departure. Most of these complaints were interestingly related to a lack of communication. There was a complaint related to ticket price, but the majority of complaints were about people. According to statistics related to disappointments with airline service in Korea, the number of consultation regarding air traffic issues received in the Korea Consumer Agency increased from 1201 in 2007–2931 in

2013, showing continuous increase over time (MOLIT, 2014). The airline market is currently expanding in size along with an increased amount of complaints from passengers.

If disappointment with the service is inevitable, due to its unique characteristics of the service, and companies are unable to completely remove all disappointments, companies need to seek solutions that effectively cope with service failures (Blodgett et al., 1997). Customers satisfied with the service recovery conducted by corporations that had shown service failure earlier evaluate them more favorably than the customers who had not experienced service failure do. More than 70% of customers who had experienced effective service recovery of companies maintain their relationship with them, suggesting that efficient management of service failure is extremely important for airlines. (Hart et al., 1990).

The airline industry is continuously expanding in size, and an increase in disappointment with service is unavoidable. If it is not feasible to prevent service failure, airlines should make an effort to lead customers to have positive images of them through outstanding failure recovery. While there have been many studies on service failure in various industries, there has been limited interest on the effects of service failure and recovery in the airlines and how service failure affects corporate image, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. In particular, there is a lack of understanding on whether studies on service failure and service recovery in other traditional services can still be applied to the service environment of airlines.

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How effectively passengers can recover from service failures is an important factor in operating an airline. Airline managers need to clearly understand how customers respond to service failures and service recoveries in order to make appropriate decisions in efficient services that cater to various passengers. As such, this study seeks to analyze how the elements of service recovery affect the corporate image, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions of customers. The study seeks to upgrade clear understanding of how certain behavioral patterns form among customers after they experience service recovery, thereby contributing to studies on service recovery in the airline industry.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Service failure and service recovery

Service failure occurs when the quality of service does not meet the customers' expectations (Chahal and Devi, 2015). For most corporations, service failure is one of the biggest reasons that lead to customer attrition. If service failure is not addressed well, customer satisfaction falls, leading to negative word-of-mouth (Lin et al., 2011). Therefore, service failure affects customer expectations about service recovery and their response to service recovery. This suggests a requisite need for review on the degree of service failure (Bambauer-Sachse and Rabeson, 2015).

Service recovery is the course of action by companies to compensate customers for a loss experienced by them due to service failure, and also indicates overall activities of service providers for restoring or relieving the damage imposed on customers for not being able to provide promised services (Johnston and Hewa, 1997). Service failure is inevitable according to the characteristics of the service, and if companies are unable to completely prevent service failures, companies should search for a solution that can efficiently cope with service failure (Blodgett et al., 1997). Jones and Sasser (1995) insisted that outstanding recovery programs are very important for complicated airline services that are comprised of many complex elements. Outstanding service recovery positively influences the overall evaluation of service experience, and apologies from service providers conveying sincerity, courtesy, attention, effort, and sympathy to customers who experienced service failure also improve overall evaluation on the service (Kelley and Davis, 1994).

In today's competitive environment, creating new customers requires more than five times higher marketing expenses than maintaining the existing relationship with previous customers. Therefore, service recovery should be the main means for maintaining the relationship with customers and satisfying them (Heskett, 1990). Finally, it is important to find out how to approach customers after detecting that a service failure has occurred. It is necessary to recover the failure efficiently. Profit or loss becomes highly dependent on customers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with service recovery. However, there may be some customers who cannot be satisfied no matter what compensation is provided, and issues might not be solved simply by apologies. This is not related to whether the level of compensation is high or low. Rather, it is related with how compensation is given (Smith et al., 1999). When a customer experiences a loss, he or she might want financial compensation for it, and appropriate compensation to satisfy the customer may lead the customer to have good image of the company. Therefore, the ultimate objective of this study is to identify what types of effort on compensation influences customers in which ways.

There have been many studies dealing with service recovery quality factors. Bell and Zemke (1987) suggested five service recovery quality elements: apology, immediate correction, empathy, compensation, and continuous concern. They insisted that empathy, compensation, and continuous concern are needed for customers inflicted with damage, while immediate correction and apology are the most efficient actions for angry customers. Bitner et al. (1990) found that what caused dissatisfaction to customers was not the failure itself but rather the inappropriate actions of the organization about failures, suggesting recognition of the problems, explanation on the reasons of failure, apology, and compensation as service recovery quality elements. Johnston (1995) insisted that tangible compensation had no effect, and that immediate correction and consideration of service providers positively influenced customers to be satisfied with service. Boshoff (1997) studied the response of 540 passengers after failing to connect aircraft due to delays from airlines, and revealed that refund and prompt actions were the most efficient strategies. Ekiz and Arasli (2007) suggested an apology, explanation, correction, sincerity, and promptness as the primary service recovery quality elements, and made a conclusion that apology without compensation had less effect, and convincing explanation on the issues and attentiveness of employees were needed. Based on the previous studies, this study has classified service recovery quality elements as compensation, promptness, apology, explanation, and attentiveness (Boshoff, 2005; Ekiz and Arasli, 2007; Goodwin and Ross, 1989; Karatepe and Ekiz, 2004).

Compensation and what is expressed as atonement can be defined as 'the response of customers on the complaints and benefit or result of response provided by the organization' (Davidow, 2003). Compensation includes refund, free gift, and coupon discount received by service providers as a response on unfairness caused by service failure (Smith et al., 1999; Tax et al., 1998). Sundaram et al., 1997 and Davidow (2000) insisted that high level of compensation brought a high level of satisfaction on recovery. In addition, Bitner et al. (1990) said that free meal voucher, room upgrade, and coupon were of important elements for satisfaction of customers on recovery.

Prompt actions on service failure not only makes dissatisfied customers become loyal to the company but also improves the chance of maintaining the relationship (Conlon and Murray, 1996). In addition, responding speed of companies and service providers on the complaints of customers is an important element that influences the intention of re-purchase and overall satisfaction of customers (Kincade et al., 1992).

Apology can be defined as a valuable compensation that is regarded as the result of redistribution (social resources) in terms of relationship for exchange (Smith et al., 1999). There are many types of apologies made by companies when they are aware of inconveniences to customers and they try their best to solve these issues. However, the most powerful of all is the humane apology (Zemke and Bell, 1990). Davidow (2000) insisted that apology was psychological compensation, and that providing a sincere apology represented understanding of customers experiencing inconvenience due to service failure.

An explanation is to make the best effort possible to solve issues through speech and represents how companies are aware of problems (Andreassen, 2000; Yavas et al., 2004). Employees who cannot explain issues well are unable to solve general complaints, recognize service issues, apologize, and a full explanation of the service failure is needed to restore the service (Bitner et al., 1990). Lewis and Spyrakopoulos (2001) insisted that a detailed explanation was of the most efficient action a company could take. In addition, Tax and Brown (1998) insisted that providing a detailed explanation of the causes of a service failure to customers was definitely needed to derive satisfaction on recovery of failure.

As for attentiveness, the interaction between service providers and customers with complaints is very important. Attentiveness is

regarded as an interpersonal communication or interaction between customers with complaints and the CEO of organizations including respect and sincerity (Andreassen, 2000; Davidow, 2000). Two thirds of customers' complaints occur due to service providers or their employees, and attitudes and behaviors of service providing employees are very important for the recovery of effective service (Tax and Brown, 1998).

### 2.2. Image, recovery satisfaction, and behavioral intention

The relationship between service recovery and corporate image has been studied by some scholars in the past. Quick response of airline company to customer complaints influenced the corporate image positively, and satisfaction with the effort of the company for recovering the service also positively influenced image (Park, 2012). Clark et al. (1992) established the company's responses to the complaints only in the form of a letter of apology and free gifts during their studies. As a result, they stated that customer response tended to positively influence the company image more when a letter of apology and free gifts were provided. Customers experiencing satisfaction from an effective recovery of service tend to evaluate the service of relevant companies higher than those not experiencing the service failure in the first place. Therefore, service failure is an opportunity to change the image of a service providing company into a desirable direction through recovery (Johnston, 2005). Scholars have mentioned how important the quality elements were when they emphasized the importance of recovery. In addition, since both failure and recovery of service influence the recovery quality elements of service providers, the necessity of the study dealing with correlation between recovery quality elements and image are represented here.

Satisfaction from recovery can be defined as an overall feeling of customers on the result of actions from a company (Davidow, 2000). Even though image is a huge variable of the company, there have not been many studies dealing with influencing relationships between corporate image and satisfaction from recovery. Martenson (2007) stated that corporate image is an antecedent variable of satisfaction. Allameh et al. (2015) studied the relationship between corporate image, perceived quality, perceived value, satisfaction and willingness to re-purchase and argued that perception of the image by tourists affect satisfaction levels. Andressen and Lindestad (1997) also noted that corporate image has a positive effect on customer satisfaction.

When considering previous studies about image and behavioral intention, a strong preference of customers on the current company image would be connected more with repurchase intention (Park et al., 2005). There have been many previous studies dealing with a role and influence of a company's image (Amin et al., 2013; Hsu et al., 2010; Koo, 2003). However, it is still not clear if there is a direct relationship between the company's image and customer behaviors or if such a connection is made out of customer satisfaction (Bloemer et al., 1998).

According to previous studies about satisfaction and behavioral intention, LaBarbera and Mazursky (1983) stated that satisfaction positively influenced the loyalty and repurchase intention of customers. Bitner et al. (1990) insisted that satisfaction with service positively influenced the satisfaction of the overall company, positive orally transmitted tradition, and repurchase intention. Efficient processing of the customer complaint derived from dissatisfaction can bring satisfaction to the overall service, repurchase intention, and positive word-of-mouth communication (Lee, 2001). Wang et al. (2014) noted that satisfaction with service recovery had a positive effect on willingness to purchase via the quality of relationship.

### 2.3. Research model

The conceptual model (Fig. 1) was designed based on reviews of preceding studies that has looked at service recovery, image, satisfaction with service recovery and behavioral intentions. The hypotheses that this study is intended to verify are indicated in arrows in the study model, and all the paths are hypothesized to be positive.

## 3. Methodology

The questionnaire consists of 20 questions including 12 items for measurement of recovery quality elements, two items for measuring the image, three items for measuring the recovery satisfaction, and three items dealing with future behavioral intention. Each of the items used a five-point Likert scale that respondents are asked to mark [Strongly agree (5) − Strongly disagree (1)]. Each question is listed in Table 1.

This survey was conducted at the Incheon International Airport and the Gimhae International Airport for 25 days from June 1st to June 25th, 2013. Subjects of the survey were passengers who had felt dissatisfied with flight services and also during the flight in the recent one year while using international airlines. In order to secure high response rate of the survey, the survey was directly conducted by survey researchers who distributed copies of the survey questionnaire, and then collected them. A total of 277 copies of the survey were distributed, but 37 copies contained inaccurate responses or poorly written answers and were thus excluded, leaving 240 valid copies to be used for analysis in this study. General characteristics of the passengers for the sample are shown in Table 2.

## 4. Empirical results

In order to verify the reliability and validity of the measurement items utilized in this research, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted. As a result of the confirmatory factor analysis, the measurement model showed an acceptable fit (CMIN/DF = 1.912, p = .000; RMR = .031; RMSEA = .062; GFI = .899; AGFI = .868; IFI = .944; NFI = .890; CFI = .943). According to the result of the reliability analysis, Squared Multiple Correlation (SMC) value on the item numbers 1, 9, and 10 of the recovery quality was lower than that of the criterion value of 0.4. According to the result of verification of convergent validity, the standardized factor loading value in the item number 1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, and 10 on the recovery quality was lower than that of 0.7. Therefore, these items were excluded followed by application on the structural equation model. The standardized factor loading values of all the other items were higher than 0.7, and the SMC value turned out to be more than 0.4 (Table 3).

Structural equation analysis revealed that $\chi^2$ value was found to have a significant difference (p = .000) with GFI = .920, AGFI = .885, NFI = .918, RMR = .025 for all the other goodness of fit indices. On that account, the goodness of fit for the model was relatively good. Thus, a hypothesis verification of the model was conducted. The goodness of fit verification result of the structural equation model is as shown in Table 4.

As a result of the verification process, among the previously established hypotheses, three hypotheses turned out to be statistically significant. The statistically significant hypotheses were: the influence of swiftness on the image, influence of image on the recovery satisfaction, and the influence of image on the behavioral intention. Among the recovery quality elements, the influence of tangible compensation, apology/explanation, and attentiveness on the image turned out to be statistically insignificant. The influence
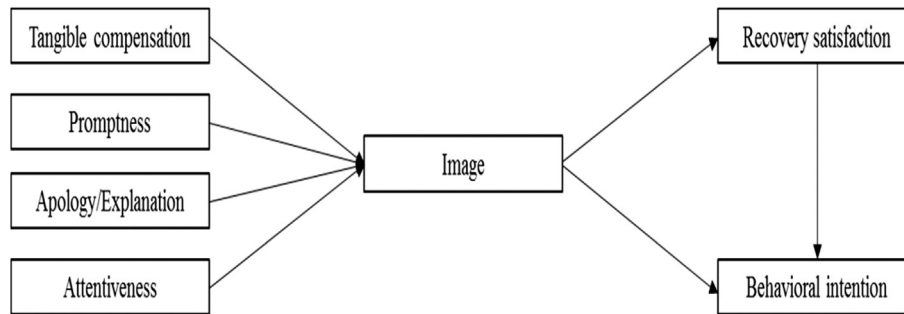
**Fig. 1.** Conceptual model.

**Table 1**
Measurement items.

| Measures | Variables[a] |
|---|---|
| Service recovery quality elements | The airline should provide me with tangible compensation in case of complaint (coupon or souvenir). |
| | The airline should conduct corrective measure that I want in case of complaint. |
| | The airline should present alternative item or measure for solving the issue in case of complaint. |
| | Cabin crews should respond promptly to my complaint in case of complaint. |
| | It is required to respond to my question immediately in case of complaint. |
| | The airline should inform me immediately about the problem and solving status in case of complaint. |
| | The airline should inform me of the expected time to take to solve the problem in case of complaint. |
| | The airline should explain about the cause and background of mistakes in case of complaint. |
| | The airline should give true apology to mistakes in case of complaint. |
| | I am entitled to receive a second apology from higher ranked managers after solving problem in case of complaint. |
| | Cabin crews should to listen carefully to my complaint in case of complaint. |
| | Cabin crews should show their attentiveness while solving problem in case of complaint. |
| Image | I had a more positive image for the corresponding airline after solving my complaint. |
| | I personally believe that this airline has a more favorable image than the other airlines. |
| Satisfaction on recovery | In overall, I am satisfied with the way that this airline has handled complaints and problems. |
| | I was satisfied with the problem-solving method of this airline. |
| | I found that the problem-solving method of this airline was better than initially expected for my complaint. |
| Behavioral intention | I will talk positively about the corresponding airline to other people. |
| | If one of my friends is seeking an airline, I will recommend this airline to that friend. |
| | I will continue to use this airline next time I fly. |

[a] Note: a five-point Likert scale.

**Table 2**
Sample characteristics.

| | | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Men | 121 | 50.4 |
| | Women | 119 | 49.6 |
| Age | 20 years old or younger | 3 | 1.3 |
| | 20—29 years old | 40 | 16.7 |
| | 30—39 years old | 107 | 44.6 |
| | 40—49 years old | 66 | 27.5 |
| | 50—59 years old | 17 | 7.1 |
| | 60 years old or older | 7 | 2.9 |
| Monthly income | KRW 1,500,000 or less [a] | 10 | 5.0 |
| | KRW 1,500,000—2,490,000 | 17 | 8.5 |
| | KRW 2,500,000—3,490,000 | 57 | 28.5 |
| | KRW 3,500,000—4,490,000 | 42 | 21.0 |
| | KRW 4,500,000 or more | 74 | 37.0 |
| Purpose of use | Tour | 147 | 61.3 |
| | Business/Work | 51 | 21.3 |
| | Studying abroad | 3 | 1.3 |
| | Visiting relatives | 9 | 3.8 |
| | Others | 30 | 12.5 |
| Number of travels | 1—2 times | 116 | 48.3 |
| | 3—5 times | 77 | 32.1 |
| | 6—8 times | 27 | 11.3 |
| | 9 times or more | 20 | 8.3 |
| Airline with complaint experience | Korean Air | 71 | 29.5 |
| | Asiana Airlines | 21 | 8.8 |
| | Other national airlines | 51 | 21.3 |
| | Foreign airlines | 97 | 40.4 |
| Total Respondents | | 240 | 100 |

[a] Note: 1020 Korean won is equivalent to $1 USD.

**Table 3**
Result of confirmatory factor analysis.

| Factor | Variables | SMC | Loadings[a] | Standardized loadings |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Recovery | Recovery 1 | .280 | .977 | .529 |
| | Recovery 2 | .458 | 1.126 | .677 |
| | Recovery 3 | .470 | 1.000 | .685 |
| | Recovery 4 | .558 | .768 | .747 |
| | Recovery 5 | .682 | .985 | .826 |
| | Recovery 6 | .701 | 1.000 | .837 |
| | Recovery 7 | .472 | 1.127 | .687 |
| | Recovery 8 | .423 | .981 | .651 |
| | Recovery 9 | .331 | 1.000 | .576 |
| | Recovery 10 | .255 | 1.088 | .505 |
| | Recovery 11 | .534 | 1.000 | .731 |
| | Recovery 12 | .656 | 1.129 | .810 |
| Image | Image 1 | .640 | 1.049 | .800 |
| | Image 2 | .597 | 1.000 | .772 |
| Satisfaction on recovery | Satisfaction on recovery 1 | .709 | .873 | .842 |
| | Satisfaction on recovery 2 | .842 | 1.000 | .918 |
| | Satisfaction on recovery 3 | .647 | .991 | .805 |
| Behavioral intention | Behavioral intention 1 | .791 | .884 | .889 |
| | Behavioral intention 2 | .797 | 1.000 | .893 |
| | Behavioral intention 3 | .828 | .983 | .910 |

[a] Note: Values in parentheses are critical ratios, and all of the values are significant ($p < .01$).

**Table 4**
Result of goodness of fit.

| Fit measure | $X^2$ | GFI | AGFI | TLI | CFI | NFI | RFI | RMSEA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Value | 189.937 (df = 106, p < .001) | .920 | .885 | .951 | .962 | .918 | .895 | .058 |

of satisfaction from recovery on the behavioral intention was also found to be statistically insignificant. The results of verification for the hypotheses on the final study model are as shown in Table 5.

The detailed results of the hypothesis verification of this study are as follows. First of all, swiftness turned out to be an element that positively influenced the image of airlines. Korean people tend to dislike waiting. The famous saying by Benjamin Franklin, 'Time is Money,' does not emphasize the importance of time for recovery, but waiting tends to make people angry. In this particular case, swift action has the highest influence on the image of an airline for customers. Secondly, the recovered image of an airline turned out to positively influence a customer' recovery satisfaction. This is regarded as being consistent with previous studies dealing with the image that influences customer satisfaction and how the image of recovery tends to have an influence on the customer satisfaction. Third, the recovered image turned out to be recommended on others or have a positive influence on the behavioral intention. The importance of oral communication in the marketing world for airlines has already been explained earlier and is also a factor that supports the importance of recovery. Fourth, it turned out that there was no positive influence on the relationship between recovery satisfaction and behavioral intention. An enhanced image of an airline through an effort for recovery influences customer

satisfaction. However, the influence on the behavioral intention turned out to be low. This finding is different from the findings of previous studies. However, it is still similar to the finding of Andreassen (2000) for how customers with an experience of failure had less satisfaction and behavioral intention before they experienced the failure in the first place.

## 5. Conclusions

This study sought to find out effects of recovery quality elements on behavioral intention of customers. It aimed to find recovery quality elements that positively influence the behavioral intention and satisfy passengers helping airlines to design behavioral guidelines in case of customer complaints or necessary recovery strategies. Therefore, this study has analyzed the influence of major elements of recovery quality elements such as tangible compensation, swiftness, apology/explanation, and attentiveness on the image of airlines, recovery satisfaction, and behavioral intention. Data analysis of this study found out that promptness has positive influence on the image of an airline. This represents how much important swift action on service failure is to improve the image of an airline. In addition, recovered image of an airline turned out to have a positive influence on the recovery satisfaction and

**Table 5**
Results of hypotheses testing.

| | Relationships | Estimate | CR | Result |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| H$_1$ | Tangible Compensation → Image | −.308 | −1.117 | Rejected |
| H$_2$ | Promptness → Image | .308 | 2.015** | Supported |
| H$_3$ | Apology/Explanation → Image | .186 | .863 | Rejected |
| H$_4$ | Attentiveness → Image | .061 | .341 | Rejected |
| H$_5$ | Image → Recovery satisfaction | .565 | 6.571** | Supported |
| H$_6$ | Image → Behavioral intention | 1.030 | 9.935** | Supported |
| H$_7$ | Recovery satisfaction → Behavioral intention | −.091 | −1.363 | Rejected |

Note: **$p < .05$.

behavioral intention supporting the importance of recovery. The findings of this study are expected to help airline companies establish more effective strategies to prevent service failures, thus improving customer satisfaction, willingness to spread good word-of-mouth, and willingness to re-purchase.

Service in the airline industry tends to inevitably lead to experiences of service failure due to unique characteristics of the service. If it is not feasible to prevent such service failure, airlines need to seek solutions that can help cope with such service failures. According to the results of the analysis in this study, passengers in Korea place a top priority on swift actions taken on the service failure. Since passengers value prompt response to service failures more than anything else, airline managers need to pay more attention on swift treatment of customers' complaints. What customers see as important when they face service failure is how employees of the airline treat their complaints and what measures they use to solve them. Therefore, a successful service recovery requires airline employees to understand the importance of prompt response to service failure. It can be realized by repetitive and thorough trainings of employees. Systematic service training of staff increases their ability to handle service failures promptly, leading to prompt service recovery and continued improvement of customer service. Airline managers also need to develop a balanced service recovery system to be applied to failure cases. Such a system and training can help managers more efficiently serve passengers who experienced service failures in various degrees and ultimately improve the corporate image, customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions.

This study has the following limitations and directions for follow-up studies can be suggested as follows. First of all, the survey was conducted on passengers with experience of complaints. However, many of the respondents had only one or two times experience using flights. Therefore, it was difficult to obtain reliable responses from these individuals. Secondly, customers might have relatively different feelings or expectations on the recovery depending on whether they conceive their complaints as categorical or psychological. In-depth interview delving into the types of complaints was not performed. Third, this survey was conducted only on Korean people. Response patterns may be different among different peoples of the world. But the survey was specifically conducted only on people living in Seoul and Busan. Therefore, it is recommended for a follow-up study to complement such limitations identifying what the recovery elements on the complaints would be on frequent flyers as well as the detailed patterns of compensation from different types of complaints. It is also desirable to include foreigners to domestic passengers in the future comparative study on failure and recovery of airline service.

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