

Learning experiences of foreign students in a Chinese university: the perception of international students of Beijing Institute of Fashion and Technology (BIFT)

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Abstract: Education is very essential in the lives of every individual. As such, people travel from their home countries to other countries to further their education as well as gaining international experience. By so doing international students face many difficulties in adjusting to a new culture and environment. The study investigated the learning experiences of foreign students in a Chinese University. The study explored the academic and social experiences of foreign students in Beijing Institute of Fashion and Technology (BIFT). The study determined the challenges foreign students' face in China. A convenient sampling technique was used to select the sample size of five (5) students from the university. The research identified teachers' supportive, good resources (library, internet, lecture theatres), engaging in social activities (trip to the Great Wall, international exhibition show, fresher's week modeling; sports activities - football games, basketball, volleyball; gym class, dance group, and tag of peace) as some of the learning experiences that aid international students to adapt into the learning environment. Again, the language barrier and food were regarded as the challenge most international students' encounter. However, the findings of this research will enable stakeholders to find a better solution to cater for the needs of foreign students in a positive and healthy way for them to be successful in attaining their educational goals.

Key Words: academic experiences, social experiences, challenges, international students.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Student's mobility is very ubiquitous as globalization in recent times has enforced internalization in higher educational institutions. Many higher educational institutions across the globe have gone through necessary reforms in pursuance of internalization. The trend has increased tremendously during the past years due to active cooperation and collaboration of stakeholders, international organizations, national governments, institutions of higher education, faculties, and students in high demand for varied occupational experts globally. The number of students who studied overseas globally has escalated from 1.3 million in 1990 to 4.3 million in 2011 (UNESCO, 2013). This shows the interest of the youth in pursuing education across boundaries out of their comfort zones. A report by the Institute for International Economics stipulates that, one-third of all internationally mobile students throughout the world study in the UK or US. This massive trend is followed by China which has become the third destination study center for foreign students (IIE Annual Report, 2013). According to UNESCO (2013), China has become an attractive destination point for supplying quality education to most international students due to their opening-up policy reform since 1978. Over 440,000 international students studied in China in 2016; 489,200 in 2017; 492,185 in 2018 (MOE, 2018).

Globally, education is considered an important tool for the improvement of society's economic, social, political resources, and of the complete well-being of all humans. According to Acculturation (2011), it is of importance to know that global migration affects the individual and their community, and as globalization increases, it is required to continue to understand this complex experience and to assess the influence of acculturation on the overall welfare of the individual emigrant. Culture can have an impact on individual learning styles hence differences occur in learning between individuals based on a cultural setting. Foreign students at international universities have always been a source of academic and economic contributions towards their host and sending institutions/countries for which foreign learners have achieved considerable significance in higher education. According to Stacy (1999), the aim of international universities is not only to admit international students, rather educate students for cross-cultural knowledge and to develop communicative proficiency, more skill, and compete in the international professional market. Higher education is becoming more varied due to different cultural and educational backgrounds of foreign students (Hewitt, 2002). Stacy (1999) suggested that education providers should identify the needs and expectations of

international students from different academic and cultural backgrounds, and efficiently aid them to meet their goals. International students studying abroad experience a lot of difficulties in their academic journey to be rationally efficient in their new learning environment (Carol & Ryan, 2005). They have to face different social and cultural norms and values from the ones they know already, different methods of teaching and learning, different beliefs, and practice about participation and performance.

Studies into international students' experiences are not new. Studies in many universities on international students' experience show that foreign students go through different kinds of challenges during their stay. This clearly states that there are many identified influences on the education and socio-cultural experiences of international students. According to Steel (2008) in a study stated that many Asian students undergo stress and adjustment difficulties during their initial enrolment hence, counselling plays an important role. Social activities and working closely with other students and international orientation programs are regarded as the most important element within the social construct that influences student satisfaction.

1.1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

The purpose of the study is to investigate the learning experiences of foreign students in a Chinese University. In the review of relevant literature, it was found that several studies on student learning experiences, engagement, and adjustment have been conducted in many countries (Keup & Barefoot, 2005) whereas in China, very few studies have investigated the learning experiences of foreign students in a Chinese University. It is therefore essential for a very systematic empirical study on international students learning experiences in a Chinese University. The study will add to knowledge the existing policies and limited literature that aimed at addressing foreign students' learning experiences.

Three research questions guide the present study: (1) What are the academic experiences of foreign students in BIFT? (2) What are the social learning experiences of foreign students in BIFT? And (3) What challenges do you face as an international student?

In answering these research questions, this study aims to provide stakeholders with a better insight into the international students' learning experiences in a Chinese University. It is only when there is a deeper understanding, which will allow the stakeholders to find a better solution to cater for the needs of foreign students in a positive and healthy way for them to be successful in attaining their educational goals. The findings of this research will assist foreign students to adapt to the Chinese universities' educational environment and improve the services and academic programs Chinese universities provide to international learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 Learning experiences

Many researchers have emphasized studies about international students' learning experiences (Bamford, et al., 2002; Kiley, 2003). These learning experiences of foreign students in their host countries usually include characteristics that are cultural, psychological, social, and academic adaptation (Edwards & Ran, 2006; Hewitt, 2002). Despite the worldwide report of the difficulties foreign students go through, the majority of the foreign students accept to adapt to their cultural and institutional demands. According to Anderson (1994), adjustment is a vital and mutual process that occurs between the person and the environment and is geared towards the attainment of the fit between the two. Therefore, academic adjustment is a fit of a learner in the academic environment. Several researchers see academic adjustment as a challenging process that has an influence on all university students (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan, 1991). Galloway & Jenkins (2009) suggested that language is regarded as one of the important issues in academic encumbering smooth adaptation for international students. Language barrier has been reported by many researchers who suggested that difficulties with language vary from stress from language and communication issues, fear of being misunderstood, cultural differences, competent in a local language, ability to participate and contribute in class discussions (Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010; Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; AL-Bustan, & Lamees, 2009; Steel et al., 2008). This difficulty affects the way some international students interact with host countries and their teachers. Also, teaching methods and styles that are unfamiliar to international students may be a source of the problem (Andrade, 2006, Zhai, 2002).

2.1 International students' negative learning experiences

According to Ryan (2011), both the nation and university well-being are endangered due to a range of teaching and learning issues that influence foreign students' learning experiences and are a problem for both staff and students. The studies conducted on foreign students' learning experiences have come up with several negative factors influencing international students learning in their host country. Campbell and Li (2008) conducted a study on Asian students in a university at New Zealand. They suggested that language barriers, cultural differences due to cultural communication difficulties, unknown patterns of classroom interactions, lack of knowledge of academic standards and

procedures, insufficient learning support, difficulties in making friends with domestic students, and the lack of a sense of belongingness were the several challenges the Asian students experienced. According to Campbell and Li (2008), all these difficulties integrate to influence the Asian students' levels of satisfaction and understanding with their learning experiences in the university.

According to Menzies and Baron (2014), language barriers and culture shock were the challenges foreign students experienced. Hughes (2013) conducted a study on foreign students' use of online information resources for study purposes in Australian universities. He suggested that students were encountering difficulties of unfamiliarity and unhappiness associated with the information-learning environment at their host university, academic practices including the use of information resources, academic procedures like referencing and avoiding plagiarism, gaining access to academic online materials and English language. International students undergo financial difficulties, food problems, loneliness, language difficulties, introduction to new pedagogies and helplessness, and lack of a sense of belongingness (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010).

According to Leask (2009), the lack of formal and informal curricular to enhance communications between home and foreign students, international students' experiences/difficulties in adjusting to the school culture affect their learning. Also, Tarry (2011) suggested that Thai students encountered challenges with language, changes in attitude, and culture shock while studying at a British university. According to Eaves (2011), cultural differences in western and non-western learning methods influence the learning behaviors or process of foreign students in western countries. Brown and Holloway (2008) postulated that the difficulties and anxiety encountered by international students are related to culture shock, homesickness, sleeplessness, tearfulness, loneliness, fear, racial discrimination, unfairness, disorientation, and depression, which negatively affect their academic performance. The various studies reviewed above show that international students are subject to have different challenges that affect their experiences of learning as they struggle to endure in their host countries.

2.3 International students' positive learning experiences

According to Gu et al. (2010), international students are seen as effective participants rather than victims/sufferers (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008) in their search to change their identity, adjust, improve and attain their academic/educational goals. Besides, as the foreign students adapt to different educational environments, cultures, and society they began encountering improved knowledge, self-consciousness, skills, and attitudes, which allow them to perform efficiently within both their host and home countries (Gu et al., 2010). Pence and Macgillivray (2008) postulated that international students go through a change in their professional and personal life such as increased confidence; this enables them to appreciate and respect people and their culture. Some researchers have revealed that foreign students' capability to adapt to their cultural transition comes from the level of care and support they get from their colleagues (international students) and teachers in their host environment. Arkoudis and Tran (2010) suggested that teachers must have consistent communication with their international students to make new understanding and practices within their learning environment. Also, international students perceive the care and support they acquire from their teachers as essential in assisting them to achieve their educational goals (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). Borg and Cefai (2014) affirm that foreign students studying in Malta were able to adapt to their academic life due to the care and support they got from their teachers.

According to Montgomery and McDowell (2009), international students have a social network in which they share their experiences and motivation to succeed as well as assisting each other academically, socially, and to some extent emotionally as an international community. Tran (2008) suggested that international students see the one on one discussions with their teachers, the response on their assignments, and communication with their teachers as vital and a means of increasing their academic knowledge. Montgomery (2010) postulated that international students communicating well with people of different cultural and social backgrounds is regarded to be effective in adjusting to their social life. According to Barnes (2011), international students' communicating and engaging with different students with varied thoughts and views boosts their academic motivation, engagement, and achievement. Barnes (2011), Brown and Holloway (2008) suggested that socializing with diverse people helps international students to have a pleasurable sense of belonging.

According to Lillyman and Bennett (2014), the share of knowledge, cultural understanding, and participating in joint research and development with the assistance and understanding of the university, academic, local students, and themselves were the positive learning experiences of international students.

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of foreign students' learning experiences



The conceptual map describes the learning experiences of foreign students. The learning experiences consist of three parts: social and academic experiences as well as the challenges. There are several factors international students experience when they seek to further their studies abroad. Some of the issues related to social experiences include the lack of social support, difficulties making friends with domestic students, etc. Also, language barrier, insufficient learning support, unfamiliar teaching styles, and methods among others were the academic experiences the foreign students go through. In relation to the challenges, lack of a sense of belonging, cultural differences, financial difficulties, food problems, loneliness, etc. were outlined.

3. METHOD:

The researchers adopted the phenomenology research as the guiding methodological framework. This approach allowed participants to share stories, freely speak, and thoughtfully describe their experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012).

The population included all international students’ in Beijing Institute of Fashion and Technology (BIFT), Beijing, China, and the target population were all male and female international students’. The sample was selected using convenient sample method. The study respondents consist of six (5) students (2 males and 3 females).

The researchers used interviews as their research instrument. The researchers structure informal face-to-face interviews with the sampled students. The researchers ensured their approval and schedule for an interview. The interview lasted for approximately 30 minutes. All interviewees were recorded per their approval and transcribed. The interview focused on issues such as students’ academic experiences, social experiences, and challenges students’ face in studying in China.

The researchers visited the respondents in their school to conduct the interview. The researchers spent a day collecting the data, and participants spent on the average thirty minutes in responding to the questions. Informed consent was sought from the participants to participate in the study and can withdraw at any time. Ethical considerations, principles, and the rights of individuals and institutions were strictly taken into consideration and not compromised. Respondents were assured of confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy of their responses and that information were not divulged or used for anything else except for the study.

The data collected through interviews were transcribed into narratives forms.

Table 1

A profile of the study participants

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Nationality	Degree	Area of specialization
A	M	23	Ukraine	Master’s	Modeling
B	F	24	Hungary	Master’s	Photography
C	F	25	Ukraine	Master’s	Photography
D	F	30	Nigeria	Master’s	Modeling
E	M	31	Ghana	Master’s	Chinese language and culture

Source: Fieldwork

Table 1 shows the profile of the interviewed participants. Five students (three females and two males) from BIFT were interviewed to get a clear understanding of their experiences in the university. All the respondents are pursuing a master's degree. Their ages ranged from 23 to 31. Two of the respondents are majoring in modeling, two majoring in photography, and one majoring in Chinese language and culture. In regards to how long the participants have been studying in BIFT, participant A, B, C, D, and E has been studying for a year, more than two years, three years, a year and three years respectively.

4. RESULTS:

The analysis of data revealed the academic and social experiences as well as the challenges international students' face in studying in a Chinese University.

4.1 Academic experiences

On issues regarding the experiences that influence students' learning on campus, the following were expressed:

Participant A suggested:

"I like this university because I feel Chinese discipline everywhere. They have some rules and everybody must keep those rules. It is a good way that will help you to study. It feels abnormal without any discipline. This has helped me to make good grades."

Participant B:

"Teachers are very supportive and this positively influences me".

Participant C:

"The experiences that influence my learning in this university are teachers. From the beginning, I already had an interest in the Chinese language but I think due to them I had more interest and every time we come to class, they always motivate us. They make the class interesting. They are patient in teaching us the language."

Participant D:

"One on one teaching with my teachers and you will be able to tell them some of your challenges and they will help you out and also the technology, the internet has been very friendly compared to my country. You can get most of your work done. It is quite interesting."

Participant E:

"The learning environment is conducive which will enhance your learning capabilities and also it is safe for foreigners. You could get to practice your Chinese with some of the students here because most of the students here are Chinese, they are friendly, and you could engage them to be able to understand what their cultures are. Moreover, the teachers are also very helpful when in need and you approach them, they can help you and that is good and it influences my learning on campus."

In relation to what is it like to study at this university, the following responses were given.

Participants A, B, and D suggested:

"The internet is very good, excellent. The library is cool. You can get most of the materials. The library and the internet are friendly."

Participants C and E:

"The resources are very of a high standard like the lecture theatre, the library, and also the WIFI on campus give you access to so much information. You could just walk into the library and read books to know about the cultures of China, which could enhance your insight. That has been very helpful."

On issues relating to the ways, students feel the experiences have improved their learning, the following statements were outlined.

Participants A and C stated:

"I enjoy the classes at this university and the teachers always answer our questions in class. The teachers are so kind to us and I am very grateful. I say a very big thank you to the teachers at this university."

Participant B, D and E:

"It has improved the way I think, my Intelligent Quotient (IQ) has developed so well and also my perspective towards life has changed. It has opened my mind."

In relation to the ways students feel the experiences fell short in helping their learning, the respondents stated the following

Participant B:

"Classroom cleanliness and the equipment should be well organized."

Participants A and C:

"The atmosphere has been a disadvantage because I have been learning the Chinese language for three years and I never feel it."

Participants D and E:

“The language barrier makes it unable to communicate or interact with colleagues to get more materials to study.”

Concerning the learning resources students use and helpful towards their learning, the statements below were given by the respondents.

Participant A:

“The university provides us with the best materials in our learning.”

Participants B and C:

“I think students should watch Chinese movies or Chinese programs. I do not do that often but when I do I can learn some new characters.”

Participants D and E:

“I use a journal, I download most of the journals on the internet. I hardly use the textbooks. Past journals, the newspaper then also what is going on around the world.”

On issues regarding the resources that the university could provide to make it easier for students learning, all the participants stated:

“There could be many trips for us to go into rural areas to dialogue with people with different intonation of the language since we are just mainly learning about what is being taught in Beijing. I think once or twice a year will be great. Also, more foreigners are not allowed to be on campus so interacting with students can be done only when you are on campus within the day.”

In relation to the differences between students’, home country studies as compared to studying in China, the following were stated.

Participant B:

“Studying in Hungary is more matured than here at the university level. At times you do not know when to have class because things are too random here.”

Participants A and C:

“This university is more serious than in my country. In Ukraine, skipping classes is not important but you need to pass the exam whilst in China, attending class matters and teachers give scores to class attendance. It is more difficult than in my country.”

Participant D:

“The issue of money is number one in my country. If you do not have ‘connections’, you are on your own. You need to bribe somebody before you will be able to get admission and learn. Also, the infrastructure is so bad. We do not have tables and chairs. People stand while class is ongoing. A whole of crazy world over there. Again, before you can get in touch with a teacher, they feel so pompous, they feel like they are the Almighty but here you can even see your teacher one on one, you talk with them. They are so friendly and accommodating compared to my home country.”

Participant E:

“In my home country, the libraries are not really open up to us as in here it is opened 24 hours and also equipped with books and other resources. Internet access to do research, able to interact with people through the internet is the main problem in my country but in China and this noble university, it is really good, you can get access to the WIFI anytime and also getting access to the teachers is much easier compared to my country.”

4.2 Social experiences

On issues regarding social experiences, all the participants agreed they do participate in social activities on campus. The following are the responses of the respondents regarding the social activities they participated as well as the ones organized by the university for international students.

Participant A stated:

“I go to the gym and this keeps me in a good shape. I took part in a fresher’s week at the university. It was interesting and a good show. I also took part in a sports competition between my school and other schools in Beijing. I also observed a comedy show organized by the school.”

Participant B:

“I got the chance to socialize with people from different countries. It is a great experience but I do not really go out. I participated in the trip to the Great Wall organized by the university.”

Participant C:

“The university organized an international exhibition show for foreign students. This helped me to know many countries as well as the food and music. I also participated in the fresher’s modeling week as a model.”

Participant D:

“The university organizes a lot of sports, football games, basketball, volleyball, gym class. There is also a dance group and modeling. Anyone you fit in, it is always free. The university also organized a trip to the Great Wall and horticulture. It was very interesting.”

Participant E:

“I have been able to meet people of different backgrounds and cultures. It has given me an insight into what the other part of the world looks like. I participate in games as in Tag of peace between various departments. The activities organized by the university are the Tag of peace, athletics, basketball, and cultural exhibition where every country demonstrate their ethnicity.”

4.3 Challenges

Concerning students’ challenges, the respondents outlined the following.

Participant A:

“The language is one of the challenges I experience. My Chinese speaking is low and it makes it difficult to communicate. It took me some time to be able to eat Chinese food.”

Participant B:

“Writing your thesis in Chinese is a challenge. Teachers are Chinese with different culture and when it comes to communication becomes challenging.”

Participant C:

“The language was so difficult for me to study in the beginning.”

Participant D:

“My major challenge is just the language barrier. At least if 90% or 80% of Chinese people can speak English, it might be better but it is like 5% of them and the 5% are also shy to speak the English language and their food is also a challenge. I have a Chinese translator application on my phone and that has been helping me.”

Participant E:

“Studying in China or the language as a whole is tough because you need to practice more often and since we are not on campus for Chinese students to assess us, it becomes a tough work. Studying here is somehow expensive, living outside campus is expensive and the harsh weather condition of Beijing is so dramatic. It could blow you away. These affect my study at this university.”

5. DISCUSSION:

5.1 Academic experiences

People travel from their home countries to different parts of the world to study. In studying in their choice of school, they go through difficulties ranging from academic to social, etc. Even though the universities are equipped with facilities, most of the international students find it difficult to adapt whereas others easily fit in. The most important thing international students must take note of is the culture, language, and how they can blend easily with the locals. In relation to the experiences that influence students’ learning on campus, participants B, C, D, and E suggested that teachers have been supportive and this has influenced their learning. This implies that the support students get from teachers has an impact on their learning. This is in support of what Arkoudis and Tran (2007) suggested that teachers must have consistent communication with their international students to make new understanding and practices within their learning environment. Besides, international students perceive the care and support they acquire from their teachers as essential in assisting them to achieve their educational goals (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010). Borg and Cefai (2014) affirm that international students studying in Malta were able to adapt to their academic life due to the care and support they got from their teachers.

Again, the study revealed that the learning resources international students get access to have been helpful in their learning. This is in line with what Campbell and Li (2008) suggested that international students’ experience a conducive learning environment, which positively influences their learning. Also, Campbell and Li (2008) findings on Asian students pointed out that they had an overall satisfaction with their learning experiences at their university due to the ICT facilities, educational quality, program offering, and learning support that improved their learning. This resonates with the research findings.

5.2 Social experiences

International students from all parts of the world meet together in a chosen university outside their home countries to study. With different cultures, they try to understand each other, and all try to adapt to the environment. Most universities organize social activities to engage international students for them to better relate well with each other and respect each other’s culture as well as the custom of the university and the country at large. These activities somewhat bring international students and locals together. All the participants stated that they engaged in the activities organized by the university (trip to the Great Wall, international exhibition show, Fresher’s week modeling, etc.).

Participants B, C, and E stated that the activities organized by the university have allowed them to meet people from different countries with different backgrounds and cultures. This states that the activities bring international students together and make them aware of the various cultures of their fellow students. This supports what Montgomery (2010) postulated that international students communicating well with people of different cultural and social backgrounds is regarded to be effective in adjusting to their social life. Also, according to Barnes (2011), international students' communicating and engaging with different students with varied thoughts and views boosts their academic motivation, engagement, and achievement. In accordance with Barnes (2011), Brown and Holloway (2008) suggested that socializing with diverse people helps international students to have a pleasurable sense of belonging.

Again, participants A, D, and E suggested that the university organize sports activities including football games, basketball, volleyball; gym class, dance group, and tag of peace. This implies international students adjust to the new environment when they fully participate in the social activities organized by the university. This is in support of what Bronfenbrenner and Morrison (2007) postulated that international students are regarded as active agents in the environment.

5.3 Challenges

A language is an important tool as far as communication is concerned. It becomes difficult if an individual in a foreign land cannot interact with the locals. Students feel so excited when traveling to a different country to pursue their education. On their arrival, they experience difficulties that make them unable to adjust to the environment. It is important to note that the culture, food, and language is very essential to every foreigner and as such must be taken into consideration. These have been the concern to most international students irrespective of the countries they travel to apart from their home countries. All the participants stated that the language is the major challenge. Besides, participants A and D suggested food as a challenge. This implies that the respondents are unable to communicate with the citizens and some find it difficult to eat the food thereby making their living in China unbearable. This is in line with what Menzies and Baron (2014) postulated that language barriers and culture shock were the challenges international students experienced. Galloway & Jenkins (2005) suggested that language is regarded as one of the important issues in academic encumbering smooth adaptation for international students. Language barrier has been reported by many researchers who suggested that difficulties with language vary from stress from language and communication issues, fear of being misunderstood, cultural differences, competent in a local language, ability to participate and contribute in class discussions (Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2010; Hellsten & Prescott, 2000; Zhang & Bruton, 2007; AL-Bustan, Ahmed & Lamees, 2008; Steel, 2008).

5.4 Limitations

The researchers encountered the difficulty of acquiring data for the study. When we got to the university, we realized the majority of the international students were living outside the campus and most of them were gone since they were done with their classes for the day. The remaining students were also doing a photoshoot show and did not get time for us. However, upon several appeals and persuasion, the researchers were able to get the results of some sampled students. This put a lot of stress on the researchers and it unduly delayed the work. With this limitation notwithstanding, the findings of the study were not compromised.

6. CONCLUSION:

Based on the research findings and results, the researchers categorically state that the study has answered the research question one about students' academic experiences and that suggests to us that the findings have confirmed the research questions postulated. The study revealed that the support from teachers, access to resources to enhance students' learning, and engaging in social activities have been beneficial to international students. Also, language barrier and food were the difficulties international students' encountered. This confirmed that international students go through a lot of challenges when pursuing their education in a country far away from their home country.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS :

The following recommendations were made based on the research findings.

- Stakeholders should note that the needs of international students are essential thereby ensuring they have a pleasant stay on campus in attaining their educational goals.
- The university's administration/management must provide international students with the needed learning resources to enhance their learning on campus.
- The university's administration/management must organize trips for international students studying in Chinese language to go to the rural areas to communicate with the locals. This will allow them to know the different intonation of the language.

- The university's administration/management must organize social activities or trips more often (say at least once in every semester) for international students. This will aid them to communicate freely with other nationals.
- Teachers must ensure a strong teacher-student relationship.
- The university's administration/management must make it compulsory for every international student to learn an intensive Chinese language course for a year before they start with their program of study. If students are fluent in the language, it will make their living conditions enjoyable.

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