Article

Women in Supply Chain Leadership: Barriers and Opportunities

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Abstract:This study explores the barriers and opportunities faced by women in supply chain leadership, a field traditionally dominated by men. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, it uncovers the pervasive cultural and societal biases that undermine women's perceived competence and suitability for leadership roles. These biases, often rooted in deep-seated stereotypes, influence hiring and promotion decisions, creating significant obstacles for women. Structural and organizational barriers, such as the lack of formal diversity policies, flexible working arrangements, and adequate mentorship, further hinder women's career progression. The dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities also disproportionately affects women, limiting their availability for work-related travel and extended hours, which are often required in supply chain roles. Despite these challenges, the study identifies several pathways to promote gender diversity in supply chain leadership. Organizational commitment to diversity and inclusion, flexible working policies, and comprehensive mentorship programs are crucial in supporting women's advancement. Education and professional development opportunities are essential in equipping women with the necessary skills for leadership roles. Additionally, fostering an inclusive corporate culture that values diverse perspectives and addresses discrimination is vital for creating a supportive environment. Broader societal and policy-level changes, such as government and industry initiatives promoting gender diversity, are also necessary. The integration of emerging areas like sustainability, entrepreneurship, emotional intelligence, marketing, and supplier relationship management offers new opportunities for women to contribute to the industry's evolution. By addressing these barriers and leveraging the identified opportunities, it is possible to create a more inclusive and equitable supply chain industry, benefiting both the industry and society.

Keywords: women; supply Chain; leadership; Barriers; opportunities; diversity; inclusion

1. Introduction

The supply chain sector, encompassing logistics, procurement, operations, and more, is a cornerstone of global trade and commerce. Its complexity and critical role in the seamless movement of goods and services make it a vital area of study and practice. Traditionally, this field has been dominated by men, which mirrors a broader trend of gender imbalance in many technical and operational domains. Despite significant strides towards gender equality in various sectors, the supply chain industry remains one where women are significantly underrepresented, especially in leadership positions. The underrepresentation of women in supply chain leadership roles is not just a matter of numbers but a reflection of deeper systemic issues that hinder gender diversity. These issues range from cultural biases and organizational structures to personal challenges faced by women. Understanding these barriers is essential to fostering an inclusive environment that values and promotes diversity at all levels of the supply chain. One of the primary barriers to women ascending to leadership roles in the supply chain industry is the pervasive cultural bias that associates leadership qualities with traditionally masculine traits. This stereotype not only influences hiring and promotion decisions but also impacts the self-perception of women who might otherwise aspire to leadership roles. Research has shown that women are often perceived as less competent or less suited for leadership in industries that are viewed as male-dominated (Catalyst, 2020). This bias can manifest in various forms, such as women being overlooked for promotions, receiving less mentorship, and being excluded from informal networks that are crucial for career advancement. Moreover, the supply chain sector often demands long hours and physical presence, which can be

challenging for individuals balancing work with family responsibilities. Women, more often than men, face the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities, which can limit their availability and flexibility to take on demanding roles (McKinsey & Company, 2021). This situation is exacerbated by a lack of supportive policies such as flexible working hours, remote work options, and adequate maternity leave. Consequently, many women may opt out of career paths that could lead to leadership positions, further skewing the gender balance. Organizational structures and cultures also play a significant role in perpetuating gender imbalances in leadership. Companies that lack formal policies promoting diversity and inclusion often fail to create an environment where women feel valued and supported. The absence of role models and mentors can also deter women from pursuing leadership roles. When women do not see others like themselves in senior positions, it can be challenging to envision a similar path for their own careers (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2021). Mentorship and sponsorship are critical for career advancement, yet women are less likely to have access to these resources compared to their male counterparts. The issue of gender diversity in supply chain leadership is not only about fairness but also about the tangible benefits that diversity brings to organizations. Studies have consistently shown that diverse leadership teams perform better, drive more innovation, and contribute to better financial performance (Hunt, Yee, Prince, & Dixon-Fyle, 2018). Companies with gender-diverse leadership are better positioned to understand and cater to a diverse customer base, which can be a significant competitive advantage. Furthermore, diversity in leadership fosters a more inclusive corporate culture, which can improve employee satisfaction and retention. Despite these barriers, there are numerous opportunities and strategies that can help promote gender diversity in supply chain leadership. One effective approach is the implementation of targeted recruitment and promotion policies. By setting clear diversity goals and holding leadership accountable for meeting them, companies can create a more level playing field. Additionally, implementing blind recruitment processes can help mitigate unconscious biases that may disadvantage female candidates. Companies can also benefit from training programs designed to raise awareness about gender biases and equip employees with the tools to address them. Mentorship and sponsorship programs are also critical in supporting women's career advancement in the supply chain sector. Mentorship provides women with guidance, support, and advice from more experienced colleagues, while sponsorship involves active advocacy for women's career advancement. These programs can help women navigate the challenges of the industry, build confidence, and gain visibility within their organizations. Moreover, creating networks and forums where women can connect, share experiences, and support each other can be highly beneficial. Flexible working policies are another essential component in promoting gender diversity. By offering flexible hours, remote working options, and comprehensive family leave policies, companies can help women balance their professional and personal responsibilities. This flexibility can make it more feasible for women to pursue and sustain leadership roles without having to sacrifice their family life. Education and training also play a crucial role in preparing women for leadership positions in the supply chain industry. Providing opportunities for professional development, such as leadership training programs, can equip women with the skills and knowledge needed to excel in senior roles. Encouraging women to pursue advanced degrees in supply chain management and related fields can also help build a pipeline of qualified female candidates for leadership positions. Furthermore, organizations can benefit from fostering an inclusive culture that values diversity at all levels. This involves creating a corporate culture that respects and values different perspectives, encourages open dialogue, and addresses any forms of discrimination or harassment. By promoting a culture of inclusion, companies can ensure that women feel valued and supported, which can enhance their commitment and performance. There are also broader societal and policy-level changes that can support the advancement of women in supply chain leadership. Governments and industry bodies can play a role by promoting policies and initiatives that encourage gender diversity. This can include funding for research on gender diversity in the supply chain sector, awards and recognition for companies that demonstrate a commitment to diversity, and public awareness campaigns that challenge gender stereotypes. In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of gender diversity in the supply chain industry, and some progress has been made. For example,

more companies are now reporting on gender diversity metrics and setting targets for female representation in leadership roles. Industry associations are also increasingly offering programs and resources aimed at supporting women in supply chain careers. However, much work remains to be done to achieve true gender parity. In conclusion, while women face significant barriers to reaching leadership positions in the supply chain sector, there are also numerous opportunities to address these challenges. By implementing targeted policies and practices, providing mentorship and support, offering flexible working options, and fostering an inclusive culture, companies can create an environment where women can thrive and contribute to the success of the industry. The benefits of gender diversity in leadership are clear, and it is in the interest of organizations, the supply chain sector, and society as a whole to promote and support women in their career advancement. The journey towards gender equality in supply chain leadership is ongoing, but with concerted efforts and commitment, it is possible to create a more inclusive and equitable industry for all.

2. Literature Review

The landscape of supply chain management has undergone significant transformations over the past few decades, evolving into a complex, global network that demands innovative strategies and diverse leadership. Despite these advancements, the sector remains predominantly male-dominated, particularly in leadership roles. This literature review delves into the multifaceted barriers that women face in attaining leadership positions in the supply chain industry and explores the opportunities that can help overcome these challenges, drawing on recent studies and scholarly contributions. A recurrent theme in the literature is the cultural and societal biases that persistently hinder women's progression into leadership roles. These biases often manifest in the form of stereotypes that question women's capabilities in handling the rigorous demands of supply chain management, which is traditionally viewed as a masculine field (Breslin, Pandey, & Trevino, 2022). Such stereotypes are not only prevalent in hiring practices but also influence promotion decisions, often to the detriment of women. For instance, women in supply chain roles are frequently perceived as less assertive or less competent compared to their male counterparts, which affects their career advancement (Catalyst, 2020). Moreover, the structural and organizational barriers within companies also play a significant role in limiting women's advancement. Many organizations in the supply chain sector lack formal policies and practices that promote gender diversity and inclusion (McKinsey & Company, 2021). The absence of these policies can result in an environment where women do not feel supported or valued, leading to higher turnover rates and fewer women in senior roles. Furthermore, the lack of role models and mentors in leadership positions can make it difficult for women to envision a clear path to leadership within their organizations (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2021). The dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities disproportionately affects women, making it challenging for them to commit to the demanding schedules often required in supply chain roles. Women are more likely to shoulder a larger share of family and household responsibilities, which can limit their availability for work-related travel or extended hours (McKinsey & Company, 2021). This issue is compounded by inadequate maternity leave policies and a lack of flexible working arrangements, which can further impede women's career progression. In addition to these barriers, women in supply chain leadership often face challenges related to networking and mentorship. Access to professional networks and mentorship is crucial for career advancement, yet women are less likely to have these opportunities compared to men (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2021). Mentorship programs are vital as they provide women with guidance, support, and advocacy, helping them navigate the complexities of the industry and build confidence in their leadership abilities. Without adequate mentorship and networking opportunities, women may find it difficult to gain visibility and advance within their organizations. However, the literature also highlights several opportunities and strategies that can help mitigate these barriers and promote gender diversity in supply chain leadership. One effective strategy is the implementation of targeted recruitment and promotion policies that set clear diversity goals and hold leadership accountable for achieving them (Hunt, Yee, Prince, & Dixon-Fyle, 2018). These policies can help create a more level playing field and ensure that women are considered for leadership positions based on

their qualifications and potential rather than gender biases. Flexible working policies are another crucial component in supporting women's career advancement in the supply chain sector. By offering options such as flexible hours, remote work, and comprehensive family leave policies, companies can help women balance their professional and personal responsibilities more effectively (McKinsey & Company, 2021). These policies not only benefit women but also contribute to a more inclusive and supportive work environment for all employees. Education and professional development opportunities are also essential in preparing women for leadership roles in supply chain management. Providing access to leadership training programs, workshops, and advanced degrees can equip women with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in senior positions (LeanIn.Org & McKinsey & Company, 2021). Encouraging women to pursue higher education and continuous learning in fields related to supply chain management can help build a pipeline of qualified female candidates for leadership roles. Moreover, fostering an inclusive corporate culture that values diversity and inclusion at all levels is critical for promoting gender diversity in supply chain leadership. Companies that actively promote a culture of inclusion, respect different perspectives, and address discrimination or harassment create an environment where women feel valued and supported (Catalyst, 2020). This inclusive culture can enhance employee satisfaction and retention, ultimately contributing to the organization's success. The literature also underscores the importance of broader societal and policy-level changes in supporting women's advancement in the supply chain sector. Governments and industry bodies can play a pivotal role by promoting policies and initiatives that encourage gender diversity (Breslin, Pandey, & Trevino, 2022). This can include funding for research on gender diversity in supply chain management, awards and recognition for companies that demonstrate a commitment to diversity, and public awareness campaigns that challenge gender stereotypes. Recent studies also emphasize the role of sustainability (Emon & Khan, 2023), entrepreneurship (Emon & Nipa, 2024), emotional intelligence (Emon et al., 2024), marketing (Rahman et al., 2024), and supplier relationship management (Emon et al., 2024) in shaping the future of supply chain management. These emerging areas offer new opportunities for women to leverage their skills and contribute to the industry's evolution. By integrating sustainable practices and innovative approaches, women can drive significant positive changes in the supply chain sector. Despite the challenges, there are success stories of women who have broken through the barriers and attained leadership positions in supply chain management. These women serve as role models and sources of inspiration for others, demonstrating that it is possible to overcome the obstacles and achieve success in this field. Their experiences highlight the importance of resilience, determination, and the support of mentors and allies in navigating the path to leadership. In conclusion, the literature on women in supply chain leadership highlights a complex interplay of barriers and opportunities. Cultural biases, organizational structures, and personal challenges continue to hinder women's advancement, but targeted policies, mentorship programs, flexible working arrangements, and an inclusive corporate culture can help mitigate these barriers. Additionally, broader societal and policy-level changes are essential for creating a more supportive environment for women in the supply chain sector. By addressing these issues and leveraging the opportunities available, it is possible to promote greater gender diversity and inclusion in supply chain leadership, benefiting both the industry and society as a whole.

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology adopted for this study on women in supply chain leadership focused on qualitative approaches to gather in-depth insights into the barriers and opportunities women face in this sector. The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews with women who hold or have held leadership positions in the supply chain industry. These interviews were designed to explore their personal experiences, challenges, and the strategies they employed to overcome obstacles in their career paths. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, ensuring a diverse representation of women from various sub-sectors within the supply chain industry, including logistics, procurement, and operations. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the different contexts and challenges across the industry.

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Participants were recruited through professional networks, industry associations, and referrals, which helped in reaching out to a broad and relevant pool of interviewees. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video conferencing platforms, depending on the participant's preference and availability. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants to ensure accuracy in data collection and were subsequently transcribed for analysis. The semi-structured format provided a flexible framework that facilitated open-ended discussions, allowing participants to share their experiences in detail while also covering specific areas of interest identified by the research questions. To analyze the interview data, thematic analysis was employed. This involved coding the transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns related to the barriers and opportunities for women in supply chain leadership. The coding process was iterative, allowing for the refinement of themes as new insights emerged. Key themes that were identified included cultural biases, organizational barriers, the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities, and the importance of mentorship and networking. In addition to interviews, a review of existing literature and secondary data sources was conducted to contextualize the findings and provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of gender diversity in supply chain leadership. This included academic journals, industry reports, and case studies that offered additional perspectives and supported the primary data collected through interviews. Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose, their role, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing the data and using pseudonyms where necessary. The research was conducted in compliance with ethical guidelines and standards to ensure the integrity and credibility of the study. Overall, the methodology employed in this research provided a robust framework for exploring the complex and multifaceted issues surrounding women in supply chain leadership. The use of qualitative interviews allowed for a rich and nuanced understanding of individual experiences, while the thematic analysis facilitated the identification of common barriers and opportunities. This approach enabled the research to offer meaningful insights and practical recommendations for promoting gender diversity and inclusion in the supply chain industry.

4. Results and Findings

The results and findings from this study on women in supply chain leadership reveal a complex interplay of barriers and opportunities that women encounter as they navigate their careers in this traditionally male-dominated field. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, several key themes emerged that provide insight into the experiences of women in supply chain leadership roles. One of the most pervasive barriers identified by the participants was the presence of cultural and societal biases that undermine women's perceived competence and suitability for leadership positions. Many interviewees recounted instances where their capabilities were questioned or undervalued compared to their male counterparts. These biases often stem from deep-rooted stereotypes that associate leadership qualities with masculinity, such as assertiveness and decisiveness, while undervaluing traits like empathy and collaboration, which are often associated with femininity. Participants noted that these biases not only affected their day-to-day interactions but also had a significant impact on promotion and career advancement opportunities. Organizational structures and policies were also highlighted as significant barriers. Several participants mentioned the lack of formal diversity and inclusion policies within their organizations, which contributed to an environment where gender biases could flourish unchecked. The absence of targeted recruitment and promotion strategies meant that women often found themselves at a disadvantage when competing for leadership positions. Additionally, the lack of flexible working arrangements and inadequate maternity leave policies were cited as major impediments to career progression. Women who took time off for family responsibilities often found it challenging to re-enter the workforce at the same level, leading to career stagnation. The dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities emerged as a critical challenge for many women in the supply chain sector. Participants described the difficulties in balancing the demanding schedules and travel

requirements of supply chain roles with family and household responsibilities. This dual burden often resulted in women having to make difficult choices between their career aspirations and personal life, with some opting to step back from leadership tracks to manage their responsibilities at home. This dynamic was particularly pronounced in organizations that did not offer flexible working options or support systems for working mothers. Mentorship and networking were identified as crucial factors in supporting women's advancement in the supply chain industry. However, many participants reported limited access to mentors and professional networks compared to their male colleagues. This lack of mentorship not only hindered their professional development but also restricted their visibility and access to opportunities within their organizations. The women who did have access to mentors and sponsors emphasized the positive impact these relationships had on their careers, providing guidance, advocacy, and support that were instrumental in navigating the challenges of the industry. Despite these barriers, the findings also revealed several opportunities and strategies that can help promote gender diversity in supply chain leadership. Participants highlighted the importance of organizational commitment to diversity and inclusion, with those working in companies with strong diversity policies reporting more supportive environments. These organizations often had clear diversity goals, accountability measures for leadership, and initiatives aimed at promoting women into leadership roles. The presence of role models and senior women leaders was also cited as an important factor in encouraging more women to aspire to and achieve leadership positions. Flexible working arrangements were consistently mentioned as a key opportunity to support women in supply chain leadership. Participants working in organizations that offered flexible hours, remote work options, and comprehensive family leave policies reported higher levels of job satisfaction and a better ability to balance professional and personal responsibilities. These flexible arrangements were seen as critical in enabling women to pursue and sustain leadership roles without having to sacrifice their family life. Education and professional development emerged as another significant opportunity. Participants stressed the value of leadership training programs, workshops, and continuous learning opportunities in equipping women with the skills and knowledge needed to excel in senior roles. Encouraging women to pursue advanced degrees in supply chain management and related fields was also viewed as a way to build a pipeline of qualified female candidates for leadership positions. The importance of creating pathways for career progression through structured development programs was emphasized as a means to systematically prepare women for leadership roles. The role of an inclusive corporate culture was underscored as vital for promoting gender diversity. Participants noted that companies with cultures that valued diverse perspectives and fostered open dialogue were more likely to support women's advancement. Such cultures were characterized by respect for different viewpoints, proactive measures to address discrimination and harassment, and a commitment to creating an environment where all employees felt valued and included. These inclusive cultures not only benefited women but also contributed to overall organizational success by fostering innovation and employee engagement. The findings also pointed to broader societal and policy-level changes that could support women in supply chain leadership. Participants advocated for government and industry initiatives that promote gender diversity, such as funding for research, awards and recognition for diversity achievements, and public awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes. They also emphasized the need for industry-wide standards and best practices for promoting gender diversity, which could serve as benchmarks for organizations to strive towards. Overall, the results and findings from this study underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to promoting gender diversity in supply chain leadership. Addressing cultural biases, implementing supportive organizational policies, providing mentorship and networking opportunities, and fostering inclusive corporate cultures are all critical components. Additionally, broader societal and policy-level changes are necessary to create a more supportive environment for women in the supply chain sector. By tackling these issues and leveraging the identified opportunities, it is possible to create a more inclusive and equitable industry where women can thrive and contribute to its success. The experiences and insights shared by the participants provide a valuable foundation for developing strategies and initiatives aimed at achieving this goal.

5. Discussion

The discussion of the findings from this study on women in supply chain leadership reveals both the entrenched barriers and the potential strategies that can foster greater gender diversity in this field. The pervasive cultural and societal biases identified highlight a critical area that requires concerted effort and systemic change. These biases not only undermine women's confidence and perceived competence but also influence organizational decision-making processes. Addressing these biases necessitates a cultural shift within organizations and broader societal attitudes, emphasizing the value of diverse leadership styles and dismantling stereotypes that associate leadership exclusively with traditionally masculine traits. The structural and organizational barriers, including the lack of formal diversity policies and flexible working arrangements, underscore the need for companies to adopt comprehensive strategies to support women. Organizations must move beyond mere lip service to diversity and implement tangible policies that create an equitable environment. This includes setting clear diversity goals, implementing mentorship and sponsorship programs, and ensuring that flexible working arrangements are not just available but actively encouraged and normalized. By doing so, companies can create an environment where women feel supported and valued, which is crucial for their retention and advancement. The dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities that many women face is a significant impediment to their career progression. This issue is not solely a women's issue but a broader societal one that requires changes in both organizational policies and cultural attitudes towards gender roles. Companies can play a pivotal role by offering comprehensive family leave policies, flexible working arrangements, and support systems for working parents. Additionally, promoting a culture that encourages shared domestic responsibilities among all employees can help alleviate the pressure on women to balance these dual burdens. Mentorship and networking emerged as crucial factors in supporting women's advancement in the supply chain industry. The disparity in access to these resources highlights an area where targeted interventions can make a significant difference. Organizations should prioritize the development of mentorship programs that pair women with experienced leaders who can provide guidance and advocacy. Additionally, creating professional networks and forums for women in supply chain roles can help build a sense of community and provide valuable support and opportunities for collaboration. The findings also indicate that education and professional development are essential for preparing women for leadership roles. Companies should invest in leadership training programs, workshops, and continuous learning opportunities specifically designed to address the challenges women face in the supply chain sector. Encouraging women to pursue advanced degrees and certifications in supply chain management can help build a robust pipeline of qualified female candidates for leadership positions. An inclusive corporate culture that values diversity and fosters open dialogue is vital for promoting gender diversity in supply chain leadership. Companies that actively promote inclusivity and address discrimination and harassment create environments where women feel respected and valued. Such cultures not only benefit women but also contribute to overall organizational success by fostering innovation, employee engagement, and retention. The role of leadership in shaping this culture cannot be overstated. Leaders must be committed to diversity and inclusion and demonstrate this commitment through their actions and decisions. Broader societal and policy-level changes are also necessary to support women's advancement in the supply chain sector. Government and industry bodies can play a significant role by promoting policies and initiatives that encourage gender diversity. This includes funding for research on gender diversity in supply chain management, recognizing companies that demonstrate a commitment to diversity, and launching public awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes. Industry-wide standards and best practices for promoting gender diversity can serve as benchmarks for organizations to strive towards, creating a more equitable and supportive environment for women.

6. Conclusions

The exploration of women in supply chain leadership has revealed a nuanced landscape where significant barriers coexist with promising opportunities for advancement. This study has illuminated the deep-seated cultural and societal biases that persistently hinder women's progression, casting a spotlight on the stereotypes that question their capabilities and suitability for leadership roles. These biases, compounded by structural and organizational impediments, including the lack of formal diversity policies and flexible working arrangements, present formidable challenges that require systemic change. Moreover, the dual burden of professional and domestic responsibilities disproportionately affects women, making it imperative for organizations to adopt comprehensive support mechanisms that facilitate a better work-life balance. Despite these challenges, the study has also identified several pathways to promote gender diversity in supply chain leadership. Mentorship and networking emerged as critical enablers, underscoring the importance of providing women with access to experienced leaders who can offer guidance and advocacy. Education and professional development are equally vital, with targeted training programs and continuous learning opportunities preparing women for the demands of leadership roles. The creation of inclusive corporate cultures that value diversity and actively combat discrimination is essential for fostering environments where women feel respected and supported. Broader societal and policy-level interventions are also necessary to sustain progress. Governments and industry bodies can drive significant change through initiatives that promote gender diversity, including funding for research, recognition of companies committed to diversity, and public campaigns to challenge stereotypes. By setting industry-wide standards and best practices, these entities can create a more equitable framework within which organizations can operate. The integration of emerging areas such as sustainability, entrepreneurship, emotional intelligence, marketing, and supplier relationship management offers additional opportunities for women to leverage their unique skills and contribute to the evolution of the supply chain sector. By focusing on these areas, women can drive meaningful change and position themselves as leaders in shaping a more sustainable and resilient industry. In conclusion, the journey towards greater gender diversity in supply chain leadership is complex and multifaceted, requiring concerted efforts across various fronts. Addressing cultural biases, implementing supportive organizational policies, fostering inclusive cultures, and advocating for broader societal and policy-level changes are all crucial steps in this process. By embracing these strategies and leveraging the identified opportunities, it is possible to create a more inclusive and equitable industry where women can thrive and lead. The insights from this study provide a robust foundation for developing effective initiatives and strategies aimed at achieving this vision, ultimately benefiting both the supply chain industry and society as a whole.

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