



The Evolution of Tourism Distribution Channels

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Tourism distribution channel

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Evolution of tourism distribution channels, focusing on how the distribution system has changed over time.

Introduction

Examining the Tourism Distribution Channel: Evolution and Transformation

Introduction A tourism distribution channel is a system of intermediaries, or middlemen, that facilitates the sale and delivery of tourism services from suppliers to consumers (Buhalis & Laws, 2001). Tourism distribution channels have attracted a tremendous amount of attention in the last decade owing to the important role they play in the tourism industry (Pearce & Schott, 2005).

Specifically, distribution channels can serve as part of the marketing mix that makes the products available to consumers, as the link between the suppliers of tourism products and their end consumers, as well as the bridge between supply and demand (Gartner & Bachri, 1994). The structure of the tourism industry distribution system not only affects the choices available to the consumer, but also the business models and marketing strategies adopted by the various channel participants (Pearce et al., 2004).

The impact of information technology since the advent of the World Wide Web has significantly changed and even transformed the structure of tourism distribution (Buhalis & Laws, 2001; Wang & Qualls, 2007). This evolution and transformation of tourism distribution channels, particularly facilitated by information and communication

technology, resulted in greater choice for the consumer, increased competition for distribution participants, and a more complex industry structure (Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005; Granados et al., 2008; Longhi, 2008; O'Connor & Frew, 2002).

This paper provides insights into the change of the structure of tourism distribution that has not been extensively explored. Indeed, the complexity of the tourism distribution structure has been diagrammatically depicted multiple times (Alamdari, 2002; Anckar & Walden, 2000; Bowden, 2007; Buhalis & Licata, 2002; Buhalis & O'Connor, 2005; Chircu & Kauffman, 2000a; Granados et al., 2008; Longhi, 2008; Ma et al., 2003; O'Connor & Frew, 2002; Werthner & Klein, 1999); each depiction has contributed to a fuller understanding of the body of knowledge by focusing on different aspects of that structure.

This study builds upon those valuable knowledge contributions by focusing on the evolution of the structure over time, systematically and diagrammatically revealing the progressively larger number of intermediation layers, in spite of concurrent disintermediation and reintermediation activity. In the process, this study does not focus on every action of every participant in detail, but rather focuses on categories of intermediaries, looking at pioneering examples of each. Likewise, the comparative rates of technology adoption in different regions of the world are not investigate

Abstract

Distribution channels play a critical role in connecting tourism service providers with consumers, influencing accessibility, pricing, and customer experience. This study

explores traditional distribution channels, modern distribution methods, and the roles of Online Travel Agents (OTAs), Global Distribution Systems (GDS), and direct bookings through suppliers' websites. Traditional channels rely on intermediaries such as wholesalers and retailers, whereas modern channels utilize technology to facilitate faster, cost-effective, and direct interactions between providers and consumers. OTAs expand market reach by offering easy comparison and booking options, GDS provide travel agents with real-time global inventory access, and direct bookings strengthen supplier–consumer relationships while reducing costs. This paper highlights the comparative advantages and challenges of each channel, emphasizing the growing importance of digital platforms in modern tourism distribution.

Literature Review

The study of tourism distribution channels has been widely discussed in tourism and marketing literature. Buhalis and Laws (2001) examined the evolution of tourism distribution systems, highlighting how traditional channels such as wholesalers and travel agencies historically dominated the market. Traditional channels, while providing extensive geographic coverage, often involve higher costs and slower delivery due to multiple intermediaries (Kotler, Bowen, & Makens, 2017).

With the advancement of technology, modern distribution channels have emerged. Online Travel Agents (OTAs) such as Booking.com and Expedia facilitate direct access for consumers, offering convenience, price comparison, and global reach (Middleton, Fyall, Morgan, & Ranchhod, 2009). Global Distribution Systems (GDS) like

Amadeus, Sabre, and Galileo provide travel agencies with integrated access to airline, hotel, and rental inventories, enabling efficient professional bookings and corporate travel planning (IATA, 2021).

Direct bookings through supplier websites further streamline distribution by eliminating intermediaries, reducing costs, and allowing suppliers to build direct customer relationships (Holloway & Humphreys, 2019). Studies by UNWTO (2020) emphasize the trend toward digitalization in tourism, noting that consumer preferences increasingly favor online, instantaneous booking methods. Overall, the literature demonstrates a shift from traditional, intermediary-heavy channels to technology-driven, customer-centric distribution models that enhance efficiency and market accessibility.

The Evolution and Transformation of the Intermediation Process:

The tourism distribution system has witnessed not only the incremental evolution but also radical transformation since the advent of the Web. In this process of progression and change, the commercial application of the Internet in 1993 serves as a milestone, owing to the introduction of the web browser into the marketplace, which makes the communication between suppliers and consumers possible.

Before 1993, the traditional tourism distribution system consisted of consumers, traditional retail travel agents, traditional corporate travel agents, traditional tour operators, global distribution systems (GDS's), incoming travel agents, switches, destination marketing organizations (DMO's), and suppliers (Figure 1). GDS's, which started as airline computer reservation systems (CRS's), are technically electronic

intermediaries (Buhalis, 1998; Buhalis & Licata, 2002). In the airline sector, traditional travel agents enjoyed the benefits of intermediation as a result of their relationships with the GDS's (Malone et al., as cited in McCubbrey, 1999).

Traditional vs Modern Distribution Channels

1. Traditional Distribution Channel

In a traditional distribution system, products move through several intermediaries before reaching consumers.

Flow:

Producer → Wholesaler → Retailer → Consumer

Features

- Dependence on physical stores
- Multiple intermediaries
- Slower communication and delivery
- Limited direct contact with customers
- Higher distribution cost

Example:

A manufacturer sells products to wholesalers, wholesalers supply retail shops, and customers buy from stores.

2. Modern Distribution Channel

Modern distribution channels use technology and direct selling methods, reducing or eliminating intermediaries.

Flow Examples:

Producer → Consumer (Direct online sales)

Producer → Online marketplace → Consumer

Features

- Use of e-commerce and digital platforms
- Faster delivery systems
- Direct producer–consumer interaction
- Lower distribution cost
- Wider market reach

Example:

Companies sell products directly through websites, mobile apps, or online platforms like Daraz, Alibaba, Amazon, and other platforms.

Examples of Distribution Channels in Pakistan

Traditional Distribution in Pakistan

1. Food and Grocery Products Producers supply goods to wholesalers in cities, who distribute them to local grocery stores and markets.
2. Clothing Industry Textile factories sell products to wholesalers, who distribute them to retail markets like Karachi's Tariq Road or Lahore's Anarkali Bazaar.
3. Pharmaceutical Products Medicines move from manufacturers to distributors, then to pharmacies and hospitals.

Modern Distribution in Pakistan

1. Online Shopping Platforms Platforms like Daraz, Foodpanda, and online brand stores sell directly to customers through home delivery.
2. Direct Brand Stores & Online Sales Clothing brands like Khaadi, Gul Ahmed, and Sapphire sell products both online and directly through brand outlets.
3. Tourism Services Hotels and airlines allow customers to book tickets and rooms online without travel agents.

Comparison Table: Traditional vs Modern Distribution Channels

Basis of Comparison	Traditional Distribution Channel	Modern Distribution Channel
Definition	Uses multiple intermediaries to deliver goods to consumers	Uses technology and direct selling with fewer intermediaries
Distribution Flow	Producer → Wholesaler → Retailer → Consumer	Producer → Consumer or Producer → Online Platform → Consumer
Use of Technology	Limited use of technology	Heavy use of digital platforms and e-commerce
Number of Intermediaries	Many intermediaries involved	Few or no intermediaries
Cost of Distribution	Higher due to middlemen costs	Lower due to direct selling
Speed of Delivery	Slower distribution process	Faster delivery through logistics networks
Customer Interaction	Limited direct contact with producer	Direct producer–consumer interaction
Market Reach	Mostly local or regional markets	Global or nationwide reach
Sales Platform	Physical stores and markets	Online stores, mobile apps, websites
Examples in Pakistan	Local markets, wholesalers, retail shops	Daraz, online brand stores, Foodpanda

Conclusion

Traditional channels rely on intermediaries and physical markets, while modern channels use digital platforms to connect producers directly with consumers, making distribution faster and more efficient.

Traditional distribution channels, such as travel agencies and tour operators, and how digital technology has reshaped these systems.

Adding yet another layer of traditional intermediation are incoming travel agents. Incoming travel agents can also be referred to as “incoming agents,” “inbound agents,” “incoming tour operators,” “ground operators,” “handling agents,” or “receiving agents” (Buhalis & Laws, 2001). Incoming travel agencies primarily serve as intermediaries between tour operators and suppliers. That is, tour operators put travel packages together, and those packages are usually handled by incoming travel agencies.

According to Buhalis and Laws (2001), there has not been much research in the area of incoming travel agencies. Also, there appears to be no documentation of this category of intermediaries suffering from disintermediation.

Before the commercial usage of the Internet, airlines, hotels, and tour operators pursued disintermediation of other channel participants with direct sales to consumers, including using retail outlets (Anckar & Walden, 2000; Anckar & Walden, 2002; McCubbrey, 1999). They also used toll-free call centers to facilitate disintermediation

(McCubbrey, 1999; Palmer & McCole, 1999).

While this pre-Web era was not as complex as the current environment of distribution, the use of multiple distribution channels had taken root. Granados et al. (2008) explain that the major GDS's had enjoyed significant power in an oligopolistic distribution environment, until technological advances reduced barriers to entry for substitutes.

The major technological advance in that regard was the Internet, which had begun operating in 1969, mainly for military and research purposes (Werthner & Klein, 1999). The commercial usage of the Internet became significant in the 1990's, as companies began leveraging the benefits of the communication protocol of the World Wide Web, which was made freely available to the public in 1993 (CERN, 2003).

Besides, the internet there have been other computer network, the online services such

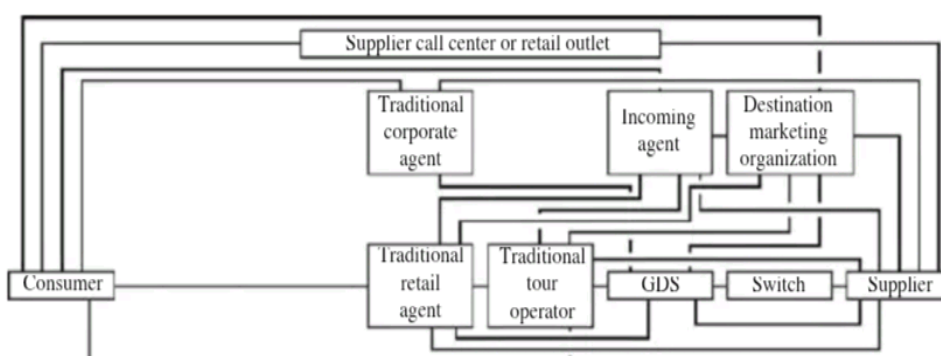


Figure 1.
Structure of tourism
distribution channels:
pre-world-wide-web era
(before 1993)

as American airlines(AOL),Compuserve, Microsoft network (MSN), and prodigy. There have also been videotex networks available to consumers linking terminal that consists of video displays and keyboards. Examples of the latter include Bildschrimtext(Btx), Prestel and Teletel.

Online services and video text services have both been involved in the distribution of travel services (Karcher,1996 ; Karcher and William 1996) however, only one of them ,Teletel have a very large base of subscribers.

In 1993, Teletel had more than 6 million subscribers using it's minitel terminals with approximately 20,000 services available, while Compuserve and prodigy have 1 million customers and 2000 services available (cats-Baril and jelassi,1994). Bildschirmtext had about 250,000 subscribers and 3500 services then, and Prestel had approximately 150,000 subscribers and 1300 services (cats barely and Jelassi,1994).

It is latter networking implementation that has brought about their majir structural changes to tourism distribution that have evolved to this day. After the public debut of the web, supplier's began establishing websites to connect directly with customers, thereby beginning the disintermediation of traditional retail travel agents. For example, airlines were able to practice disintermediation via multiple channel including call centers, retail outlet and the web(McCubbery,1999). In addition even traditional travel agents have been useful to hotels later also tried disintermediation travel agents by selling directly to customers vie the web(Tse,2003).

Role of Online Travel Agents (OTAs), Global Distribution Systems (GDS), and direct bookings through suppliers' websites.

Systems, Inc. and several hotel chains made the TravelWeb.com portal available to the general public in March 1996 (TravelWeb, 1996), a few months after the October

1995 founding of TravelWeb (Pegasus Systems, Inc., 1997). Pegasus' switch service, the Hotel Industry Switch Company (THISCO), had been facilitating the linkage of hotel CRS's to GDS's since 1989, but the debut of TravelWeb provided consumers with Web access to the central reservation systems of hotels (Pegasus Systems, Inc., 1997; Werthner & Klein, 1999). This disintermediated GDS's by avoiding the paying of GDS fees (Werthner & Klein, 1999). In 2004, Priceline obtained full ownership of TravelWeb, buying the stakes held by several hotels and Pegasus Solutions (Priceline.com, 2004).

Now, Pegasus, via its Utell brand, provides hotels with access to consumers directly via the Web, to traditional travel agents via GDS's, and to another category of intermediaries, online travel agents (Pegasus Solutions, Ltd., 2009). Online travel agents joined the fray in 1995, when the Internet Travel Network (ITN) became the first such online agent to attempt to disintermediate traditional travel agents (Chircu & Kauffman, 1999; Chircu & Kauffman, 2000a; Chircu & Kauffman, 2000b) (see Figure 3).

In 1996, Sabre, a GDS owner, debuted Travelocity (Sabre Holdings, 2009). Also in 1996, Microsoft launched the online travel agent Expedia (Chircu & Kauffman, 1999). Priceline was launched in 1998; it began by selling airline tickets using a "demand collection system" in which demand is collected from consumers and communicated to suppliers (Priceline.com, 1998; Priceline.com, 2009). Currently, Priceline offers that system, as offering the traditional retail method of disclosing prices (Priceline.com, 2009). ITN was eventually rebranded as GetThere, which was later acquired by Sabre in 2000 (Chircu & Kauffman, 2000a).

The online travel agent lastminute.com was founded in 1998 with the purpose of selling airline seats and hotel rooms that were otherwise likely to go unsold (Anderson & Earl, 2000; Buhalis & Licata, 2002). It had an initial public offering in March 2000 (Anderson & Earl, 2000), right around the time that many stock market investors realized that Internet firms weren't as valuable as they had seemed, and that some had no prospects of generating profits.

Despite the resultant burst of the Internet bubble, and the associated plummeting correction of share prices, lastminute.com and other online travel agents with sound business models survived. In fact, lastminute.com went on to buy a number of other companies during the 2000–2004 timeframe (Salzburg Research Forschungsgesellschaft, 2006).

This included the August 2000 acquisition of Dégriftour, a successful, pioneering French electronic travel agency which had utilized the Télétel network of Minitel videotex terminals since its founding in 1991, and later used the Web as well (Alzon, 2000). Lastminute.com was in turn purchased by Travelocity in 2005 (Salzburg Research Forschungsgesellschaft, 2006).

Comparison Table: OTAs, GDS, and Direct Booking

Online Travel Agents (OTAs)	Global Distribution Systems (GDS)	Direct Booking (Supplier Websites)
Online platforms for booking travel services	Computerized systems connecting travel suppliers with travel agencies	Booking directly from airline, hotel, or service provider website
Individual travelers	Travel agencies and corporate agents	Individual travelers
Booking.com, Expedia, Agoda	Amadeus, Sabre, Galileo	Airline or hotel official websites
Online platform or mobile app	Used by travel agents through reservation systems	Directly on supplier's website
OTA acts as intermediary	Travel agents act as intermediaries	No intermediary involved
Suppliers pay commission to OTAs	Suppliers pay fees to GDS providers	No commission cost
Easy comparison and booking options	Professional travel planning services	Often lower prices and special offers
Global consumer market	Global travel agency network	Depends on supplier marketing reach
Managed partly by OTA	Managed by travel agent	Direct relationship with supplier

Examine the impact of social media, mobile applications, and personalized marketing on tourism distribution.

Impact of social media:

The main sources for customers' travel and tourism-related information were predominantly controlled by actors within the tourism industry, and these resources tend to largely portray the bright side of destinations and experiences, albeit with inherent bias (Berhanu & Raj, 2020). The rise of digital technologies, particularly social media, has empowered tourists to gather unbiased information to make their travel decisions (Khan, 2017). Social media has been instrumental in reforming the tourism industry by providing novel and creative approaches to communication, information propagation, and information sharing (Oliveira et al., 2020).

An increasing number of organizations in the tourism industry utilize these platforms to engage with tourists and influence their purchase decisions. Social media platforms are actively used by hotels, travel agencies, and hospitality companies to share information, recommendations, and opinions to pursue a competitive advantage. These platforms have become instrumental for tourists to learn about other tourists' travel experiences and ascertain authentic information about tourist destinations. Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube have become the mainstay of tourism-related content, providing affordable, effective, and authentic information to potential tourists across the globe (Gossling, 2021). Tourists' decisions towards a destination are highly influenced by individuals

(such as influencers) or organizations while they search for information on social media (Bu et al., 2021). The level of tourists' satisfaction, as well as their intention to revisit the place or positively recommend it to others (such as friends, relatives, peer groups), are influenced by the content created and shared on various social media platforms (Kaosiri, 2019).

Impact of mobile application

The trend toward the use of mobile devices in the tourism industry is very marked. According to Mobile Travel Trends 2019, 61% of travellers 'nearly always' or 'some-times' use a smartphone app to book a flight, and 62% of travellers agree that being able to book hotels on travel apps is essential. E-tourism was born precisely from this trend of bringing ICT and tourism together and can be defined as digitising all processes and value chain inherent to tourism (Werthner & Klein, 1999). E-tourism thus represents a changing paradigm in the sector that has revolutionised business processes, the value chain, and strategic relations between the different actors in the process. Smartphones have transformed consumers' behaviours (Emek, 2014), as they are now more connected, anytime and anywhere. The capabilities of the new smartphones support thousands of applications and extend their functionality widely (Wang et al., 2012). They quickly were used as a travel tool and in tourism information research and travel planning (Hsu & Lin, 2015; Tan, 2017).

As they contain many of the same components as personal computers, it is possible to customise and update smartphones to meet diverse individual needs

(Rakestraw et al., 2013). It is also possible to access a wide range of services, such as personalised information search, net-working, and navigation (Wang et al., 2012). For users, smartphones are not only communication devices, but a continuation of their personality and identity as human beings (Persaud & Azhar, 2012).

By 2011, it was anticipated that mobile services and applications, which were then emerging, would represent significant value in the digital market, and many predicted that they would quickly overtake the use of more traditional desktop applications (Portolan et al., 2011), with consumers emphasising the easy-to-use features from mobile apps (Tan, 2017). In the following years, with the growth in the use of smartphones and mobile applications, this market segment became one of the greatest successes in the history of consumer technology (Kennedy-Eden & Gretzel, 2012), with the majority of the consumers being bold, venturesome, and willing to experiment with innovations (Tan, 2017). This evolution was made possible because users of new technologies quickly took to new concepts and services as a reflection of their effectiveness in performing daily tasks. As such, the integration of smartphones into daily habits has produced a spillover effect. They become part of all spheres of consumer life, both professionally and personally, and are integrated into even the most routine tasks of daily life such as shopping, information search, or daily commuting. That has, therefore, also influenced tourist behaviour (Wang et al., 2014), bringing a wide range of changes of industry

There are other perspectives regarding smartphone usage motivations, including

their ability to support tourists on the trip and at their destination (Höpken et al., 2010). Different authors have reached similar conclusions. Okazaki et al. (2015) concluded that the primary motivations for using MTAs are speed and access to information; finding engaging experiences, accommodations, and restaurants; and getting feedback or taking immediate action, as travellers need timely information. Wang et al. (2014) identified 12 motivations, where social interactions, fun, keeping in touch and keeping informed, finding restaurants, and staying safe were highlighted.

Impact OF Personalized Marketing

Personalization in marketing is all about mobilizing customer data to inform your marketing strategy. In other words, organizations using personalized marketing will gather data on their customer behavior and individual interests, preferences, and habits to create tailored travel experiences and custom content across their digital channels.

3 TIPS TO MARKETING PERSONALIZATION

1 Offer what users wants

Ask your users for personal data or create more personalized experiences. Netflix is great at using machine learning for personalization, with 80% of their views coming from their recommendations (Medium).

2 Create better content

Gathering personal data allows you to create tailored content. 58% of users are more likely to convert when they receive content based on their previous behaviour (HubSpot). Give your content an advantage by collecting personal data.

3 Humanize your business

80% of consumers are more likely to make a purchase when personalization is involved (Epsilon). They want to be able to put a face(s) behind a brand. Personalizing your brand can help give customers friendly experiences that are humanized.

Information extracted from HubSpot

Enhanced Customer Journey:

Personalization tailors the entire customer experience to individual preferences, from initial search to post-trip, increasing satisfaction and booking rates.

Data-Driven Decision Making:

Tourism businesses use data analytics to segment customers, allowing for more effective, targeted advertising through Google AdWords, social media, and other channels.

Increased Loyalty and Revenue:

By delivering relevant content and experiences, companies foster deeper relationships, leading to higher customer retention and increased bookings.

Sustainable Flow Management:

Personalized marketing helps destination management organizations (DMOs) influence tourist choices, which can reduce overtourism by promoting less-visited areas.

AI and Smart Technology Integration:

AI-based personalization, such as AI-powered recommendation systems and voice assistants, is critical in shaping how tourists explore and book service

Examples of how different tourism businesses, such as hotels and airlines, have adapted to the digital age in their distribution strategies.

Q1. Hotels and Hospitality

Hotels now leverage a mix of Online Travel Agencies (OTAs) for visibility and direct digital channels for high-margin bookings.

2. Airlines

Airlines have focused on reducing reliance on Global Distribution Systems (GDS) and, "unbundling," their products to sell directly to consumers.

New Distribution Capability (NDC):

Airlines are adopting, "NDC," an IATA-supported XML standard. This allows airlines to bypass legacy GDS systems and deliver, "rich content," directly to travel agents, such as branded fares, special bundles, and customized seat options.

Direct-to-Consumer (DTC) Apps:

Airlines now use their own apps as the primary booking and service channel, enabling passengers to book, change flights, and receive real-time notifications, which increases ancillary sales (e.g., baggage, preferred seating).

Dynamic Pricing and Bundling:

Using big data, airlines now offer, "continuous pricing," which adjusts rates in real-time based on demand, user profile, and search history. They also bundle products (e.g.,

flight + hotel + car) to increase revenue.

Social Media Commerce:

Airlines, such as KLM, use platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger to allow customers to check in, receive boarding passes, and change itineraries directly within the chat app.

Biometrics:

To streamline the airport experience, airlines are integrating, "facial recognition," and biometric, "e-gates," to reduce, "check-in," and boarding times, which enhances the overall, "digital, "customer journey,".

3. Other Tourism Businesses

Tour Operators:

Companies like Viator and GetYourGuide act as, "marketplaces," that aggregate local tours, while tour operators use dedicated, "booking software," to manage reservations, payments, and, "instant, "confirmation,".

Virtual Experiences:

Tourism boards now use, "Virtual Reality (VR)," to showcase destinations. For example, some museums offer, "digital, "tours," as a way to engage potential visitors before they travel.

Summary of Key Digital Trends

Trend	Description
Mobile-First	Over 90% of travellers research online, and many book on mobile.
Direct Bookings	Direct, "brand.com, "sites" are favored over, "OTAs," to save on commissions.
Personalization	AI and, "big data, "tailor, "offers, "to, "individual, "customer, "needs.
Contactless	Mobile check-in, digital keys, and QR codes for services are standard.

Conclusion

Distribution channels are a vital component of the tourism industry, determining how products and services reach consumers efficiently and effectively. Traditional channels, involving wholesalers and retailers, have long facilitated market coverage but are slower and costlier due to multiple intermediaries. Modern distribution methods, including Online Travel Agents (OTAs), Global Distribution Systems (GDS), and direct bookings through suppliers' websites, leverage technology to streamline the process, reduce costs, and improve customer convenience. OTAs expand reach and provide comparison options, GDS enable travel agents to access real-time global inventories, and direct booking strengthens supplier–consumer relationships. Overall, the shift toward digital and direct distribution reflects changing consumer behavior and the growing importance of technology in tourism. Effective integration of these channels allows tourism providers to maximize market access, enhance customer satisfaction, and remain competitive in a rapidly evolving industry.

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