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Effects of Organizational Learning on Competitive Advantage of Selected Telecommunication Firms in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of organizational learning on competitive advantage of selected telecommunication firms in Nigeria. The study used cross-sectional descriptive research design to determine the effect of organizational learning on competitive advantage of selected telecommunication firms in Nigeria. Both primary and secondary data were collected for this study. The population of study is the entire telecommunication firms in Nigeria, but the sample size was drawn from MTN and Globacom Nigeria, Lagos offices which resulted in 267 elements drawn scientifically using Taro Yamane formula. Data used for analysis was on 193 returned questionnaire designed on a 5-point Likert scale rating used to sample respondents opinion. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze data which consist of frequency distribution, arithmetic mean, standard deviation and simple ratio. Regression model was used to test the hypotheses. The result revealed that organizational learning and knowledge sharing has a positive and statistically significant effect on competitive advantage and innovativeness respectively. The study recommends that managers/management of organization should develop internal capacity to work towards superior performance that leads to competitiveness by embracing organizational learning.

Keywords: Competitive advantage; Innovativeness; Knowledge sharing; Organizational learning

Introduction

The ability of an organization to learn has been linked to be the main source of its competitive advantage [1]. Organizations need to change with today's ever changing and dynamic business environment to be successful, and to achieve this, organizations must continue to learn, and implement the changes learnt [2]. Organizational learning is about managing the creation of the organization's knowledge, which is the process of acquiring, maintaining and sharing knowledge with the purpose of adapting to the dynamic business environment [3]. Organizational learning is seen by many researchers as the fundamental ingredient that improves competitiveness of any organization [4], which arises from individual and group knowledge acquired and transferred through the process of learning, into routines, work processes and systems that helps to develop organizational competencies and capabilities [5], which is positively connected to competitive advantage [6,7]. This has led to the general consensus by researchers in the field of management and social sciences that organizational learning is no longer an option but a major factor for organizations the world over to achieve sustainable competitive advantage [8-10]. Organizational learning in Nigeria has not been widely accepted and practiced ought to because most managers and organizations in Nigeria has not seen it as a fundamental ingredient to boost success, performance, and competitiveness in the Nigerian business environment [11] the exception being the banking industry in Nigeria [12].

This study aims to investigate how organizational learning has influenced the competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria. The telecommunication industry is one of the major gains of globalization not just in Nigeria but the world at large and has continued to experience drastic change requiring constant updating and improvement of processes, procedures, machines and tools, techniques, and even the people within it. Nigeria has four (4) major telecommunication giants namely, MTN, Globacom, Airtel and 9mobile (in no particular order), who jostle for control of the market and subscribers by adopting various strategies aimed at outwitting others so as to gain competitive advantage in the market place.

Statement of the problem

The generality of opinion of scholars is that the success of any organization irrespective of its size and shape depends largely on its ability to adopt organizational learning as its core ingredient [5]. Despite this clarity and consensus, its adoption by most corporate entities is still very low [4]. Managers' inability to access what is needed to evolve to a learning organization has become a major challenge. The outcomes of some research studies which is centered around manufacturing firms alone does not have a clear cut effect on making organizations compete favourably [13], while others have tried to restrict organizational learning to the performance of teachers and lecturers of higher and tertiary institutions which still isn't a perfect measure of performance of goods and service oriented firms that aims for survival and fights competition [14]. Managers in most organizations in Nigeria have been affected by the notion that organizational learning vary a great deal in organizations and the assumption that learning for decision making and changing environment is the sole preserve of top level managers alone have not done justice to why they must incorporate learning in their programmes [11].

Telecommunication firms are failing daily not because they are not better equipped but because the major problem is how to correctly identify specific causes of an employee's poor performance, high

telecom cost, managing telecom inventory, continued change in technology, among others [15] most of which falls at the domain of employees and the questions "are employees better equipped to fit into the dynamism of the ever changing business environment? Do employees have the required knowledge, skill and attitude (KSA) to make organizations sustain competitive advantage? are yet unanswered by managers in Nigeria who still treat employees as liability rather than assets worthy of investing in [16].

Objectives of the study and hypotheses

The objective of the study is to:

Examine the effect of organizational learning on competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria;

Examine the effect of knowledge sharing on the innovativeness of firms in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria.

The hypotheses to be tested by this study are stated in the null form below:

H0: Organizational learning does not significantly affect competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunication industry;

H0: Knowledge sharing does not significantly affect innovativeness of firms in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria.

Conceptual framework

Chris [17] viewed organizational learning as the manner by which organization and its members acquire skills and bring on board knowledge essential for the development of capabilities, resources, and ability for effective and efficient performance. This is centered on organizational learning driven by knowledge management practices shared by everyone in the organization. Mylse [18] argued that organizational learning is an endless process through which organizations respond to its environment by exploiting various skills, knowledge and capacities aimed at achieving competitiveness. Robelo et al. [19] posited that organizational learning is a situation whereby employees continually improve their capability to achieve results through development of new patterns, freeing up collective ambitions and learning together as a unit. The emphasis of organizational learning is on its capacity to acquire knowledge, information and assess what would enable them achieve ascendency in the market place [16,20,21].

Argote [22] opined that knowledge when shared among organizational members can be integrated into the organization so that other members can have access to that knowledge even when leaving the organization. Geiger [23] emphasized that the creation of knowledge happens at moment of practices, and such knowledge and practices goes together in the learning process of organizations. This knowledge exists in collective associations which are part of a drive to become a member of a practice [24]. Knowledge is the outcome of learning which can be manifested in changes in thoughts or conducts. It can be explicit or tacit and difficult to absorb [25,26]. It can be declarative or technical [7,27,28]. Hashemi et al. [29] identified nine (9) main factors that contributes to organizational learning which are (i) system thinking; (ii) team learning; (iii) mental models; (iv) common ideas and vision; (v) personal skills and domination; (vi) experimenting with new approaches; (vii) learning from past experiences; (viii) learning from others; and (ix) knowledge sharing.

Competitive advantage exist when a firm is able to deliver benefits that its closest rivals and/or competitors can also deliver at a lower cost (Cost advantage) or benefits that surpasses those of competitors products/services (Differentiation strategy). Competitive advantage is necessary for satisfied customers to receive higher value in delivered products which can only be achieved through organization of production, higher value utilization of resources and possible low cost of production. Competitive advantage occurs when an organization acquires or develops qualities or combination of qualities that allows it to outperform its rivals in the same business [30]. E'Onyemanam [31] opined that competitive advantage is the degree of dominance by which firms produces goods, services, and other related functions based on certain recognizable advantages that grant them superiority over competitors. It is the ability of firms to do better than similar firms in areas such as sales, cost reduction, market shares, innovation, profitability etc. [32].

Hao [33] posited that competitive advantage can be viewed from two angles, which are: Positional advantage: which connotes defining the position that leads to better company efficiency (unique enrichment of resources, market positions, recognized accesses and other traits that are comparatively fixed)? This is based on the company's status, social or inexpensive, actual or superficial, in the eyes of the customers, competitors, partners, regulators, other stakeholders. Kinetic advantage: which is an action focused ability that allows a firm to operate more effectively and efficiently. It comes from a firm's knowledge and capabilities including those gained from access to or copying other firm's knowledge and capabilities. It is the firm's proficiency and skill in carrying out business functions, including, but not restricted to recognized market opportunities, knowledge of customers, technical know-how and capability, speed of action, response in the market place, efficiency and flexibility of business processes. It must be noted that positional and kinetic advantages often strengthens each other.

Theoretical framework

Organizations are consistently shaped by the constant changing environment and by the complex learning processes which constitutes the combination of individual with superior knowledge on operative managements to aid their operations [34]. Current methodologies to organizational learning practices emphasizes schedules as fountains of knowledge which are regarded as repeated arrangements of actions which span multiple organizational players and resources [11] the focus of which is to establish superior working capabilities that drive high performing organizations towards the realization of their pre-determined goals, which is to remain competitive and attain advantage over rivals [35]. This study will be hinged on the Social cognitive theory of learning.

Social cognitive theory of learning

Social Cognitive Theory posits that individual behavior is part of an inseparable triadic structure in which behavior, personal factors and environmental factors constantly influence each other, reciprocally determining each other [36]. Environmental factors are seen as the factors that are physically external to the person and that provide opportunities and social support such as social pressure or situational characteristics. Personal factors are any cognitive, personality, or demographic aspects characterizing an individual. In other words, individuals choose the environment in which they evolve, but they also shape their surrounding environment. Pajares [37] affirms that "How

individuals interpret the results of their performance attainments informs and alters their environments and their self-beliefs, which in turn inform and alter their subsequent performances." Furthermore, individual behavior in a certain learning situation both influences and is influenced by environmental (or situational) and cognitive/personal factors. Social cognitive theory explains how people acquire and maintain certain behavioral patterns, while also providing the basis for intervention strategies [38].

Learning theory is a set of principles systematically and based reasoning is intended for a conceptual framework and have been tested empirically in providing an explanation and problem solving in the learning phenomenon [39]. In this case, the learning phenomenon in question is caused by changes in individual behavior in its interaction with the environment in an effort to meet the needs and achieve its objectives, so as to obtain a better quality of life and effective. Recognizing the importance of learning for individuals, this study refers to Bandura's social cognitive learning theory. This theory is an expansion of the flow of behaviorism and is considered relatively new compared to other learning theories. Bandura uses the principles of classical conditioning and conditioning role in understanding the learning by the individuals. In the next part of this research, we will discuss the basic principles and the lessons learned from this theory.

Bandura's social cognitive theory is an extension of the behaviorism theory that emphasizes the importance of behavioral factors, environmental, and individual (cognitive) in the learning process [40-42]. Hjelle et al. [43] state that the most important physiological functions and is believed to be understood in Bandura's learning theory is the emphasis on continuous reciprocal interaction between these three factors. Behavior can affect cognitive and vice versa individual cognitive activities can affect the environment, environmental influences can alter individual thought processes

In recognizing the importance of reciprocal relationships that occur between the behavior, the individual (cognitive), and the environmental influences in understanding how individuals learn, Bandura in this case, puts the main emphasis on observational learning. Bandura considers that individual learning is done not only through their own experience but also through the process of observation, namely selectively observing and considering the current behavior model [39,40]. It is important by individuals to acquire the skills, strategies, and beliefs [39,44]. Slavin RE [39] and Santrock [44] adds that the principle of this theory reveals how self-observation of the surroundings can influence behavior and cognitive within the individuals.

According to Bandura, observational study involves an impersonation, but is not limited to it. That is, what is learned is not an exact imitation to what was observed on the model, but rather a general form that would do people in ways that are more creative [44]. Hence, learning theory proposed by Bandura called social cognitive theory of learning through imitation. In this regard, there are three underlying assumptions [45]. First, learning by individuals to imitate what is in their environment, especially the behaviors displayed by models. Second, there is a close relationship between the individual and his/her environment. Learning occurs through linkage between the behavior, the individual (cognitive), and the environment. Third, the outcome of learning behavior code form visually and verbally manifested in everyday behavior.

The existence of these assumptions make clearer the individual cognitive processes that play a role in learning, whereas learning occurs due to the influence of the social environment. Individuals will observe the behavior in the environment as a model, and then the behavior of the model is imitated and become their behaviors. Bandura [38] and Surya [45] stated that when the individual do the learning, it turns individuals cognitively able to present or transform experiences. Finally, individual's behavior will be formed through imitation of the behavior in the environment as a model, while learning is a process of how impersonation happens to be in conformity with his situation and objectives. Bandura [38] and Hisrich et al. [42] also stated that almost all learning phenomena resulting from direct experience occurs through observation of the others' behaviors (behavioral model).

It must be noted that for organizational learning to yield the desired outcome, organizations must put in place structural framework for learning among workers because knowledge acquired, shared and utilized enables organization to be innovative and improves quality/diversification of product in meeting the demands of the environment [11,46-48].

Knowledge sharing and innovativeness: knowledge is an indicator of organizational learning. Organizations learn when a change in the knowledge of an organization occurs [49]. Knowledge sharing occurs when knowledge is circulated continuously within the organization. Knowledge is public goods and can be used by several individuals concurrently. Knowledge sharing is an economical asset of an organization that leads to new ideas generation, creativity in thinking among employees, new product development among others. Knowledge sharing provides individuals, teams, and enterprises with the opportunity to improve their work performance as well as create new ideas and innovations [50]. Wang et al. [51] argued that knowledge sharing helps organizations benefit from individual's experience and knowledge and turn it into corporate knowledge thereby leading to an innovative organization. Knowledge sharing can be explicit in nature (factual and easily exchangeable through written, verbal or codified media) or tacit knowledge (entails procedures learnt through experiences) [22].

Empirical findings

Bello et al. [13] studied organizational learning, organizational innovation and organizational performance, an empirical evidence among selected manufacturing companies in Lagos metropolis, Nigeria and found that organizational learning had a positive correlation with organizational innovation, and organizational innovation has a positive correlation on organizational performance; they also found that organizational learning has a positive correlation on organizational performance. Ewans et al. [11] in their study of organizational learning and performance of selected paint manufacturing firms in Lagos, Nigeria, used survey design and employed Pearson correlation coefficient and found that knowledge sharing engenders innovativeness in operations test which results to product diversification given the dynamism of the business environment. Similarly, while analyzing the relationship between organizational learning capacity and organizational performance in the banking sector in Nigeria found that organizational learning capacity (knowledge and skill acquisition) contributes positively to the performance of employees in the banking sector [12]. Edy et al. [10] while studying the effect of organizational learning on performance of higher education lecturer in Indonesia found that there is significant and positive effect of organizational learning on teaching competence and lecturer performance [52]. While trying to provide insight into the relationship between organizational learning and organizational

success which leads organization to be competitive found that organizational learning results in enhanced personal development for staff, enhanced innovation with a consequent introduction of new product and services. The study links these benefits to better financial performance. The argument is that individuals learn to enhance their job processes resulting in greater level of achievement of team goals and organizational goals. Akewushola (2012) in his study of organizational learning as a strategic tool for enhancing organizational competitiveness of selected audit firms in Lagos, Nigeria found that opportunity for individual learning makes employees to be committed and that organizational condition have significant effect on performance.

Methods and Procedures

The study adopted cross-sectional descriptive research design, structured questionnaires were developed with closed ended questions using a 5 point Likert scale measurement rating, ranging from S.A (5), A (4), Und (3), DisA (2), S.D (1) point respectively with the intention of capturing reality in quantitative terms. The two companies selected from the telecommunication industry in Nigeria with MTN Nigeria contributing 602 staffs from their Lagos office and Globacom Nigeria 240 staffs from their Lagos office respectively totalling 842 elements from top level to lower cadre staffs. Data collection was primary source only, sample technique was simple random after which simple proportion was employed in the ratio that each firm contributed (71:29) to the total population of study. Sample size was determined using Taro Yamane (1967) sample size determinant ($n=N/(1+N^{*}e^{2})$) and verified using Israel (2013) published table, which resulted in 267 elements as sample size out of which 205 questionnaires were returned and 193 was found usable for deducing a conclusion. Simple percentage, mean, standard deviation and regression analysis was employed to analyze data of the variables under consideration to the researchers. Content and face validity was employed and a Cronbach Alpha reliability of 0.786 was obtained on SPSS 20.0 package.

Data Analysis

Respondents demographic attributes

From the spread of the sample size based on sex distribution of respondents, 90 respondents representing 46.6% of respondents are male, while 103 respondents representing 53.4% are female (Table 1). This is as a result of more females working in Telecommunication Industry. Age distribution revealed 52 respondents representing 26.9% between the ages 21-30 years, 107respondents representing 55.4% between the ages of 31-40 years, 27 respondents representing 14.0% between the ages of 41-50 years while 7 respondents representing 3.6% between the ages 51 years and above, this shows that most employees in the telecommunication industry are middle age adults. The marital status shows 79 respondents representing 40.9% of the sample population are single, while 108 respondents representing 56% are married and with family and 6 respondents representing 3.1% are divorced. On the education front, the distribution shows that 27 respondents (14%) had OND/NCE, 129 respondents (66.8%) had BSc/BA/HND, 28 respondents (14.5%) had MSc/MBA and 9 respondents (4.7%) had other qualification, this shows that most employees of the telecommunication industry had a minimum qualification of BSc/BA/HND. The official status shows a distribution of 25 respondents (13%) being top level management staff, 44 respondents (22.8%) being middle level management staffs and 124 respondents (64.2%) were on the lower cadre, this findings revealed that most employees of the telecommunication industry in Nigeria were at the lower cadre. The contribution of the telecommunication firm under study is broken down below (Table 2).

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	90	46.6
Female	103	53.4
Age		
21-30	52	26.9
31-40	107	55.4
41-50	27	14.0
51 and above	7	3.6
Marital Status		
Single	79	40.9
Married	108	56.0
Divorced	6	3.1
Educational Status		
OND/NCE	27	14.0
BSc/BA/HND	129	66.8

MSc/MBA	28	14.5
Others	9	4.7
Official Status		
Top Level Mgt.	25	13.0
Middle Level Mgt.	44	22.8
Low Level Mgt.	124	64.2

Table 1: Demography of Respondents. **Source:**

Contribution	Mtn	Globacom	Total
Population of study	602	240	842
Sample size	189	78	267
Respondents (returned)	133	72	205
Respondents (analyzed)	124	69	193

Table 2: Contribution of the telecommunication firm under study. **Source:**

Operationalizing variables

CA=f (OL),

Where: CA=Competitive Advantage; and

OL=Organizational Learning.

Indicators	
Organizational learning	**Competitive advantage**
Knowledge Sharing	Innovativeness

Table 3: Innovativeness=f(Knowledge Sharing).

Hypothesis 1

H_0: Organizational learning does not significantly affect competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunication industry.

Model summary: The model summary is shown in the Table 4. The variance in the dependent variable (competitive advantage) as explained by the constant (organizational learning). The R^2 value of 0.261 expressed in percentage indicates that 26.1% of the variation in the dependent variable (CA) can be explained by the independent variable (OL).

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.511[a]	0.261	0.257	0.36699

Table 4: Model summary. [a]Predictors: (Constant), Organizational Learning.

ANOVA: The ANOVA table (Table 5) shows the assessment of the regression model which predicts the dependents variables significance. This test the null hypothesis to determine its statistical significance, the F value and P value is used to determine this. The result of the model in the table above indicates that the regression model statistically significantly predicts the outcome since the p value of 0.000<0.05 and the Fobserved 67.431>Fcritical 3.04 the null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	9.082	1	9.082	67.431	0.000[b]
	Residual	25.724	191	0.135		
	Total	34.806	192			

Table 5: Assessment of the regression model predicting the dependent variables significance. [b]Predictors: (Constant), Organizational Learning.

Coefficients: The coefficient table (Table 6) shows the contribution of the variables to the dependent variable. The study undertakes to compare the contribution of the independent variable OL using the beta coefficient value 0.563 in the unstandardized coefficient. This means that changes in organizational learning contributes to explaining competitive advantage enjoyed by telecommunication firms in Nigeria.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	Constant	1.922	0.307		6.269	0
	Organizational Learning	0.563	0.069	0.511	8.212	0

Table 6: Contribution of the variables to the dependent variable.

Hypothesis 2

H_0: Knowledge sharing does not significantly affect innovativeness of firms in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria.

Model summary: The model summary in Table 7 shows the variance in the dependent variable (innovativeness) as explained by the constant (knowledge sharing). The R^2 value of 0.161 expressed in percentage indicates that 16.1% of the variation in the dependent variable (INN) can be explained by the independent variable (KS).

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.401[a]	0.161	0.156	0.42813

Table 7: Variance in the dependent variable (innovativeness). [a]Predictors: (Constant), Knowledge Sharing.

ANOVA: The ANOVA table (Table 8) shows the assessment of the regression model which predicts the dependents variables significance. This test the null hypothesis to determine its statistical significance, the F value and P value is used to determine this. The result of the model in the table above indicates that the regression model statistically significantly predicts the outcome since the p value of 0.000<0.05 and the Fobserved 36.608>Fcritical 3.04 the null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	6.71	1	6.71	36.608	0.000[b]
	Residual	35.01	191	0.183		
	Total	41.72	192			

Table 8: Assessment of the regression model predicting the dependent variables significance. [b]=Predictors: (Constant), Knowledge Sharing.

Coefficients: The coefficient table above shows the contribution of the variables to the dependent variable (Table 9). The study undertakes to compare the contribution of the independent variable KS using the beta coefficient value 0.391 in the unstandardized coefficient. This means that changes in knowledge sharing contributes to explaining innovativeness of telecommunication firms in Nigeria.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1	(Constant)	2.608	0.29		9.005	0
	Knowledge Sharing	0.391	0.065	0.401	6.05	0

Table 9: Contribution of the variables to the dependent variable.

The findings revealed in the first hypothesis tested that organizational learning can be used to explain the variation of competitive advantage that firms in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria enjoys, the R^2 value of 0.261 indicates that 26.1% of competitive advantage that these firms enjoy over rivals is as a result of their ability to learn, unlearn and relearn through the implementation of learning programmes in their activities. The F observed of 67.431 was greater than the F critical of 3.04 and the P value of 0.000 was less than the level of Significance of 0.05 which is enough to reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant effect of organizational learning on competitive advantage of firms in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria, which is synonymous with the findings of Yeo [52] found that organizational learning results in enhanced personal development for staff, enhanced innovation with a consequent introduction of new product and services. The study links these benefits to better financial performance. The argument is that individuals learn to enhance their job processes resulting in greater level of achievement of team goals and organizational goals and the findings of Akewushola (2012) that found that opportunity for individual learning makes employees to be committed and that organizational condition have significant effect on performance. The coefficient table also shows that the independent variable contributes 0.563 (56.3%) to the changes experienced by the firms enjoying competitive advantage in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 2 revealed that knowledge sharing is a cause of the variation in innovativeness as seen in the R^2 value of 0.161 (16.1%) of telecommunication firms in Nigeria. The F observed of 36.608 is greater than the F critical value of 3.04 and the P value of 0.000 is less that the level of Significance of 0.05 which is enough to reject the null hypothesis that there is no significant effect of knowledge sharing on innovativeness of firms in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria. The beta coefficient of 0.391 (39.1%) indicates that knowledge sharing is responsible for 39.1% of changes that occurs in the innovativeness that firms in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria enjoys. This is consistent with the findings of [13] which found that organizational learning had a positive correlation with organizational innovation, with organizational innovation having a positive correlation on organizational performance, they also found that organizational learning has a positive correlation on organizational performance and [11] findings that knowledge sharing engenders innovativeness in operations test which results to product diversification given the dynamism of the business environment.

Conclusion

The study recommends that firms embrace organizational learning as a key ingredient in the development of their core competence and that organizations should invest more on their human capital development programme for all staffs irrespective of their status in the organization which will in turn result in individual and team advancement and by so doing they will be better equipped to tackle the dynamism of the ever changing business environment. Secondly, a learning environment allows for team bonding which is essential for knowledge acquired to be transferred within and between individuals and groups. When the environment is conducive then the opportunity to be creative and innovative is higher among individuals, therefore managers and organizations should incorporate and foster knowledge sharing and team bonding in the organization [53].

Limitations and Areas for Further Studies

This study was not able to incorporate all the four (4) major firms in the Nigerian telecommunication industry because of the scope will be to large. This led the researcher to adopt 2 out of the 4 firms to reach a conclusion. The researcher adopted cross sectional research design that can be improved upon. Other service industries could also be incorporated by other researchers to broaden the study on organizational learning in Nigeria and indeed Africa.

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