



Article

Theoretical Basis and Socio-Economic Significance of Barrier-Free Tourism Development

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Abstract: In the article, the author discusses the theoretical and methodological foundations of the concept of barrier-free tourism and its socio-economic significance. The article analyzes international and national experiences in this area, substantiates the need to adapt infrastructure facilities based on the principles of universal design, introduce digital technologies, increase human resources and improve the legal and regulatory framework. Also, the theoretical foundations of barrier-free tourism, the views of scientists, its features, negative and positive aspects, and the problems existing in the system are studied, and the category of "barrier-free tourism" is improved.

Keywords: Barrier-Free Tourism, Universal Design, Inclusive Tourism, Social Inclusion, Tourism Infrastructure, Digital Technologies, Human Resources, Legal and Regulatory Framework, Socio-Economic Efficiency

1. Introduction

The theoretical foundations of the development of barrier-free tourism are determined, first of all, by a deep scientific analysis of the concept of inclusive tourism, identification of its legal, organizational and economic mechanisms and their implementation in practice. This process is aimed at creating equal and free access to tourism services for all social groups, including people with disabilities, the elderly, families with children and tourists with other needs. As a result, the development of barrier-free tourism infrastructure not only establishes the principles of social justice and inclusion, but also has a positive impact on the country's macroeconomic indicators by creating new jobs, improving the quality of services and stimulating regional economic activity. Therefore, the development of barrier-free tourism is recognized as a strategically important direction in ensuring social integration and economic stability.

In order to fully understand the theoretical foundations of barrier-free tourism, it is first appropriate to emphasize its essence. The term barrier-free tourism was first introduced by Ralph Smith in his article "Recreation of Disabled Tourists: Barriers to Participation" in 1987. In this article, the scientist limited himself to developing a theoretical definition of the concept of barrier-free tourism. In this article, for the first time, the problems of disabled tourists in traveling were revealed. Ralph Smith divided the problems of barrier-free tourism into two: internal (problems arising from the mental,

Citation: Umurzakova, D. E. Theoretical Basis and Socio-Economic Significance of Barrier-Free Tourism Development. Central Asian Journal of Innovations on Tourism Management and Finance 2025, 6(4), 1409-1418.

Received: 30th Jun 2025

Revised: 07th Jul 2025

Accepted: 31st Jul 2025

Published: 23rd Aug 2025



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physical and psychological state of a person), external (interaction with the external environment, mobility, etc.) [1].

The goal of the reforms carried out in our country in recent years is to ensure the country's economic growth, create new jobs, improve the standard of living and quality of life of the population, and join the ranks of developed countries by ensuring macroeconomic stability through supporting entrepreneurial activity. The role and importance of the tourism industry in the implementation of these goals is of particular importance in our country. For this purpose, the Strategy "Uzbekistan - 2030", adopted by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh.M.Mirziyoyev on September 11, 2023, in Goal 23, which states that "Organize free trips of 1,000 people with disabilities from each region to Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva per year within the framework of the "Barrier-Free Tourism" program", indicates that we will carry out reforms in our country to develop "barrier-free tourism"[2]. Reform, in turn, can be implemented through scientific, organizational-legal, institutional, technical, and infrastructure modernization. In our opinion, first of all, its study from a scientific point of view will serve the correct and effective implementation of subsequent stages.

Literature Review

Many economists have conducted research on tourism, inclusive tourism and barrier-free tourism, conducting scientific research on improving the efficiency of the sector, improving the organizational and economic mechanism, and developing service provision. In particular, in the scientific article "Tourism Policy in Developing Countries: A Critique" by K.L. Jenkins, people from richer countries are increasingly eager to travel to distant places, which offers benefits in terms of income redistribution and employment. However, there are barriers - for example, developing countries have a low impact on aggregate demand and may suffer from inadequate transport services. Uncontrolled tourism can also cause long-term social problems. The author argues that host country governments need to intervene to achieve the full benefits of tourism. Their policies should be based on sound comparative interdisciplinary research [3].

R.Bianchi's article "The Globalization of Tourism and Fear: Analyzing the Politics of Risk and Security in Global Travel" argues that international tourism represents the apotheosis of consumer capitalism and Western modernity, based on the seamless integration of people, goods, and capital. However, the globalization of terrorism and military intervention, as well as the growing insecurity caused by targeted attacks against foreign tourists in some parts of the world, show that liberal calculations of unhindered movement, political stability, and the unlimited expansion of the market that guarantees the "right" to travel, are increasingly associated with concerns about risk and security. It also examines how the geopolitics of security and the neoliberal expansion of the global market have begun to fundamentally change the parameters of mobility and the environment in which tourism operates. At the same time, he analyzes how international tourism is linked to the strengthening of market relations and the limited freedom concepts associated with consumerism, showing that the expansion of modern tourist mobility is often associated with this [4].

The scientific article "The role of the state in the development of inclusive tourism" written by the Russian scientist N.A.Logunova identifies the need for the development of inclusive tourism and its importance for people with disabilities, and indicates that the implementation of state policy in the field of inclusive tourism and planning the development of this sector at the state and regional levels should comply with two principles: "universal design" - creating a barrier-free environment to ensure unhindered access to objects, and "reasonable adaptation" - providing services to all citizens, regardless of existing limitations in life activities, and creating a flexible environment for life activities, from the point of view of the mutual measurement of human needs and capabilities, adapting the environment to the needs of people with disabilities. The main

indicators and opportunities taken into account in the formation of key indicators indicate the need to prioritize this type of tourism in the field of state regulation [5].

In his scientific article "The Importance of the Development of the Digital Economy in the Tourism Sector in Uzbekistan", Z.O.Rakhimov discusses the development of the digital economy in the tourism sector, as well as internal and external factors affecting its development. The significance of this study is that the conditions and factors of the formation of the digital economy and the current consideration of the information provision of tourism activities are considered as the most important drivers for its development. He also pointed out the need to digitize tourism facilities for the development of barrier-free tourism [6].

The scientific article "Prospects for the organization of barrier-free tourism services for people with disabilities" written by D.F.Tilmurodov describes the prospects for providing barrier-free tourism services to people with disabilities in the Republic of Uzbekistan. Using the methodology for determining quality parameters, the motivations of people with disabilities to travel were studied. Factors influencing the development of tour routes for people with disabilities in the tourism market were considered. The article also develops proposals and recommendations for the further development of barrier-free tourism services in our republic [7].

2. Materials and Methods

This scientific article widely used the methods of systematic approach of scientific knowledge, monographic observation, statistical abstract and logical thinking in the process of conducting research. Also, in the implementation of scientific research, using the method of analysis and synthesis effectively, research was conducted to reveal the theoretical and socio-economic significance of barrier-free tourism, and solutions to the problems were presented.

3. Results and Discussion

A number of scientific studies have been carried out abroad and in our country on barrier-free tourism and tourism, and it is advisable to give priority to foreign views. In the scientific literature on barrier-free tourism, the term "barrier-free tourism" began to be used in the report "Tourism for All" presented by the British Tourism Council in 1989 [8]. Also, the achievements in organizing travel for people with disabilities in the tourism sector since 1981, which was declared the "International Year of Disabled People", and in order to support them, are described in detail. In particular, a number of studies have been conducted on the barrier-free tourism market since the 1990s. These studies are mainly devoted to the analysis of the role of people with disabilities in society and external factors affecting their travel. At the same time, studies have also been conducted on improving transport services for people with disabilities [9]. Since the 2000s, research on barrier-free tourism has been rapidly increasing. Many researchers have achieved research results by conducting surveys, while some researchers have widely used methods such as systematic equation modeling and mathematical simulation. According to the purpose of these studies, they can be divided into the following types:

1. Analysis of the behavior of tourists with disabilities;
2. Identification of the needs and desires of tourists with disabilities;
3. The process of accumulating tourists' experiences;
4. Existing problems in barrier-free tourism;
5. The importance of tour agents for tourists with disabilities;
6. Factors influencing barrier-free tourism [10].

In general, the above studies aimed to study the behavior and needs of accessible tourists from a consumer perspective. The results of the studies showed that disability is mainly related to the ability to consume without barriers. That is, the more health problems

a disabled person has, the more likely he or she is to need recreation, which has been confirmed in empirical studies.

Many people with disabilities recognize travel as one of the main means of communication with the outside world. For them, the main goal is to satisfy needs such as sports, exercise, treatment, and a sense of freedom. According to M.Daniels et al., during tourism travel, people with disabilities mainly have difficulties in finding transport services and suitable housing, as well as a lack of other additional services. These problems are often explained by the financial instability of people with disabilities, that is, their difficulty in entering the highly competitive labor market, and therefore they look for relatively inexpensive housing and services. Based on this, people with disabilities carefully analyze the prices of tourist services when planning a trip [11]. They do not trust traditional tour companies and travel agents, because they think that they do not take their needs into account. They also noted that the infrastructure in the provision of tourism services is not sufficiently adapted for people with disabilities.

In Europe, the Barrier-Free Tourism Network was established in 2006, and on the initiative of this organization, the first data on the travel of people with disabilities, the elderly, and people with special needs were collected. Since then, research on barrier-free tourism has been mainly focused on the following areas:

1. studying the experiences of people with disabilities;
2. using digital technologies in barrier-free tourism;
3. perspectives of tourism managers;
4. forecasts of barrier-free tourism.

The British economist of Greek origin, D.Buhalis, defined "barrier-free tourism" as "consumers who are able to travel but have limited opportunities, impaired health, and disabilities"[12]. In our opinion, disabled people, the elderly, and people with special needs can use tourist services like healthy people only through "barrier-free tourism". Based on D. Buhalis's definition, it is appropriate to identify a group of tourists with limited opportunities. In our opinion, the members of "barrier-free tourism" include tourists with a lot of luggage, the elderly, tall and short travelers, the elderly, tourists with temporary health problems, parents with young children, pregnant women, tourists who do not speak a foreign language, travelers with psychological problems, people with disabilities, and their caregivers. At the same time, there are different interpretations of the term "barrier-free tourism", which we analyzed by systematizing it, see Table 1.

Table 1. Definitions and descriptions of the term "barrier-free tourism" by foreign scholars.

Researchers and organizations	Definition of barrier-free tourism
World Tourism Organization	Type of travel that can be organized for everyone, regardless of race, nationality, religion, or physical disability.
D.Buhalis	Accessible tourism consumers are people who are able to travel but have limited mobility, poor health, or disabilities.
S.Darcy and others	It is a type of tourism that takes place in buildings with a unique universal design that allows all people to travel, regardless of ethnic origin or physical condition.
S.Makkabi and others	It is a type of travel organized for people with disabilities.

E.Alen and others	It is a type of income-generating tourism organized for people with disabilities and the elderly.
T.Oukes, S.Minka	It is a type of tourism that reflects modern liberal values and is organized regardless of the physical and psychological state of people.

From the data in Table 1, we can see that different scholars have developed different definitions of barrier-free tourism, approaching it from different perspectives. However, the scientific views of D. Buhalis and S. Darcy in this area are important in fully revealing the essence of "barrier-free tourism". These scholars were among the first to develop their own definitions of the term "barrier-free tourism" and propose conceptual models for its development.

Also, according to the definition of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), barrier-free tourism is "a process that enables all people, regardless of age, ability or physical condition, to enjoy a safe, comfortable and satisfying tourism experience" [13]. According to studies conducted in the United States, Australia and the European Union, people with disabilities are increasingly traveling in these regions. For example, in 2024, the number of tourists with disabilities in Australia was 11% of all tourists. According to the results of a survey conducted in the United Kingdom in 2023, 12% of domestic tourists were people with a chronic illness or disability. "Accessible tourism" consumers spent significantly more than other tourists and travelers. In the United States, studies show that Americans over the age of 18 with disabilities spend an average of \$ 13.6 billion on tourism annually [14].

Scientists from the CIS countries, including O.Beydik, N.Belousova, N.Sofiy, N.Nayda, and L.Volobuev, concluded that the main areas of their research on "barrier-free tourism" are dedicated to "the use of services such as rehabilitation and socialization of tourists with disabilities," and in turn, actions aimed at restoring their health are "barrier-free tourism."

O.Almukhamedova and other authors note that the concept of "barrier-free tourism" is not yet widely accepted in Russia. They say that this problem is rare in European countries, since the percentage of people with disabilities is relatively high and the adapted infrastructure is sufficiently developed. On this basis, based on these considerations, they developed recommendations for the development of "barrier-free tourism" for Russia. That is, these scientists considered "barrier-free tourism" to be medical services received by people with disabilities mainly for the purpose of improving their health.

At the same time, many studies have been conducted in our country to develop "barrier-free tourism" and to reveal its essence more broadly. In particular, Uzbek scientists A. Makhmudova and D. Amirova defined "inclusive tourism as a complex concept that can be interpreted in different ways, and in some sources this type of tourism is also referred to as barrier-free tourism and tourism for people with disabilities. Inclusive tourism differs from adaptive tourism, which is intended only for people with disabilities. Inclusivity is the interaction of different social groups (disabled people, elderly people, representatives of various social minorities)" [15]. In our opinion, scientists developed a definition in their approach to "barrier-free tourism" taking into account the social relations of people with disabilities, the elderly, families with children, and people with special needs. Inclusive tourism has a broader meaning than the concept of "barrier-free tourism" and includes "barrier-free tourism" within inclusive tourism. The authors have tried to highlight the importance and essence of "barrier-free tourism" within inclusive tourism. Inclusive tourism is a type of tourism that ensures the equal participation of all individuals, including people with disabilities, low-income people, groups with language

or cultural barriers, and aims to eliminate economic, social, cultural and technical barriers. "Barrier-free tourism" is a type of tourism in which physical, architectural and transport barriers are eliminated, and the infrastructure is adapted, which plays an important role in providing inclusive tourism services. In our opinion, the main emphasis in the research conducted by scientists has been on inclusive tourism, and insufficient research has been conducted to open up "barrier-free tourism". We can also see similar situations in many scientific studies. At the same time, other local scientists have also conducted research on "barrier-free tourism", and we have summarized their definitions of the service process in relation to the views of foreign scientists, compared their definitions, the problems they are seeking solutions to, their recommendations for the development of service provision, and their economic and social significance, and as a result, we have determined the extent to which "barrier-free tourism" is being approached in our country and abroad, see Table 2.

Table 2. Scientific views on barrier-free tourism in Uzbekistan and foreign countries.

№	Main directions	Views of Uzbek scientists	Views of international scientists
1	Description	"Barrier-free tourism" - creating equal and free tourism opportunities for all social groups, including people with disabilities	"Accessible tourism" - eliminating physical, communication and service barriers for all users based on universal design
2	The main problems	Inadequate infrastructure, insufficient regulatory framework, and low staff training	Global differences in standardization, financial constraints in developing countries
3	Recommendations	special lanes for the disabled, ramp, elevator, braille, training for service staff	Making "Universal Design" principles mandatory, strengthening government-industry cooperation
4	Economic importance	Creating jobs, attracting a new tourist segment, increasing regional economic activity	Increasing the contribution to gross domestic product (GDP), strengthening a sustainable tourism strategy
5	Social significance	Ensuring social justice, inclusion, and citizens' right to tourism	Improving the quality of life of citizens, strengthening integration in society

Referring to the data in Table 2 above, we can see that inclusive tourism and barrier-free tourism are closely related and complementary. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the share of people with disabilities, older travelers, and socially vulnerable groups in the global tourist population is increasing every year [16]. Therefore, the concepts of "barrier-free tourism" and "inclusive tourism" are widely used in practice. Although they are related, they differ in content and scope.

Based on the views of the above-mentioned scholars, in our opinion, "Barrier-free tourism" is a type of tourism infrastructure that adapts the process of people with disabilities, the elderly, families with children, and people with special needs to travel for a certain type of package or for at least one day for the purpose of recreation, treatment, and health improvement. By a person with disabilities, we can mean people who are limited in their ability to travel for various reasons.

Barrier-free tourism plays an important role in the development of general tourism, as well as in ensuring social equality in society. The main goal of barrier-free tourism is to ensure that people with disabilities and limited opportunities can travel and enjoy life on an equal basis with healthy people. The development of this type of tourism will significantly contribute to increasing the volume of exports of tourism services in the economy, ensuring employment of the local population, and developing tourism infrastructure, see Figure 1.

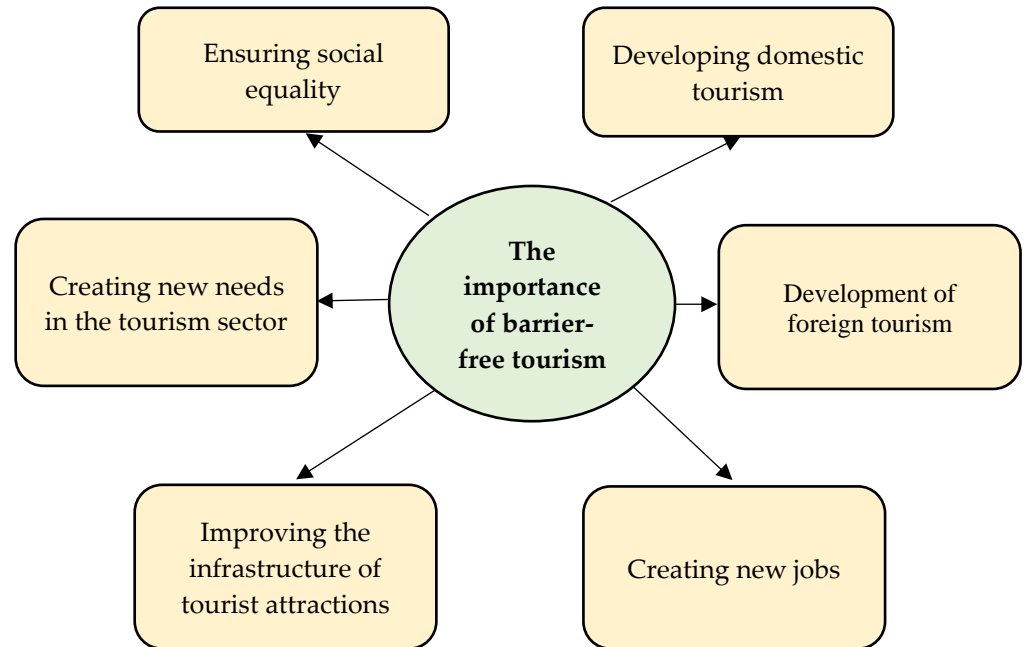


Figure 1. The socio-economic importance of barrier-free tourism.

Barrier-free tourism can be studied from different perspectives. For example, this tourism can be analyzed from an ethnic, economic and legal perspective. From an economic perspective, serving tourists with disabilities provides an opportunity for tourism enterprises to discover completely new markets and turn potential demand into real income. From an ethnic perspective, having a tourist experience for a person with disabilities strengthens equality and solidarity in society. From a legal perspective, it leads to a number of decisions on the right of every person to have a tourist experience through laws and by-laws. According to S. Darcy and D. Buhalis, “barrier-free tourism” is a phenomenon that occurs in cooperation with representatives of various sectors, and it is the creation of sufficient conditions for tourists with disabilities to move, see, hear and understand in the form of tourist products and tour packages [17]. This approach of scientists to “barrier-free tourism” shows that it can be achieved by improving the infrastructure of tourism entities.

In many cases, there is insufficient information available about the conditions for accessible tourists in tourist destinations. For example, the availability of accessible accommodation for accessible tourists, the conditions inside it, its compliance with ergonomic requirements, the difficulty of booking, the lack of accessible accommodation for accessible tourism consumers in some areas, the absence or lack of caretakers, the fact that additional services are “expensive” or “impossible” for accessible tourists to purchase, and others can be cited as problems currently faced, see Figure 2.

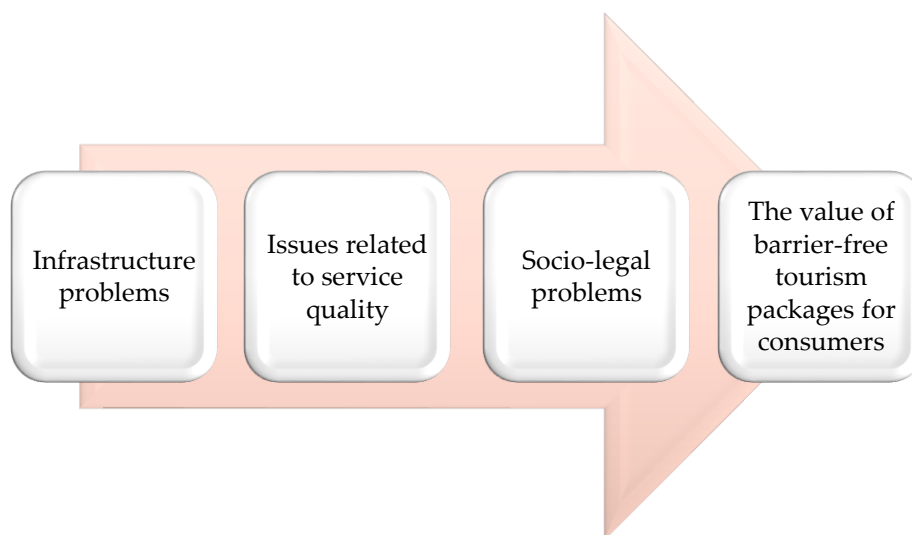


Figure 2. Problems with barrier-free tourism in Uzbekistan.

Barrier-free tourism currently faces a number of systemic problems, both globally and in Uzbekistan, and these problems can be divided into four main groups. Referring to the data in Figure 2, these problems hurt the development of barrier-free tourism. In particular:

First, infrastructure problems such as the lack of ramps or elevators on buses, trains and planes, limited space for wheelchairs, the absence of ramps or their construction at the wrong angle, narrow doorways, the lack of elevators, the lack of Braille, large print and voice guidance systems.

Secondly, there are problems with the quality of service, such as insufficient training of staff, a lack of special transport, adapted hotel rooms, support guide services, and websites and mobile applications that are not optimized for users with visual, hearing, or cognitive disabilities.

Thirdly, there is a lack of enforcement or weak control over the implementation of barrier-free tourism standards, insufficient investment and subsidies for the construction of adapted infrastructure, and insufficient support in society for people with disabilities to travel.

Fourth, the shortcomings in the infrastructure and services of accessible tourism, such as the high cost of tour packages for people with disabilities, the elderly, families with children, and citizens in need of social assistance, the lack of sufficient financial support from the state, and the misallocation of sponsors' funds, are hindering its widespread development. In this area, it is necessary to strengthen the legal framework, make technical standards mandatory, train personnel, and form an inclusive culture in society.

4. Conclusion

In our opinion, as a result of studying the essence of the above-mentioned "barrier-free tourism", studying the views of scientists, its economic characteristics, and analyzing its institutional foundations, we should implement the following suggestions and recommendations in order to develop the sector in our country, improve the quality of service, increase its efficiency, and improve infrastructure:

Firstly, in order to develop "barrier-free tourism" in the republic, it is necessary to review its institutional framework at the national level, improve the existing ones and bring them into line with the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Secondly, by introducing the concept of "universal design" in tourist facilities in our country, based on world standards, and creating convenience for all users, not only for tourists with disabilities, but also for the elderly and families with children, increasing tourism revenues by an average of 15-20%.

Third, organize special inclusive service competency development courses for employees working in the tourism and service sectors of the republic.

Fourth, develop mobile applications and web platforms that provide information about accessible tourist facilities and services in order to increase the attractiveness of "barrier-free tourism".

Fifth, to implement a socio-economic monitoring system by creating a system of indicators for specific service coverage, user segments, and social integration indicators to assess the social and economic effectiveness of "barrier-free tourism".

As we noted above, the issue of developing barrier-free tourism is theoretically explained by the formation of a sustainable model that guarantees equal access to tourism services for all members of society, regardless of their physical capabilities. The analysis shows that the main determinants of development in this area are the harmonization of the legal and regulatory framework with international requirements, the application of the concept of universal design in infrastructure projects, continuous improvement of the skills of personnel in the tourism sector, the introduction of modern digital platforms, and the formation of a socio-economic monitoring system. As a result of this integrated approach, the scope and quality indicators of services will improve, the level of participation of the population in tourism activities will increase, the efficiency of state investments will increase, and the potential for creating added value through the tourism sector of the national economy will significantly expand. Thus, the systematic development of barrier-free tourism infrastructure should be recognized not only as a factor in strengthening social inclusion, but also as a factor in increasing the country's economic competitiveness and achieving strategic advantage in the global tourism market.

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