An Exploratory Study on the PhD Dissertation: PhD Students' Opinions on their Research Development Process

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to compare the approaches within the context of the PhD students' dissertation process. Moreover, in this research it is aimed to identify how PhD students evaluate their own dissertation process. In addition, this research analyses the differences between the students' study attitudes "in the PhD dissertation process in the field of educational sciences. This research adapts a qualitative research methodology and a case study design. Participants of the research were selected by purposeful sampling method with regard to the topic of interest. The majority of the participants, the PhD students, worked as research assistants at the same university. The data obtained from the PhD students were analyzed by using descriptive analysis method. Findings showed that the PhD students have different opinions about the development and design of the dissertation process. The PhD students stated feeling of inadequacy in the following issues: designing the research in accordance with theoretical method steps, the use of technology, the implementation of statistical methods, the cooperation between schools and universities, time management, and foreign language use in academic context.

Key words: PhD students, Research development process, Case study.

Introduction

This research examines the differences in PhD student's research development and implementation process. In general, PhD students' scientific research approaches, their duties and responsibilities during research process, and difficulties and problems they faced in this process have been studied. Literature shows that the studies on this specific field is limited, however it is possible to see some studied focusing on different aspects in PhD research process (i.e.; Meyer, Shananhan, & Laugksch, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Ives & Rowley, 2005; Brew, 2003). In a study with 154 experimental higher education students in Australia and South Africa, researchers examined how higher education students define their research and how they define research development process (Meyer, Shananhan, & Laugksch, 2005). In this study, researchers conducted research on the students' research choices, decisions and implementation actions across different universities. They mainly aimed to investigate how the research students conduct their research, as well as the relationship of the research contents they have learned with the ones they learned during the doctoral education process. It was found that the participants' research approaches were grouped into eight categories and the cultural background, previous learning, differences in personal characteristics, and differences in individual opinions affected their approaches (Meyer, Shananhan, & Laugksch, 2005). In another study, researcher defined the PhD students' research approaches depending on their individual characteristics (Lovitts, 2001). The researcher mainly aimed to answer the question of why students are not successful during PhD research process, although they have received many training on the data collection strategy and scales during the doctoral education process. According to the researcher results, research defined the four main reasons for not being able to complete the doctoral process which are: the misleading research, the low level of individual motivation, the excessive stress or pressure of the doctoral program, or the individual burnout of the students (Lovitts, 2001). In another study, Ives and Rowley (2005)

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examined the interaction between the students and their supervisors during the research process. The influence of the supervisor to the student and the process itself was found to be as rational progress in line with tasks, streamline information flow, assessing difficulties, counseling and support, control the student according to his experience. The researchers stated that the more the supervisors contribute to the process, the more the students are successful in the process. Thus, the study analysed students stated that they could progress in a more useful process (Ives & Rowley, 2005). Similarly, Royalty, Gelso, Mallinkrodt, and Garrett (1986) found that strong attitudes of researchers positively affected the following issues: feeling enthusiastic about the study, taking responsibility and participating in research experiences. Both students and supervisors aim to further the existing knowledge.

It can be said that the studies mostly focus on the understanding of doctoral students, supervisor or post-doctoral researchers regarding research process. However, literature should be enriched in terms the different aspects of research process. One of the most significant missions of universities is to encourage students to conduct research, to question the existing situation and search for information. Research approaches of students are believed to affect the knowledge generation process. Today, how the topic of research is conceptualized at universities and how researchers conduct their studies have been rarely studied. In general, researchers reflect their ideas regarding the nature of their studies through qualitative differences. However, some potentially common ideas were not examined scientifically and empirically since there is not systematic research on how research should be conceptualized. The studies conducted are evaluated in terms of content, contribution to the field, significance, and raising awareness. Especially, the research studies in educational sciences are very important since it is a starting point to reveal the thoughts and life styles of societies. Research approach is a process enabling researchers to give meaning to his/her own study (Brew, 2003). Since research approaches are different, different research practices are available today. Therefore, acquiring various research approaches is likely to result in wider contexts of research.

The research conducted by academician candidates is important for the continuity of education and science in general. Therefore, regular evaluation of such research in the field and determination of the prevailing tendencies provide valuable insights for the scientists trying to conduct further studies in the related field (Barnett, 1992). The knowledge level of the researcher about the field, the scope of the study, the appropriateness of data collection tools and methods, and data analysis are primarily important for the quality of the research conducted in the field of education.

How PhD students perceive research process and their opinions regarding the theme, type and results of studies are the main problem areas of this dissertation. Examining the research approaches of PhD students, this study deals with how PhD students evaluate their own studies or other studies in the field of education in different ways. The relationship between what is told and what is realized are also examined. In addition, the study explores whether researchers choose their research topics according to their research mentality or not.

Research Purpose

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the PhD dissertation process of students studying in the field of educational sciences, as well as their opinions on their research development process. Also, their views toward the dissertation process and their research practices were aimed to be clarified. Specifically, this study focused on the PhD students' opinions on their research study fields, the methods, and technology they use; their approaches for research practices shaping their published or unpublished studies; and the challenges they face during dissertation, reporting, and evaluation process. In accordance with this aim, participants were asked to answer following research questions which aimed to serve the research purpose:

In this study, it is aimed to examine some problems that will clarify the participants' views on their research approaches. In response to this sub-objective, the following questions were directed:

- How do doctoral students define the research process in the field of educational sciences?
- What are the research approaches of the PhD students in the thesis development process?
- According to doctoral students, what are the basic difficulties encountered during the research process?
- What do PhD students think about the research approaches used?
- What are the opinions of students about feedbacks directed to their thesis?
- How are the reasons for the poor progress in the research process evaluated by the students?

Method

Research Model

This study has been designed in line with qualitative research approach. The reason for adopting this approach is that it is more flexible in discovering the perceptions and the interpretations in the study, and it is more effective in the analysis of the data collected. Qualitative studies are about how individuals give meaning to their lives, how they interpret what they experience, doing research to explore their point of views, events, phenomena and values (Merriam, 1988). In the literature, the definition of qualitative research is not consistent, situational variations can be done by different researchers (Creswell, 2007), so it is still difficult to talk about a standardized process in qualitative data analysis. This study uses case study design, one of the designs of qualitative research. In a case study design, focus is on data analysis on one phenomenon, which the researcher chooses to analyze in depth regardless of the participants for the study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Gay, Mills and Airasian, (2009) suggests case study approach from qualitative research designs if the researcher asks how and why questions about the research information of participants and if more than one data source needed to be used to find an answer to the research problem in order to examine in depth an uncontrollable phenomenon. The case study method is usually investigated cases in its framework of "how" and "why" is used to search for answers to questions like that happen. There are usually a lot of evidence and information source for the research problem (Yin, 1984).

In this study, since the descriptive analysis approach allows the data to be organized according to the themes of the research questions and presented according to the questions or dimensions used (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006), descriptive analysis method was used to analyze the qualitative data. In this context, themes have been formed by making various coding in the qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions. In addition, some of the views of doctoral students are given as examples.

Study Group

Since this study aims to examine the PhD students' views on their dissertation process and research development process, participants of this research were supposed to have sufficient level of knowledge in order to answer the research questions, as well as other details such as working full-time at a university and being PhD student who has already passed the PhD qualifying exam. In this regard, purposeful sampling method was used, which selects informative about the topic of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). The aim of this sampling method is to do in-depth research and to select the information-rich situations in line with the purpose of the study. The sample of this research was composed of individuals with qualifications determined in relation to the problem. Four PhD students, about 30 years, constituted the sample of this study. All participants were studying at the educational sciences department and working as research assistants at the same university. Voluntarily participation was asked for the study. The information of these participants is briefly presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Participants Demographic Characteristics

Participants	Gender	Academic Title	Field
Emel	Female	Research Assistant	Educational Administration Supervision Planning and Economics
Mehmet	Male	Research Assistant	Educational Administration Supervision Planning and Economics
Sinan	Male	Research Assistant	Education Programs and Teaching
Yaşar	Male	Research Assistant	Education Programs and Teaching

Participants were informed about the confidentiality of their identity so following ID codes were given for each participant for this purpose: Emel, Mehmet, Sinan, and Yaşar.

Data Collection

Data collection process started at the end of September 2014 and it was completed about 1 year later, the end of November 2015. Before September 2014, a pilot study was conducted with three PhD students who were not included in the current sample of this study. A semi-structured interview was prepared by the researcher in line with the relevant literature to answer the research questions. After the pilot study, this form was revised and

developed in accordance with the feedbacks received from the pilot study. During data collection process, each participant was interviewed at two different time points. First interviews were help in September 2014 and the second interviews were help in November 2015, one year later. Each interview lasted approximately 4 hours at each time point. So, the total duration for the interviews was about thirty-two hours. The revised semi-structured interview form was used to collect data and the same form was used in one year later. Participants' permissions were got for voice recording and interviews were recorded for an in-depth analysis of the problem identified in the study.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Data analysis was based on the descriptive analysis method. In the data analysis process, data transcription was done and recorded interviews were transformed into text format. Following this, data were aimed to be coded into themes. For this purpose, in the first step each sentence was coded into key codes such that similar sentences were coded into same categories and different categories were created for sentences having different meanings. In the second step, each category was coded into new categories such that main categories were generated from the sub-categories. In the final step, main categories were again coded into new categories such that similar categories were coded into same themes and different themes were created for main categories indicating different content. So, overall text was coded into four different themes at the end: design, trading, phase, and result. In this research, the theme "*design*" mainly covers the qualitative differences defined in this research, the theme "*trading*" mainly covers the research's task definitions and responsibilities, the theme "*phase*" mainly covers the discoveries and verifications for research study, and the theme "*result*" mainly covers the personal learning and gains in a study.

Reliability and Validity of the Research

The validity of a study is based on the accuracy of the research findings and the reliability is based on obtaining the same results in case of conducting the study at different times (Kirk and Miller, 1990). The studies for validity and reliability in this study are given below:
- For credibility (internal validity), the descriptions made in the data analysis form the basis for the comments and explanations made later.
- For transferability (external validity) is provided by defining the properties of the research sample in detail in the method section in a way that allow for comparisons for other samples.
- For consistency (internal reliability) detailed information is provided about sample groups, data collection tools, process of data analysis.
- For confirmability (external reliability) the sample group, data collection and analysis methods, the conceptual framework used in the analysis of the data are defined in detail.

Findings

The Opinions of the Students regarding PhD Dissertation Process

This section presents the findings of the data obtained from the interviews conducted with PhD students based on the questions prepared on the basis of the research questions about PhD dissertation processes of the students.

Emel's Opinions about PhD Dissertation Process

Emel, who is a student at Department of Educational Administration, defended her PhD dissertation and completed the program successfully. She used qualitative research design in her dissertation; therefore, she conducted interviews, observations and focus group activities. She defines her PhD dissertation process as *very difficult* and states that developing a theoretical background was the most challenging part. Emel mainly focused on self-development. She studied a topic that is closed to her supervisor's area of interest because she wanted to get more academic benefits from his experience and knowledge. The table below presents summary information about Emel's opinions about PhD dissertation process.

Table 2. PhD students Emel's Opinions about PhD Dissertation Process

Themes	Opinions	Descriptive Code
Design	First of all, it was a topic that I can enjoy and want to learn about. Secondly, my supervisor led me to this topic	The student and supervisor' common areas of interest
	Whichever is appropriate for the research should be chosen. In fact, the quality of the study is important.	Suitability of the aims for the design (process-oriented)
Trading	He used to guide me about the books I should read or the concepts in research and dictionary use	Development of academic style
	Many people conduct studies with his/her supervisor. We are influenced by many people	Compensating the inadequate points through joint studies
Phase	I found analysis part quite challenging. I created a new theme	-Analysis process
	I am person who suffers from time management problems	Time management problem
Result	The influence of the researcher is important	Contribution to the field
	We are expected to create something more original	To create an original product

According to Table 2, Emel's design theme perception was less subjective compared to phase theme. Emel found some phases of her dissertation challenging and was not successful in time management. She emphasized that research should be original, and time should be managed successfully. She also added that research should have a strong theoretical background and contribute to the field. Thus, she believes that it is important for the researcher to conduct studies on the topics that are closely related to his / her area of interest. She also stated that all research processes require considerable amount of labor and researchers need time and energy to carry out a quality study. She emphasizes that the most important factor for the success of research is researcher. Finally, she states that when researcher is not pleased and satisfied with research, it is difficult to obtain productive outcomes.

Sinan's Opinions about PhD Dissertation Process

Sinan, a student at Educational Programs and Teaching Department, defended his PhD dissertation and completed the program successfully. He stated that he had good relationship with his supervisor and benefitted a lot from joint studies he conducted with his supervisor. Sinan also conducted some studies with other professors working in the field of his supervisor as well. In addition, he regularly attended courses offered at different universities. The replies he gave to research questions were generally about his experiences in the courses he took during his PhD education program. Professor Mert, a professor from the same university, was Sinan's supervisor. The table below presents summary information about Sinan's opinions about PhD dissertation process

Table 3. PhD students Sinan's Opinions about PhD Dissertation Process

Themes	Opinions	Descriptive Code
Design	The courses I took affected my choice of dissertation topic	The effects of the courses taken
	Product-oriented is a slower process. I can say that we move from the design to the aims	Method-oriented
Trading	I got information from him about structuring the method, determining theoretical framework, writing literature review and the problems I faced in findings and data analysis.	Research has been a pathfinder.
	I have learned from the studies. I can say that the studies we conducted together opened new horizons for me and gave me a kind of culture to follow	Acquiring a critical point of view
Phase	It was difficult to enter the data to the computer. Also writing the discussion section was challenging	Data collection process
	If I do not study, this section will not finish. This is what motivates you	Creating a dissertation-oriented motivation
Result	Firstly, it should appeal to your area of interest. Your motivation might get lower in the next phases. Secondly, I believe that it should contribute to the field	Being a study to contribute to the field
	It is important to write discussion section while writing the literature review to create good research.	Having a substantial discussion section.

According to Table 3, Sinan's opinions about research process center around the following issues: relation to the field, combination of theory and practice; an ideally managed process; being published in scientific journals; dependence on external factors and institute's existing culture; researcher's own area of interest. Design theme focuses on problem solving by bringing different elements together according to external factors. Researcher's ideas, techniques and activities were shaped during PhD dissertation process. Similarly, trading theme focuses on products externally but here the researcher is aware of the social networks he belongs to. Sinan often used self-motivation methods while writing his PhD thesis.

Yaşar's Opinions about PhD Dissertation Process

Yaşar, a student at Department of Educational Teaching, defended his PhD dissertation and completed the program successfully. He stated that his PhD dissertation process was long, but he worked regularly in a disciplined way. He also mentioned that there were few studies on the topic he studied in his dissertation and he wants to conduct more studies on that topic. Finally, he told that he had experienced problems in accessing the related literature because there were not many researchers studying in his research area. Professor Nihat, a professor from the same university, was Yaşar's supervisor. The table below presents summary information about Yaşar's opinions about PhD dissertation process

Table 4. PhD students Yaşar's Opinions about PhD Dissertation Process

Themes	Opinions	Descriptive Code
Design	The most important reason for choosing my dissertation topic was the need in the literature	Working on a topic not adequately studied
	I can say that we followed a path to reach our aim rather than following a product-oriented approach	Process-oriented analysis
Trading	They were about research design, data collection tools and data analysis types	Research design process
	Because this required academic discipline	Establishing academic discipline
Phase	We collected data at certain intervals. We visited these places very often	Data collection process
	Environment was important in the motivation. Having certain vagueness in the data and findings different than those in the literature were challenging for us	Reporting process
Result	For instance, it is necessary to gain academic discipline and have publications	Gaining academic discipline
	The most important reason is the need in the field and to find a problem and solution	Contribution to the field

According to Table 4, Yaşar believes that it is more important to carry out up-to-date and practical research. He also highlighted that research question should be based on an existing problem and it should be answered satisfactorily in a quality research. Trading theme highlights the importance of analysis to find the essence of data in shaping a study. In other words, there is an internal focus in understanding a phenomenon. Awareness and the studies that are likely to contribute to the field are also important according to Sinan. Result theme highlights internal tendency, researcher's personal academic discipline and his/her awareness.

Mehmet's Opinions about PhD Dissertation Process

Mehmet, who is a student at Department of Educational Administration, defended her PhD dissertation and completed the program successfully. He spent one and a half year of his PhD dissertation process writing literature review section. He believes that research should primarily contribute to the self-development of the researcher. He conducted joint studies with his supervisor. In addition, he suggested that the studies conducted by the researcher involve his / her personal preferences, discoveries and knowledge and these develop according to the limitations of the researcher and his / her abilities. Professor Atilla, a professor from the same university, was Mehmet's supervisor. The table below presents summary information about Mehmet's opinions about PhD dissertation process.

Table 5. PhD students Mehmet's Opinions about PhD Dissertation Process

Themes	Opinions	Descriptive Code
Design	I was influenced from my own readings, from the courses I took during my PhD program and from my professors.	His own area of interest and educational background
	The basic factor is that the topic takes you to qualitative method naturally	Choosing the appropriate method for the topic
Trading	My supervisor made suggestions for all the sections	About the inadequacy of reports
	They affect in terms of method, analysis and synthesis steps	Method and synthesis
Phase	It is challenging to bring pieces together	Synthesis process
	I feel alone in the process. This reason for this is that supervisors have a lot of students. Supervisors do not want such supervising mechanism	Students are the responsible one for in the process
Result	When you start focusing on a work, you shouldn't focus on another	Focusing or dissertation process
	Originality. It should contribute to the field with a different point of view. It should get references by other authors	Being creative and getting references

Mehmet stated that it is important to conduct quality research that focuses on the area of interest and might be reference to further studies in the field. Getting references from other studies, being creative and providing insights for further studies are the other characteristics of good research according to Mehmet.

Table 6. The Opinions of PhD Students about PhD Dissertation Process

	Emel	Sinan	Yaşar	Mehmet
Design	Students' and the supervisor's common are of interest	The effects of the courses taken	Studying on a topic that is inadequately studied	His own area of interest and educational background
Trading	Development of academic style	Research has been a pathfinder	Research design process	About the inadequacies of the reports
Phase	Analysis process	Data collection process	Data collection process	Synthesis process
Result	Contribution to the field	Being a study focusing on the area of interest and contributing to the field	Gaining academic discipline	Focusing on dissertation process

The table above displays the summary of the findings about the approaches of PhD students regarding PhD dissertation process. There are statements about the opinions of the students for each theme. While Emel emphasizes the studies that contribute to the field on common areas of interest with supervisors, Sinan highlights the courses he took during his education and the importance of conducting studies according to his own area of interest. Yaşar, one the other hand, focuses on carrying out studies on various research topics. Finally, Mehmet determines the topics according to his area of interest.

Results and Discussion

This study presented the results of the data obtained from interviews conducted with PhD students about their research approaches and dissertation processes. This research, training PhD students in the area of Turkey, comparisons have been made on the process of preparing his doctoral dissertation. Therefore, it is thought that research findings will contribute to the doctoral process at national context. However, doctoral education shows differences and similarities in different countries of the world. Therefore, it is thought that the findings of the research are important at the international context. Also, in Turkey due to the lack of research on this subject, the results are discussed in more international context.

The first theme involved the significance of the study, combined ideas, the collected data and the techniques used. Students progressed in their dissertation process by counselling to their friends and supervisors, and they often needed help to solve the problems they face. Feeling lonely during the process and not being able to generate and improve ideas led to failure and lack of self-confidence. Çakmak et.al (2015) conducted a qualitative study focusing on dissertation writing process of PhD students. The study examined dissertation process of research assistants who were also PhD students. The analysis of the data revealed four main themes: personal characteristics, interest in the field, emotional grab, experiencing the flow. According to the study findings, participants who were dissatisfied with the field of postgraduate education, who did not have a specific academic goal, and who felt that the doctoral field they were studying were not suitable for their interests and abilities were not experiencing a fluent research process. The researchers suggested that the flow in the academic field required that the students were dealing with studies that were appropriate for their level of ability. Consistent with Çakmak and colleagues' (2015) study, this study also revealed that if the students conducted researches in the areas they determined, they experienced a flow in the process by a positive effect on motivation and interest.

The second theme involved the prestige, money and popularity students gained as a result of their publications and the scholarships they won with their publications. Results indicated that, being a part of a group, being appreciated and recognized were reported to be very important for researchers. Besides the research methods courses taken during PhD education, involving in research practices was an important factor in developing research skills of students (Cooke, Test, Heward, Spooner, & Courson, 1993; Green & Kvidhal, 1990; Newman, 1994). The studies conducted in this issue revealed that the graduate students, teachers, and teacher candidates who participated in research activities or took research method courses developed more positive attitudes and approaches towards the research (Entwistle & Walker, 2002; Newman, 1994; Sanders, 2001; Trimarco, 1997). According to Ives and Rowley (2005), the interaction between the supervisor and the student had a significant impact on the success or failure of a PhD student. This current study also found out that one of the important factors in developing the relationship between the supervisor and the student was the congruence between the supervisor and the student.

The third theme revealed the details, explanations, facts and ideas of researcher. In this theme, the intrinsic motivation of the students played an important role on continuity of students' research performance. It was found that the students' previous research knowledge, practices, experiences, time management skills, and work with supervisor had significant effects on this motivation. The most important points in the PhD education process was found to be as the acquisition of the academic motivation/discipline, the development of time management in the research, the creation of research experience, and the preparation of a research report. Communication during research process was promoted by personal relationships, social networks, and relationship with supervisor. It was found that the interest of the supervisor in the research was the most important factor for a successful study. Bringing personal interest and values together and helping his / her students study accordingly was one of the important roles of supervisors (Archer, 2000).

In the fourth theme, towards the end of the PhD process, awareness of the PhD students is the most important acquisition for the research development process. In this theme, there is a focus on the researchers' communication with different people while progressing in their own studies. Thus, their studies are a combination of their own experiences and the things they learn from these connections (Hall & Burns, 2009). It was found that the research approach of a researcher was shaped by his / her past and present knowledge, practice experiences, and habits. Each research experience of a researcher who was still at the beginning in his / her career was reflected in research practices.

This theme reveals the researchers' gain of academic identity as a result of a long period of PhD training. The acquisition of academic skills encompasses a long educational process (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Ph.D. students reflect their academic knowledge that they gained in their early research studies and practices and increase their acquisitions with their personal experiences and relationships with academic advisors (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

Conclusion

This research revealed that the PhD students' approaches toward their own research and dissertation process had changed during the process itself, from the beginning to the end of the doctoral thesis process. It had been found out that research understanding was not constant, and changes and developments had occurred throughout the doctorate process. Within the context of four themes created as a result of the answers given to the research

questions, changes and developments were presented. Students who were new to the process had different approaches than the experienced ones. Since students who were new to the process had different approaches than the experienced ones, they stated feeling of inadequacy in the following issues: designing the research in accordance with theoretical method steps, the use of technology, the implementation of statistical methods, cooperation between schools and universities, time management, and foreign language use in academic context. All these variables depended on various factors (i.e., academic background, self-confidence, motivation, experiences, knowledge, interest, students' attitudes, culture, student expectations, the scope of courses, academic community, and attitudes and behaviours of supervisor). According to Vosniadou and Kollias, (2003) research, the research approach was found to be related to many factors. These factors, education background, self-confidence, talent motivation, previous experiences, knowledge, interest, attitudes, corporate culture, student expectations, the scope of courses, academic community, attitudes and behaviours of consultants (Vosniadou & Kollias, 2003). According to McGrail, Rickard and Jones (2006), the researcher's motivation has a significant impact on the academic spread of knowledge. In this research, the student's scientific research varies according to his motivation, ability, creativity, originality.

Recommendations

This study's participants consisted of PhD students from with the fields of Educational Administration Supervision Planning and Economics and Educational Programs and Teaching. Thus, findings might be limited to the research approaches and thesis process comparisons of students from these particular two PhD fields. Since the data may not be representative for PhD processes of different fields, prospective research may expand the focus of area. Since the PhD training and research process is the most important process of becoming an academician, the highlight of PhD process is of critical importance. The findings of this research cover the academic years of 2014-2015 and 2015-2016. So, new studies that reveal the current situation can be conducted in order to bring new perspectives to the literature. Presenting the opinions and perceptions of experienced researchers is important for the development of academician candidates.

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