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Social Media Marketing Use in Georgia's Institutions of Higher Education

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Social Media Marketing Use in Georgia's Institutions of Higher Education

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Marketing and Logistics.

By
James Kelly

Under the mentorship of Dr. Lindsay Larson

ABSTRACT

The Internet and social media are changing the way that people interact with the world around them everyday. Individuals are able to learn more about the products they use, places they visit, and other people within their network by simply turning on their computer, smart phone, or tablet. Thanks to this great utility, institutions of higher education around the world are using social media to interact with and market themselves to faculty, students, and even prospective students. After all, universities are aiming to prove that their product can add value to the lives of stakeholders while providing them with benefits that cannot be found anywhere else. With over 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States, these institutions are starting to wonder about the equity that can be found in their university's brand (Sevier, 2002). This study aims to discover how institutions use outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs, and other platforms, to connect with university offices and students in new ways. Using an online survey platform, this study was able to explore trends being used by various institutions to reach constituent populations.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Colleges and universities around the world are constantly trying to attract new students to their hallowed halls of higher education. In the past, prospective students could expect a slew of brochures to be mailed to their homes trying to recruit them, alumni would have to wait for the next university magazine or alumni newsletter to come out for updates about their alma mater, and current students would have to rely largely on a campus paper to get their news. Now thanks to the Internet and new forms of media, institutional stakeholders can communicate like never before. This allows messages to be spread faster than ever through a variety of different mediums. Online networking platforms, especially social media, are providing institutions with a new way to reach out to an array of different parties around the world at anytime.

Social media is a term used to describe a broad range of contemporary online applications that allow individuals to connect with one another for a variety of reasons (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Franklin & van Harmelen, 2007). With social media sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and a medley of new sites which emerge almost daily, keeping in touch is becoming easier than ever. Almost as soon as new forms of media emerge, millennials are logging in and finding ways to connect with their peers in ways that the world has never seen before; however, social media usage is not limited to millennials. Social media is growing as an outlet for adults to connect with their friends and family as well. As a result, institutions are developing new and more creative strategies for connecting with these stakeholders.

As social media continues to gain popularity, especially with younger generations, it is important that institutions are keeping up with these trends. Students are using social media to bond with one another more now than they are via face-to-face exchanges. This is causing more and more students to expect the same digital communication from their faculty and institutions that they receive in their daily lives (Ratliff, 2011). These “digital natives” are gradually causing a complete redesign of the college landscape for prospects, students, faculty, staff, and alumni. As a result, stakeholders are seeing institutions presenting an increasingly united front when it comes to social media communication (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canche, 2011).

Though the students of these institutions are largely driving the usage of social media, many of college administrators across the nation are beginning to see the value in the information obtainable from successful implementation of a social media communication strategy. Social networking sites allow internal stakeholders (i.e. faculty, staff, administrators, etc.) to get feedback from various external stakeholders (i.e. students, prospects, alumni) in real time and often with better response rates than emailed surveys (Zailskaite-Jakste & Kuvykaite, 2012, p. 180). Another benefit that institutions are experiencing is the ability to address specific segments and focus more specifically on their target markets through web-communications (Chauhan & Pillai, 2013, p. 174; Bonnema & Van der Waldt, 2008, p. 315). Reaching these segments is accomplished via customized email "blast," Facebook pages and Twitter accounts for specific departments on campus, online video discussions using Skype and Google+ Hangouts as well as a breadth of other methods.

In a recent study by the Harvard Institute of Politics, researchers found that more than 90 percent of people enrolled in institutions of higher education have a Facebook account (2011), which makes the use of social media as a marketing tool an even more valuable resource. By taking advantage of digital marketing, not only can institutions exploit Generation Y's borderline obsession with technology to reach out to new students, but they can also use this to cut costs in a time where higher education budgets are continuing to get tighter and tighter. From academic affairs to student affairs, social media is becoming a tool used to redefine the student experience at institutions. In fact, studies show that 75% of prospective students not only want colleges to provide them with an exclusive community that allows incoming students to interact with each other, but that this also helps to boost enrollment and retention of students once they have committed to a university (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canche, 2011).

As technology continues to advance and college-aged students continue to connect with one another through technology, social media will continue to become an increasingly relevant marketing tool, especially in higher education. In addition to having great reach, it also provides institutions with a new way of interacting students. This can range from posting photos that highlight university facilities on Facebook, providing access to university update videos via YouTube, or even just entertaining students with fun facts about the institution through Twitter. Social media marketing will play an important role as we continue to see a push in college enrollment across the United States and around the world.

METHOD

This study aims to answer an assortment of questions. First, the study looks at whether or not institutions of higher education are using social media. One of the major goals of this project was to gain a better understanding of how institutions are currently using social media platforms and the reach that institutions have on the platforms that they use. Additionally, the question is raised as to how effective social media is in reaching students and how different institutions manage their accounts. Finally, this study aims to uncover more about what trends are anticipated in the future of social media and what issues campuses are experiencing.

Various institutions of higher education were surveyed in order to learn more about how they use social media to communicate with various stakeholders. The first step in the research process was to receive approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). This process helped to guide the creation of the survey tool used throughout this project. After completing the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) program and gathering the necessary materials, an application was submitted to the IRB so that the project could move forward. Within a few weeks, this research project received exempt status approval and could begin.

Due to the diversity of institutions found within the United States, the study took a single state approach to learning more about social media. The sample of institutions surveyed was determined based off a listing found on Academic360.com for the state of Georgia. This list included institutions that were a part of the University System of Georgia and the Technical College System of Georgia, as well as private institutions.

Working with a single-state sample allowed for inclusion of colleges and universities with a broad range of sizes, public and private institutions, and institutions found in a variety of different community settings as well. After the list compilation was completed, contact information for the participants was gathered from the marketing and communication office of each institution. These individuals included people whose job was specifically social media focused as well as marketing directors and web content administrators. After this list was completed, the participants were cold called to inform them that the survey was coming and to ensure that the survey would be going to right person at the institution.

After contacting the participants and receiving preliminary consent, Qualtrics online software platform was used to distribute the survey and store responses. The survey was exploratory in nature and used a variety of different question types in order to gather information about how the institutions were using social media. These questions ranged from likert scales to free response questions, which provided a wealth of information. The survey's initial distribution was late November 2013 and it remained open until early January 2014. During this time, participants received reminder emails on three occasions to let them know that the survey was still open, but would close soon. After closing the survey on Qualtrics, all participants received a thank you email and were given the opportunity to provide contact information in order to receive a finished copy of the study.

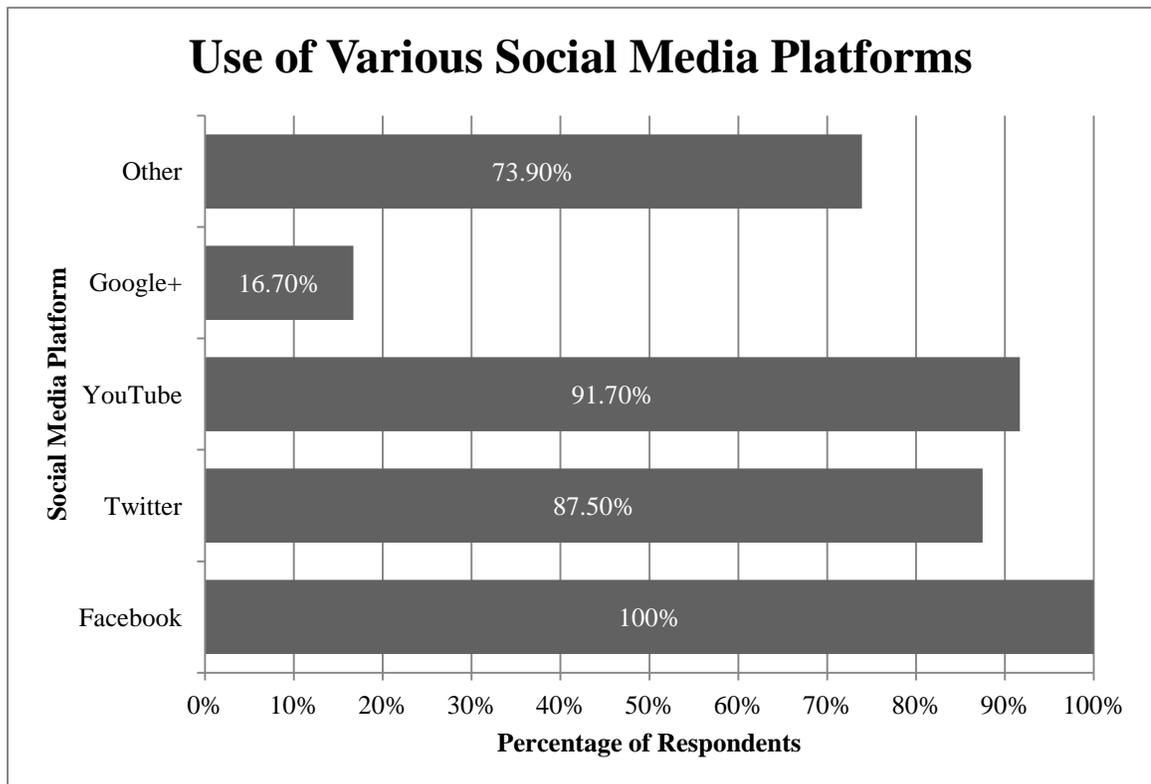
SAMPLE

Out of 77 requests sent, twenty-four institutions from the state of Georgia responded to the online survey. Of those 24, 54.2% (n= 13) classified themselves as “Colleges,” 45.8% (n=11) classified themselves as “Universities.” The sample consisted of both private institutions (30.4%) and public institutions (69.6%). When asked about the size of the institution, 25% of the sample noted that their institution was small (less than 2000 students), 62.5% reported that they were medium (2000-15,000 students) and 12.5% reported their institution to be large (over 15,000 students). Institution size classifications came from sizing scales taken from the College Board (The College Board, 2012). Participants also indicated their campus setting. “Rural” campuses represented 30.4% of the sample, “Suburban” campuses represented 43.5% of the sample, and “Urban” campuses represented 26.1% of sample. Finally, institutions indicated if they were a 2-year or a 4-year institution. Of the institutions that participated, 29.2% indicated that they were a 2-year institution and 70.8% indicated that they were a 4-year institution.

DETAILS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE

After reviewing the survey data, we saw that all of the institutions in our sample use some form of social media to communicate with both their internal and external stakeholders. Not surprisingly, Facebook is the most commonly used social media platform by institutions with a 100% usage rate reported. YouTube was the next most popular platform and 91.7% of respondents reported using this site to communicate with stakeholders. The third most popular outlet is Twitter with 87.5% of respondents having

an account for their institution. Almost three-quarters (73.9%) of the respondents use some other form of social media. These platforms include Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Vine, Tumblr, Merit (a system used to report student awards), Storify, Foursquare, Vimeo, and various online blogs. The least used social media platform by respondents was Google+ with only 16.7% of participants reporting usage of this outlet.



Each of these social media platforms provides institutions with a unique means to communicate with their stakeholders. Respondents reported how they use these platforms and their target market for each. Though a medley of messages are communicated through social media, some of the most commonly reported were in regards to campus updates, news about alumni, campus photos and facts, upcoming events, and opportunities for students. In general, these messages focus on prospective

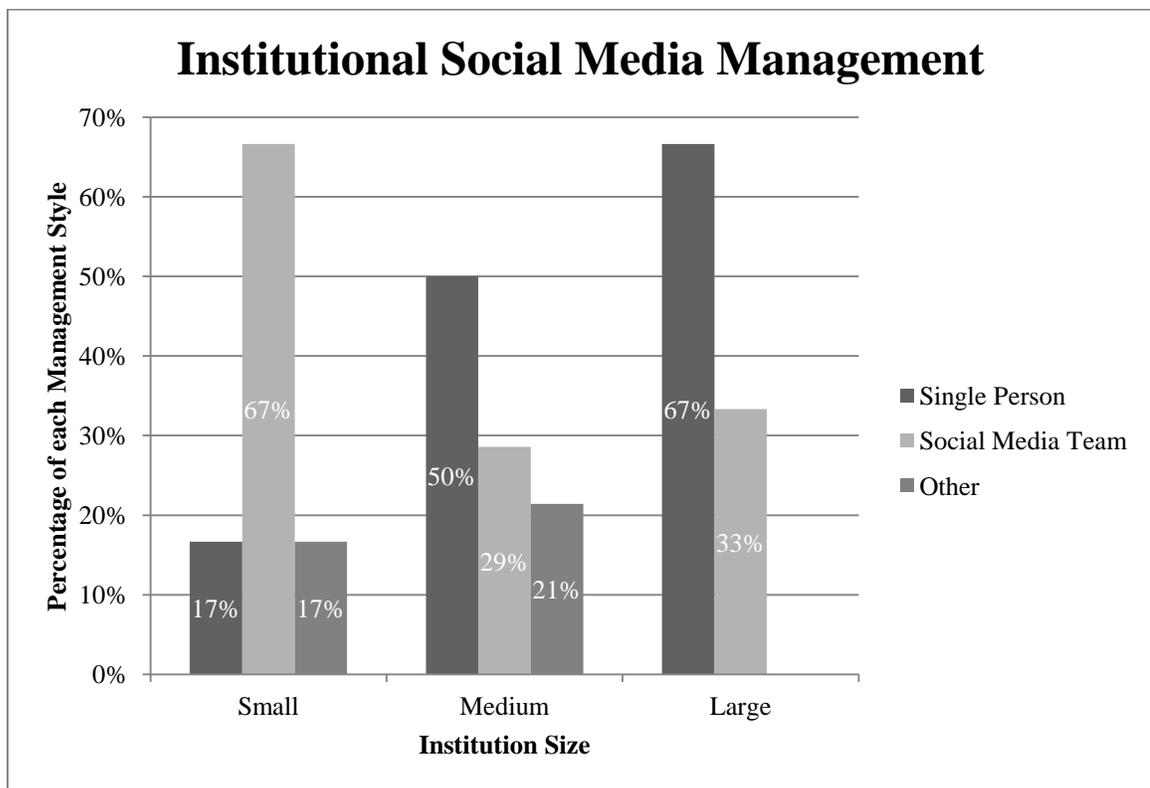
students and their families, current students, institutional faculty and staff members, alumni, and community members. Overall, institutions are using an array of platforms to reach out to stakeholders for very similar reasons, but they also use an array of different strategies to communicate both inside and outside of their institution.

DIFFERENCES OF INTEREST

Though most of the institutions surveyed use similar social media platforms to accomplish analogous communication goals, some notable key differences emerged based off survey responses. Institutions indicated how they manage social media accounts: by an individual or by a group of people. The responses split evenly between management by a single person (43.4%) or a group of people (39.1%) for the respondents as a whole, but the experiences for each of these institutions differs when it comes to size. On average, when an individual manages the social media profiles for an institution it is reported that they not only devote more time to management of their accounts, but they also found managing these accounts to be less taxing than those respondents who manage these accounts across a team (78.3%). On top of this, institutions that manage social media via a single administrator are more likely to branch out into a number of different social media platforms.

Another noticeable trend in the data revolves around what types of management strategies different sized institutions are implementing. Small and medium institutions are more likely to institute teams of people to manage their social media accounts rather than an individual who manages these profiles alone (52.1%). That being said, small institutions had a much more positive experience than medium and large institutions

when using teams to manage their social accounts. On a 5-point likert scale, respondents were asked to evaluate their experiences with social media where 1 represented a “Regretful” experience and 5 represented a “Very Good” experience. Small and medium sized institutions reported a mean of 4 when using a team and large institutions had a mean of 3 in terms of experience with a team. In other words, when a team-approach to social media account management is utilized, smaller institutions report this strategy to result in a more positive experience. In contrast, larger institutions seem to report more positive experiences with social media when their social media accounts are managed by a single individual (mean=4).



When looking more closely at the strategies used by individual social media managers there are a few interesting factors that stand out. To start, these individuals

report that they use content management and scheduling tools, such as Hootsuite and Flipboard, to monitor their profiles as well as ensure that the content being shared is appropriate for all of the audiences who may visit their accounts. When scheduling communications, many of the institutions have either integrated social media strategy into their overall communications strategy or developed a separate plan that focuses entirely around their social media strategy. Some institutions even mentioned that the strategy they execute for managing content is using 'no formal strategy at all.' One institution said that because they have fairly new accounts that they "are still trying to throw things at the wall and see what sticks...[and] are still looking for the right 'voice' for the institution."

Though management teams have some of the same approaches to strategy, their overall implementation methods are very different. Teams were less likely to use content management tools and seemed to report having even less of a plan when it comes to social media strategy than individual managers. Due to the nature of these teams, they are able to spread the work out across the university. Overall, social media teams tended to consist of one "team leader" from the marketing and communications department working in conjunction with a number of "support" members from different departments across the university. Smaller teams tended to engage in more planning activities such as developing a social media calendar to use as a point of reference.

REPORTED EFFECTIVENESS ISSUES

Another area that the study aimed to uncover more information about was perceived effectiveness of social media as a marketing tool. When respondents were asked how effective they believed social media was in the execution of the institution's

overall marketing strategy, a majority of the respondents provided positive feedback. On a 5-point likert scale ranging from "Very Effective" to "Very Ineffective," the mean response was a 4 indicating that many institutions feel that it is quite effective in strategy execution. One institution even went as far as to say that using social media provided them with an opportunity to connect with people on a one-on-one basis through direct messaging. Though institutions felt social media could be used to accomplish their strategy, over half of the institutions surveyed (56.5%) also indicated that they felt their message was getting lost in the crowd (mean=3.3).

Institutions were also given the opportunity to indicate what ways they believed social media is useful to their institution. On a 7-point likert scale, a majority of respondents (87%) found that social media was the most useful for promoting the institution's brand. After that, respondents stated that the greatest uses for social media after brand promotion were for promotions at the university (found useful or very useful by 81.8% of respondents) and building relationships (found useful or very useful by 78.3% of respondents) respectively. The last major thing that institutions found social media useful for was for providing support to various users. Institutions found that using these accounts was very useful in accomplishing their overall marketing strategy and connecting with various institutional stakeholders.

Though most respondents praise the value of social media as a marketing tool for their institution, many have found a number of challenges exist when it comes to using social media in this way. One of the biggest challenges was due to staffing. Adequately staffed institutions where these groups could accomplish their goals have very positive outlooks on social media, but understaffed institutions have a very different point of view.

The understaffed groups indicated that this is a major contributor to why they underuse social media. They also stated that the addition of a new staff member focused entirely on social media implementation would be largely beneficial to their institution, but, in the long run, “without significant investment, expectations for immediate communication and access will outpace staff’s abilities and knowledge.” The fact that institutions feel understaffed is an interesting problem considering other institutions avoided staffing issues by having a single employee who focused entirely on social media, or by simply creating a link between social media and day-to-day responsibilities for their staff.

ANTICIPATED SOCIAL MEDIA GROWTH

For many campuses, social media was not even on the radar for marketing and communication departments five years ago (as noted by survey responses regarding length of social media involvement). However, as time has gone on, institutions have started to recognize the need for social media as a tool to reach out to stakeholders and this trend is expected to continue in the next five years and beyond. One respondent described the change of social media over time in this way:

Social media has moved from the status of being a dinky afterthought to a way of life. Mobile accessibility and development have made it possible to be on social media all the time. By using social media so frequently, however, we are becoming much more anti-social in real life. We're much more interested in liking someone's status about getting engaged than actually telling them congratulations in person. It's a fascinating phenomenon.

This statement describes the feelings of a majority of institutions in terms of social media growth. Social media's ability to allow users to generate content has taken the control of the message out of the hands of the university and its communications office. This shift in the content creation is causing institutions to take a more reactive role in terms of communicating with stakeholders. Other institutions note that social media is allowing institutions to engage in "real-time and immediate" conversations with other users rather than the delay that can sometimes occur via other means of contact. It also allows institutions to keep information up-to-date without the hassles associated with managing a traditional website.

Many institutions expect the growth of social media to one day overtake traditional forms of communication. This includes using social media as the primary means of communication on their campus. Not only will this help institutions to get information to users faster, but it will also create more transparency within institutions. One of the biggest drivers for social media adoption and implementation in higher outlet that can be used to promote their organization to a large audience using the Internet.

SOCIAL MEDIA ISSUES

Social media provides institutions with a communication medium that is a quick and effective way to communicate with stakeholders, but it is not without its share of issues. One of the major concerns reported in the survey is in regards to the creation of anonymous, or anon, accounts and a slew of unofficial university related hashtags. These accounts claim to be affiliated with institutions, but post content that is outside of the control of the college or university. Another problem that institutions are facing is that

some members of the target markets do not understand how to use social media. This is especially a problem when it comes to non-traditional students and older alumni who are not acquainted with these types of communication media. One institution reported that they had, “one non-traditional student who wanted to let everyone know about an on-campus seminar. Rather than placing a post on the university's Facebook page, he ‘commented’ on other posts on the page with the seminar info. When...asked him about it, he admitted that he did not know how to place a post on the page.” This is just one example of the issues caused by the generational gaps between millennial students and their older peers.

When asked whether social media is viewed as a tax, two major trends emerged. Firstly, those institutions that agreed it was a tax seemed to feel this is an issue of being understaffed and spread too thin. These institutions report that their office is unable to use social media in the strategic and innovative ways that they would hope to use it. Secondly, institutions that did not experience social media as being a tax saw using social media as an essential part of their job. This is either because it was already built in to the staff member's position or the staff saw it as something that was needed to accomplish their goals. As noted previously, social media strategy was also far less likely to be viewed as taxing when a single manager system was in place. These institutions with a single social media manager also perceived social media as the best way to reach out to a new generation of students, likely in part due to their investment and in part due to the ease brought through establishing a dedicated social media position within university marketing. Though issues did exist in terms of social media use, all in all institutions

reported finding social media to be immensely valuable when communicating both internally and externally.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This research project was not without its fair share of limitations. Though the survey was sent to 77 institutions only 24 completed the survey. Institutions that do not use social media may have been influenced by a self-selection bias; for example institutions that chose not to respond may not use social media as a marketing tool at all. The use of institutions only within the state of Georgia may be seen as a limitation. However, though this study was not national in scope, the broad range of diverse institutions within Georgia allowed for the state to serve as a reflection of American educational institutions. That being said, one of the biggest issues arises based on the survey methodology. Despite the fact that our survey was anonymous in nature, responses remain subjective and perspectives on the value of social media can of course be skewed depending on the individual who responds to the survey. If the study were repeated, it would be important to find a way to increase the response rate as well as reach out to more participants. It may even be of interest to gain multiple perspectives by also pulling student data on impressions and awareness of their university marketing office's social media usage.

Based off the information gathered from the survey participants, we are seeing that institutions are not only using social media, but are constantly expanding into new media outlets in order to connect with new segments. While it is true that institutions as a whole are expanding their network, many facets of social media are left up to the

discretion of the institution as to how to handle them. This includes how they manage their profiles and the strategies they employ to be successful. Institutions seemed to agree across the board that social media was a great way to execute their strategy, but, due to the constantly changing nature of the Internet and these media platforms, many colleges and universities found that they could get overwhelmed due to limited staffing and lack of funding to expand their staff. Finally, there is no question that institutions who are not already heavily involved in the social media world see the need to invest in training and development efforts as time goes on so that they are not left behind as these sites continue to grow in popularity. Taken together, these findings suggest that social media use by colleges and universities is slowly redefining the way colleges interact with all of their stakeholders.

Overall, there is no question that social media is on the rise as a communication medium for higher education institutions across the nation. Through research, it has been found that colleges and universities are beginning to see the importance of these outlets especially when it comes to interacting with millennials. The world is seeing a transition from prospective college students receiving mountains of brochures in the mail to many of these same communications arriving digitally through email and social media platforms. As an increasing number of social media platforms emerge, institutions are continuously trying to use these outlets to connect with all of their stakeholders. Since this trend is expected to continue in the future, consumers can expect to see their favorite institutions finding new and more exciting ways to connect via social media outlets.

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