

**THE PREVALENCE OF STRESS AMONG TERTIARY EDUCATION STUDENTS:  
A CASE OF MEDICAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE COLLEGE OF  
HEALTH SCIENCES IN ZIMBABWE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Zimbabwe as a country has been facing an enormous serious economic and political challenges, as result, the economic direction of the country has been going on the negative downwards trend for more than two decades. This have destructively affected the quality of life for ordinary Zimbabweans, whose livelihoods has been detrimentally put at stake with the national situation. The education sector is also an economic and social sector that has been adversely affected by the economic situation, specifically students. The tertiary education has become unrealistically expensive, with fees going beyond the reach of majority citizens. This has compromised the number of graduates, as significant number of students are quitting education due to failure to pay fees. It is from this background that this research was explored to examine the circumstances of medical students whose profession is so vital to the Zimbabwean society, which is seriously facing the shocking deterioration of the health service. The overall agenda of the research was to explore the psychological, economic and social stressors that students are facing while pursuing their education, including solution suggestions for students who are learning in such a harsh and difficult environment. The qualitative methodology was used to explore the research objectives, with data being collected from 30 medical students from College of Health Sciences, who volunteered to take part in this research. The findings have reflected the shocking prevalence of stress amongst students, as there are many psychological, behavioural and physiological signs of stress identified by this research. Numerous stress drivers were reported to be the main cause of stress amongst students, and the economic insecurity and general social vulnerability were the main identified causes of stress amongst students which is literally making the future of the students very bleak. Therefore, there is need for various important educational stakeholders, governmental, nongovernmental organisation, people of faith, educational institutions and private sectors to

collaborate together in order to come up with proactive ideas that will help tertiary students who are suffering from such a national predicament, as they are trying to change their lives and the society in general through education.

**KEYWORDS: Stress, Economic Situation, Maladaptive Behaviours, Educational Stakeholders**

## 1.0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The millennium era is a period characterised by dramatic changes of events at business, political, economic and social level, such that new challenges facing the world have imposed fierce pressure on humanity. The developed world have experienced new challenges due to the socio economic environment specifically, climate change, obesity, non-communicable diseases, divorce rates, and terrorism (Aurand et al, 2005). On the other hand, the developing world and Zimbabwe included, has witnessed new challenges of the millennium period which are working in coalition together to pose stressing pressure on human populace. The developing world has suffered from the devastating effects of climate change that is detrimentally affecting the agricultural economy of the country, and this is made worse by the reported cases of poor governance, corruption, sanctions amongst other numerous matters affecting the country (Mutambara & Munodawafa, 2014). Due to these factors, Zimbabweans have witnessed hard times in more than a decade and as a result there are numerous work of literature which have reported increasing crime related cases in the country, including drug abuse cases, prostitution, robbery, theft among many social crime related problems, and this is attributed to the economic environment people are living in the country (Nsingo, 2010). Students do not live in their own environmental vacuum as the country challenges have also a ripple effect on the life and general wellbeing of students in tertiary education. Students are therefore exposed to significant amount of stressors and their circumstances do require extensive research exploration to avoid vulnerability of future holders of the country.

Stress is an old vocabulary that requires academic and professional attention due to the effects it impose on general human performance and functioning (Balmer, et al, 2001). The United Nations together with UNICEF have championed significant researches regarding modern education environment and some of their findings have portrayed that, there is a significant change in the growth of literacy amongst developing world countries which is at 6 % per capita (Burbano et al, 2011). The main driver being that, the developing world countries are encountering new challenges in the millennium period which are frustrating talent development in the modern day schools with pressure now posed on government and non-governmental organisation to join hands to improve the conditions of students in schools to curb stress related problems. In this endeavour it can be observed that many players in the private sector are working in collaboration with governmental institutions to provide educational help in schools, however majority of the programs are seemingly targeting children at primary level whilst some of the concerns of the mature adult students are ignored (Chemhuru & Makuvaza, 2014).

In a different study in the Philippines, 7% of students who were about graduate were found to be infected by sex related diseases as they were infected during their study period (Gallicano, 2011). The pressure of educational environment encouraged students to resort to prostitution, and other dangerous income generating projects which compromise the wellbeing of the students. This Research was a wakeup call to the government of Philippines, where they had to come up with numerous funding portfolios for students to access funds in order to encourage positive ways of

raising education funds (Gallicano et al, 2011). This reflects the opinion that if attention is not given to educational institutions and their learning environment, students may endure shocking social and psychological stress during their education journey.

Moreover, even in the Zimbabwean neighbour South Africa have faced a massive national protest of students in tertiary institutions demanding governmental attention towards their educational welfare, and that a true reflection of the fact that policy designers are putting a blind eye towards this important social requirement (education) (Callitz & Fourie, 2016). Studies in South Africa are reporting the increasing figure of students suffering from mental illness reported cases amongst students (Khalidoun, 2014). Despite the fact that the South African government has a big budget towards government subsidies, tragic cases associated with stress and depression amongst students are often reported. If one of the successful economies of Africa is facing challenges in supporting students' quality of life, then the poor vulnerable students of Zimbabwe can only be extremely exposed to a high degree of vulnerability. The diverse circumstances faced by students reflect the point that stress-related causes and circumstances cannot be overgeneralised as they are contextual, and it seems problems faced by students in various tertiary institutions are relative to their situation, therefore each case should be treated as a unique case without mind of generalising and patronising problems.

Research by Gurura (2015); have focused on students who immigrate to other countries for better education beyond country's borders. The findings of his research have demonstrated that there are numerous challenges faced by students who study in other countries. This includes students who leave the country for education in overseas universities under the state scholarships. He reported that there are common cases of prostitution amongst students who have benefitted from governmental scholarships. Some students are reported to end up doing petty jobs like cleaning toilets, domestic job on full and part time, other even end up quitting education altogether, while other may end up not coming back because they do not have anything to show-off back home. These stressful circumstances are inspired by situations they found themselves in education institutions. For scholarship students, the main challenge is that, scholarships they tend to fall short on the students' general educational requirements.

Carl Rogers has pointed that human beings have an innate desire to grow and to actualise, and the assumption behind this humanistic perspective is that human beings are basically good, ethical and are agents of positive change, who have the power to overcome the emerging challenges posed in their life ways (Woolfolk, 2007). However, humanistic according to Carl Rogers explains that human malfunctioning or abnormal behaviour is a product of failure and frustrations in pursuing self-actualisation (Ryan, 1992). In other words exploring circumstantial factors faced by students in tertiary institutions would help one to understand factors that hinder their way to self-actualisation and then dig stressors that block students as they aim to excel in their life endeavours. Rogers have pointed that the presence of unconditional regard and societal support systems seems to be crucial for one to have a physical and mental health, and considering the lack of societal support for students one can observe the probability of increasing cases of abnormal and maladaptive behaviours amongst students. Even Carl Rogers's academic partner Maslow believed that human beings have various needs which they require in their lives although their needs vary from individual to individual. These mentioned human needs can also be straining to individuals if not provided to students therefore, through the yardstick of these psychological theorists the assumed enormous needs deficit of students in an economically harsh environment of Zimbabwe could be the main driver of stress amongst students.

Zimbabwe as a country have her own share of problems which needs to be explored to unearth stress related problem prevalence in their educational setting. The report given by national statistics have reported that 86% of all Zimbabwean students are getting school fees from people who are not their direct parents, and this reflects the pressure posed on students in the Zimbabwean Institutions. Zimbabwe's College of Health Sciences is one of the high profile institutions with remarkable positive history, and recorded image of producing the best medical talent for both local and international market, however, recent trends have reflected that majority of students at the institution have a poor background and they tend to struggle to have a descent economic upkeep whilst they are carrying their studies (Ndhlovu, et al, 2014). This means these children have a new breed of challenges which they have to overcome as they are learning, hence there was a need to dig into the challenges they are encountering in order to understand the stress related issues revolving around their life at this institution. This research therefore targets medical sciences due to the challenges posed by the disciplines which require full a great degree of commitment due to the crucial nature of the discipline to national health challenges. The lack of financial help from the governmental is posing a lot of pressure on students who do not have enough resources to deal with economic and education challenges concurrently, in the harsh economic environmental where governmental financial avenues are not available for the students. In the context of these challenges, students' life related challenges may range from accommodation facilities, financing of study requirements, the political instability in the country and the deteriorating economic trend which all kills the hope of the better future. This background assumed that there might be several challenges faced by students at the institution especially conspiring pressure imposed by the course they are pursuing, which require one to be well resourced to avoid study interference. It is this background that circumstantial issues facing medical students requires special attention from the research dimension to awaken the responsible stakeholder of their needed contributions towards students' welfare. The country is facing deteriorating health system and as result there is significant need of health practitioners, hence there is need for a study that explores the circumstances of the medical students who are themselves the hope of the nation.

### **1.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

- To examine prevalence of stress amongst students at the Medical School in Zimbabwe
- To examine the economic and psychological stressors amongst the medical students
- To examine how student deal with numerous stressing factors revolving around their educational environment

### **2.0 METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative methodology was chosen as the appropriate methodology to examine research objectives of this research and the choice was based on the grounds validity and reliability the methodological approach have to the research. The stress related issues are too subjective and difficult to impose on individual, and therefore they require an individual reporting on the bases of one personal experience which then allow the researcher to have a personal understanding of stressors circumstances of the participants. The availability sampling methodology was used as the sampling methodology, and 30 university students from College of Health Sciences a subsidiary institution of University of Zimbabwe (n=30, 15 males, and 15 females). University of Zimbabwe is one of the country's old and reputable institution in country which acts as a model of tertiary education for other tertiary player in the country (Ndhlovu, 2014). The data was collected by the in-depth interview tools and themes were identified in the context of research objectives. The

important ethical principles were observed in the research and this was done to make sure participants are protected, commitment of the participants is harnessed, and finally trust cooperation of participants is achieved. This was achieved through observing important ethical principles like informed consent, free participation, confidentiality and anonymity. Thematic analysis was chosen as the most appropriate methodological approach to analysis of the collected data.

### **3.0 PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 SIGNS OF PREVALENCE OF STRESS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION**

##### **3.1.1 Negative Feelings and Stress**

Students like any other human beings are very vulnerable to the challenges of stress during the time of pursuing educational studies. Stress has been reported as one of the driving forces that made the learning process very miserable for prospective graduates. Stress has been attributed to unwavering pressure from educational demands and the intended economic upkeep during education journey. The perception of the education system as a difficult and miserable was seemingly common amongst students. The unknown nature of the examination at college level seemed to spark a sense of fear, and irritability as students are required to focus on academic work while at the same time they have to find ways of improving their livelihoods. Generally, being scared for the impending exams and the general fear of examination seemed to poke the negative feelings of the students during the course of their learning process.

*“Thinking of the exams and how my parents struggle to raise fees, I miss my happiness and I feel scared to an extent where it hinders my level of concentration towards school work... medicine is not an easy course, it requires every support to excel in this course”*

The general perception of the medical students was that, their career was so important to the nation that they deserved the external support from government and to the private sector, and this could be in terms of bursaries and other financial support systems. However, it seemed the greater society was giving them a blind eye which then forced them to endure internal irritability, fear, and low optimism about their future. As a result, this was generally affecting the general student's educational moral. The research have also demonstrated that the cultural challenges faced by students in getting psychological service, as counselling is still being regarded as the service of the weak individuals, thus the negative stereotypical perception of counselling is making the situation of students very vulnerable to stress related problems. It is these forms of stressors that are seemingly the reason behind the accumulation of stress amongst students which took students into great levels depression and suicidal thoughts.

##### **3.1.2 Negative Thoughts, Self-esteem and Stress**

The other interesting idea that popped up from the discussion with students was the way in which they tended to dwell around negative thoughts regarding their education and their surrounding environment. The common driver of this was the demographic background of most students who pursue medical studies. The medical field is seemingly crowded with students from a rural background and as a result, there is high pressure for students to change the livelihoods of their families but at the same time they also have a massive pressure inserted upon themselves by their low level self-concept. As indicated, the majority have a rural background and they seem to suffer from low self-efficacy, as they did not have the belief that they could be future effective medical practitioners, and this sense of self-doubt mixed with school pressure and cumulative fear of failure is negatively affecting students' concentration in education

*“I can’t see in my family coming a doctor, it is hard to believe that, these thoughts always makes me feel I can fail anytime.....”*

The negative preoccupation thoughts of worry about future seemed to be the cause of forgetfulness when they tried to focus on education. These negative thoughts seemed to inspire the sense of embarrassment amongst them whenever they had to demonstrate their progress in education context especially during practical sessions. Generally, negative self-evaluation of students seemed to be a disaster for their own career progression as they seemed to struggle to trust themselves versus their career, and this is attributed to the negative poor-rural identity which haunt them even at school.

### **3.1.3 Behavioural Signs of Stress**

Medical students were the ones who are expected to have a high degree of health consciousness, however the findings from this research revealed otherwise. Across gender it seemed students doing medical course were also resorting to smoking and alcohol consumption as a way of dealing with pressure revolving around their education process. They reported that every weekend and at times during the week they would get some time to drink alcohol to refresh their minds as a way of dealing with stress related challenges.

*“ We normally take too much on a Saturday to forget problems that always face us as medical students, people outside our environment do not understand what we are going through and it is very sad, schooling in this harsh environmental is difficult.....”*

They also reported that they only realised that they had a high degree of stress due to the way they were involved in accidents and acting impulsively which is contrary to their discipline (Medicine), which requires a high degree of conscientiousness to avoid mistakes and loss of life. The loss of appetite and the increase in alcohol intake were two factors reported respectively and this can only reflect how vulnerable students were to stress in modern Zimbabwean context. Some students have even reported cases of accidentally finding their friends crying behind their door without mentioning why they were crying. This could only be a manifestation of the degree of stress the medical students do face during their study journey.

### **3.1.4 Physiological Problems and Stress**

Besides, medical students have also reported the frequent occurrence of physiological problems which they attribute to various forms of stressors. There is some gender differences regarding on how they experienced the signs of stress. Women have reported changing dates of menstrual periods which is characterised by menstrual tensions, while other students have reported skipping menstrual periods, a situation they attribute to the effects of stress. These signs reported were a manifestation of stress prevalence amongst medical students

*“I can’t even follow my menstrual calendar because it is very inconsistent and I think it has to do with school pressure, I wish I could finish as soon as possible”*

However, both male and female students reported that they seemed to have recurring sleep disorders and they attribute this to considerable amount of stress. The lack of enough sleep seemed to be the main cause of headaches and butterflies in stomach and also pain in the neck. These physiological reports by students were true manifestation of prevalence of stress in tertiary institution.

### **3.1.5 Social Manifestation of Stress**

The research have also revealed the manifestation of stress amongst students in social spheres. The sense of loneliness was commonly reported by medical students, and this was also characterised by the sense of isolation and a lower sense of sex desire, with majority reporting that they were not

interested in developing intimacy relationship as they enjoy spending most of their time in their own private rooms.

*“I find myself less interested in social relationships.....”*

The other interesting idea that pops out of the discussion was that there is a general stereotype that medical students are generally antisocial, but in actual fact this is derived by the pressure posed by numerous stressors facing students in their academic environment.

### **3.2 CAUSE OF STRESS**

#### **3.2.1 Life after Graduation**

The impending postgraduate life was founded by the research as one amongst many stress driving factors. The economic terrain of the country is one of the petrifying phenomenon for medical students and this is mainly due to the fact that, medical employment is no longer guaranteed as traditionally the case for Zimbabwe. The salary levels on the market seemed to be less attractive as compared to the professional status. This is worrisome for students who are supposed to invest many years of hard work to acquire a medical degree.

*“Considering the commitment and effort one takes to be a doctor it is sad that our market has no descent life for a professional doctor.....”*

The parents of these students have literally lost everything to support the educational process of their children, and therefore children seemed to have pressure to pay back their parents, however, that dream is difficult to convert to practical terms due to national economic environment. The prospective life offered by the market is seemingly gloom and as a result this is posing a lot of pressure on medical students who are supposed to be disciplined in the absence of the general motivation.

#### **3.2.2 Isolation from Family and Friends**

Education environment is seemingly creating an atmosphere of total isolation for students from the people whom they depend upon for social and economic support. Isolation from loved ones was mentioned as an important factor for creating a sense of independence for students, however, it seemed the majority of students are struggling with the process of adjusting to the new life that separates them from their dependence. As a result a significant number of students are reporting cumulative stress experiences.

*“It was difficult for me to live a life without my parents and loved ones, it was very difficult when I do not have airtime credit.....”*

This process of adjustment seemed to affect students mainly those who came from outside the city who could only visit their beloved ones after their semester was over. The majority of such students complained of the unbearable sense of stress linked to being distant from their loved ones. The common experience associated with isolation was the sense of homesick, and this psychological experience is seemingly destructing students as they pursue their academic endeavour.

#### **3.2.3 New Ideas and Exposure**

Majority of medical students do have a rural background where traditional moral values are highly respected. However, tertiary education is exposing them to new experiences which posed various forms of temptations. This includes the temptation of cohabiting with someone of the opposite gender.

*“I did not want people to perceive me as a villager in Harare, as a result I had pressure to conform, but it was giving me a lot of stress and mental pressure when I think about my behaviour”*

The pressure to move with trends of fashion was one of the worries that affects tertiary students in medical department, and as result this was increasing stress index amongst these students as they always try to move with the pace of urban life. Some reported that they ended up dating old rich people so as to get the financial backup required to move with social trends. Social influence is therefore one of the pressing factors that increases levels of vulnerability and stress amongst medical students.

### **3.2.4 Financial Responsibilities and Stress**

Financial needs were also amongst the stress causing factors which are seriously affecting the educational focus of the students. The pressure came with financial needs to photocopy reading material, assignments, money for leisure, and also basic needs required for individual upkeep at the university. However, due to the scarcity of part time and full time jobs, students are struggling to have enough money to sustain their needs. Some of the students are supported by their guardians who are not prepared to pay a little extra to support other secondary needs.

*“The money I get is for fees only and nothing beyond that.....”*

The other interesting idea that popped up from the research is that students' life is full of social comparison, and as a result students seem to feel relatively poor when they compare their life styles to their class mates, and as a result they seem to be always preoccupied with negative flow of thoughts about themselves.

### **3.2.5 Greater Academic Demands**

The demands posed by science subjects in the medical profession seem to be of great intensity for students such that it is very rare not to find a student who does not complain about the school work load. The work load itself seem to be too much such that students are failing to balance social life and academic lives, and considering the longevity of the course it seems students are left to endure unbearable five years of academic degree training. The size of the workload also means that majority of students are required to spend most of their time studying at the expense of social life.

*“Lecturers are very strict to us, and it seems all lectures are like that, and we do not have resting time ...”*

The amount of pressure posed by the course seems to be the cause of some students to quit the course prematurely. The academic pressure and pressure from other life arenas of raising extra funds for educational upkeep may be too extreme for the student, and some may end up quitting the course altogether.

## **3.4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Basing on the data explored above, the Zimbabwean students are living in an economically harsh environment and the pressure posed by various stressors can never be underestimated. The data above have demonstrated that stress is very prevalent amongst the medical students at the medical institution. This situation requires urgent attention from important educational stakeholders who are vital in improving the conditions and general welfare of the students. In behaviouristic terms the students are very vulnerable such that they could engage in unproductive behavioural trends that could harm their lives and their career. According to the operant conditioning of Skinner, behaviour and consequences relationship is very important in the establishment of learning of human behaviour (Simmons, 1994). The behaviour that college students tend to learn was not all productive, as some behaviours explored in the research are basically counterproductive. Negative reinforcement is a behavioural explanation for students' behaviour where counterproductive



behaviours are strengthened by the overwhelming desire to eliminate the displeasing stimuli, and in this context displeasing stimuli could be stress, being a laughingstock, hunger and other associated stressors (Soares, 2002). As reported in the study students do engage in alcohol abusive behaviour in order to eliminate the displeasing pressure from stressor, hence it is the moral responsibility of parents, government and other private players to create a conducive supportive educational environmental that do not breed unwanted maladaptive behaviours. Alcohol on its own is well-known for affecting human cognitive functioning with short term effects of attention deficit, self-neglect and less detail oriented, and any consumption of alcohol by the students can have a long effect on the student's career agenda (Woolfolk, 2007). In the long run the medical students are likely to develop alcohol related dependences and this could be detriment to their concentration on educational work and also their bigger profession in general, as bad habits are likely to interfere with learning process and job execution.

Furthermore, the academic pressure posed upon students' educational environment is physiologically challenging such that students have reported numerous physiological problematic experiences. Students do not have enough time to sleep as the majority of them have reported frequency occurrence of insomnia, and this could be attributed to stress and biological interference in natural circadian rhythm. This demonstrate the level of vulnerability for students, as lack of sleep is correlated with poor attention, poor problem solving and poor language generation (Saunders & Balinsky, 1993). Considering the difficulty nature of the medical course, it is therefore of great importance that students engaged in this learning process do so without some form of internal interference. Therefore, therapeutic service, counselling help and life skill training sessions could prove to be helpful for such students, if person centred solutions are to be discovered for the students. Additionally, lack of sleep was scientifically found to be correlated to lack of appetite and weight loss, and therefore this is likely to expose students to various nutritional diseases as they are deprived from nutritional value needed for their brain's up keep (Hobfoll, 1998). Signs of anorexia could be visibly being observed amongst medical students with majority of them having skinny bodies a demonstration of insufficient balance diet. It was from this background that the welfare of the country's future doctors require immediate attention. The help can come from stakeholders like dieticians, career coaches, and life skills counsellors. These skills are very important for students in helping students to live a health a productive life.

Furthermore, the importance of human needs cannot be underestimated if one relies on the data findings. The need for human survival especially financial upkeep has been identified as the main factor that is affecting the general wellbeing of students as they are pursuing their educational journey. Humanistic perspectives have gone with this opinion buy arguing that human beings have important needs that they need to live and to survive (Ryan, 1992). The deprivation of human needs is likely to lead to the development of maladaptive behaviours like crime and other anti-social behavioural tendencies (Soares, 2002). The fact that students are missing basic financial support and other basic educational requirements may be the explanation why students resort to some unnecessary behaviour like drinking, social withdrawal and prostitution. These students are not born with such a behavioural tendency but it seems it was well inspired by the conditions they found themselves, hence the condition of the students in tertiary institutions is a typically humanitarian crisis.

This view is complemented by the work of one of the popular psychologist, Karen Horney, a who is a Neo-Freudian who believed that human behaviour is shaped by the way human beings responded to everyday anxieties posed by the societal circumstances. The anxieties can be due to financial anxiety, social anxiety and psychological anxiety (Karen, 1983). The unpredictability of the

economic terrain of the modern day Zimbabwe is seemingly the main cause of anxiety and students are increasingly becoming vulnerability. The financial anxieties seems to be driving students into some form of behaviour which are counterproductive as they resort to drinking, prostitution and amongst other counterproductive behaviour. It is from this background that various stakeholders in the community are expected to take a proactive role in helping the students who are living in these difficult circumstances. Besides, government and nongovernmental stakeholders, private sectors should also prioritise local students as part of social corporate responsibility, as such a social move would be vital for creating a sustainable society.

Comparing developed world and the developing world, one can observe that the challenges faced by students from these two context are very different. It seems challenges facing the students of the developed world are of higher order needs than those of the developing country which is driven by lower level basic needs. The developed countries seem to yearn for higher order needs like affiliation at school, leisure needs and recognition amongst friends due to the better quality of life in those societies, whilst those in the developing countries seem to yearn for basic needs like food, clothes, shelter and also security of those needs due to economic-social vulnerability. The situation of students in tertiary institutions is so desperate and it is a humanitarian issue that require local and global attention in order to give chances for students to determine their life destine.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

The economic terrain of the country is seemingly moving towards a downwards index and this is negatively affecting every citizen of the country including students. The medical students have endured immense amount of pressure due to the economic environment of the modern Zimbabwe. The stress prevalent was demonstrated by various emotional, economic, behavioral and psychological problems discussed in this study. This was made worse by the pressure posed by the medical course itself, which is relatively challenging for majority of the students. The students are so vulnerable to the pressure of numerous circumstantial stressors and as such there are falling into the trap of some antisocial behavioral approach like prostitution and drug abuse. It is this precarious situation that students are deserve external help from policy makers, nongovernmental organizations, private sectors and even religious societies. Besides, even the university require to lead proactively involved towards addressing some of the critical challenges facing the medical students in tertiary education.

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