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# SOUTH KOREA'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY DURING COVID-19 AND IMPACTS OF ONLINE LEARNING: A CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS OF PAKISTANI AND AFRICAN STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

*Iffat Tahira*[*]

**Abstract**

*The purpose of this study is to assess the effects of South Korea's excellent Information Technology infrastructure on students learning in online classes amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey was administered on Pakistani and African (N=156) students to investigate their perceptions regarding new paradigm shift towards online learning through correlational and cross-sectional study design. Results show a significant difference between African and Pakistani students on mean scores of teaching mode and learning environment in online classes in the year 2020; t (156) = -5.353, p < .001); indicated an insignificant difference between Pakistani and African Students on mean scores of personal characteristics and factors towards online classes; t (156) =-.716, p-value .095. According to hierarchical regression, the country of the respondents emerged as the strong predictor of attitude towards online teaching that accounted for 16 % of the variance in total attitude towards online teaching, β =.38, t = 5.39, ***p < .001. Personal attributes also emerged as a significant predictor for attitude towards online teaching, β =.30, t = 4.30, ***p < .001 which accounted for 9 % variance in the attitude towards online teaching.*

**Keywords:** *Online classes, Cultural diplomacy, E-learning, Students, Issues.*

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural diplomacy is one aspect of international relations, as one of the 'soft' features of living together on earth, rather than the "hard' stuff of laws and treaties, multilateral organizations, and military

[*]Hanyang University, Republic of Korea Email: iffattahira@gmail.com

capability" (Kirsten, Rachel, John, & Samuel, 2007). The increasing significance of cultural diplomacy now, along with the broad concept of public diplomacy is considered in recent developments through joint research initiatives, education, and mutual cooperation. Taking into consideration, "international cultural activity has not attracted the kind of cross-government structural experiments that exist in the fields of science and education (Kirsten, Rachel, John, & Samuel, 2007). However, cultural institutions work to build collaboration in research initiatives, education programmes, and joint projects offered by advanced countries.

In recent times, the increasing importance of cultural diplomacy is obvious through the academic exchange, joint research projects, and development cooperation programmes. International education can cultivate public diplomacy among nations. As an education hub, South Korea (hereafter Korea) is a destination for international students for the last few years. The global diaspora plays a crucial soft role in increasing the nation's soft power. The outbreak of COVID-19 has left major impact on several aspects of lifestyles and disrupted teaching and learning in the education sector around the world.

A paradigm shift has been seen in the education sector through the rapid transition to emergency remote teaching. It has compelled countries to change the approaches in the education sector. For the continuous academic endeavours amid pandemic, universities in Korea shifted in-person classes to online teaching to ensure social distancing. Based on these shifts, the unprecedented situation of coronavirus in Korea also begot universities to shift in-person teaching decision to avert pandemic. By considering students' health on priority and ensuring effective remote teaching, the Korean government has taken steps to introduce online classes in the education sector. Instructors and tutors were directed to organise their classes via an online mode of teaching. Numerous institutions and instructors caught greatly unprepared for the implementation of online teaching.

## CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND THE PROJECTION OF SOFT POWER

According to Cull, cultural diplomacy is "an actor's attempt to manage the international environment through making its cultural resources and achievements known overseas and/or facilitating cultural transmission abroad" (Cull, 2009). Cultural diplomacy comes from two premises; first, "good relations can take root in the fertile ground of understanding and respect, and; second, cultural diplomacy rests on the assumption that art, language, and education are among the most significant entry points into a culture" (Cooper, Heine, & Thakur, 2013). In this context, cultural and educational exchanges have broad and long-lasting impact upon human beings, institutions, and communities. Cultural and educational exchanges are deemed as valuable to those groups engaged as they share 'experiential learning in the process and advance human understanding' (Chou & Spangler, 2018). From this perspective, cultural events, exchange programmes, broadcasting, teaching a country's language, and culture are considered tools of soft power indirectly (Vuving, 2007, p. 13). In this respect, international students play an instrumental role and become informal ambassadors for the host country when they go back to their origin country.

International education can cultivate public diplomacy among nations. Universities are increasing their pivotal role in regard to 'global competition among universities' as described by Joseph Nye through the projection of soft power, "political strategy used to foster appreciation and acceptance of a nation's culture, values, and ideas in contrast to the more direct and tangible measures that hard power compasses" (Stetar, Coppla, Guo, Nabiyeva, & Ismailov, 2010). Within this framework, the emergence of several education hubs in Asia and the Middle East has a particular focus on cross-border tertiary education in the last few years. Jack (2015) believes, through considerable strategies, policy planning, and significant financial resources, the objective of these hubs is to transform a state or city

into an illustrious destination for education, research activities, and to build a collaborative relationship. Education hubs seek to use influence across the world and engage the global actors to move the knowledge economy by attracting in cultural diplomacy. As an education hub, Korea has become a destination for international students for the last few years. The global diaspora makes an important contribution to revenue generation, economic growth, technical and scientific research in the host country. Hughes (2019) explains that international students bring global vistas and also help to establish continuing business relations, trade, and economic benefits. They play a crucial soft role in increasing the nation's soft power when they return to their home country and become informal ambassadors.

Against this background, Korea is developing into a globally recognised 'Asian powerhouse in the fields of technology, education, and tourism.' This Asian Tiger's capital Seoul has ranked among the top ten international students cities around the world. In 2017, about 123,000 international students studied in Korea, and the government has focused on setting its target higher, with an objective of 200,000 international students by 2023. In Korea, Foreign residents have ranked at top 2.5 million by an increase of about 7 percent in 2019. Ministry of Justice recorded over 2.5 million (2,524,656) foreign population which "accounts for 4.9 percent of the total Korean population, it 51.64 million as of 2018." The academic world categorises a nation as a multicultural society by calculating its foreign population over 5 percent. By the evaluation, Korea shows to be on the "threshold of becoming a multicultural society." International students studying in Korea increased by 12.1 percent to 180,131 (Yonhap News Agency, 2020) include students from China, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Africa, Pakistan, the Philippines, US, Bangladesh, and many other countries. Pakistani students account for 2000 (Abrar, 2019), while African students 1.7% of all international students studying in Korean educational institutes (Jung, 2020).

## IMPLEMENTATION OF ONLINE TEACHING AMID PANDEMIC IN KOREA

The continuous movement of human beings around the world makes a pandemic taking its toll to resist. The outbreak of COVID-19 reported the first confirmed case of infected people in Wuhan, China. (Tahira, 2020; Osler, 2020; Family 2020). Dighe, Cattarino, and Riley (2020) note that Korea was one of the first states to be affected by coronavirus. The unprecedented world health crisis has reported some 184,573,435 confirmed cases and 3,993,597 deaths over the world (World Meter, 2021). The sudden epidemic has affected everyone's life, including teachers, students, employers, workers, parents, and children. Work from home or remote working became important in many countries. The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted teaching and learning in educational institutions. For the continuous academic endeavours, universities in Korea implemented an online learning mode of teaching to ensure social distancing. Though Korea's excellent internet infrastructure proves relatively smooth, to transitioning in-person class to online classes. However, fewer students have opined about their negative experiences with this sudden paradigm Kalenzi, Back, and Yim (2020).

Online learning systems are recognised as Web-based software for distributing, tracking, and managing courses over the net. It requires the adoption of advanced technology to administer, design, deliver the learning materials, and provide two-way communication between learners and instructors. E-learning platforms include blackboards, discussion forums, polls, quizzes, chat rooms to share course contents by students and teachers. These ways can be seen as productive and convenient ways to gain learning purposes (Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj & Sethi, 2020). Amid COVID-19, online education is a challenge for students and instructors around the globe and Korea is no exception in this case. A well-structured online mode of teaching can provide improved and effective student learning outcomes relative to a classroom-based mode of teaching (Education

Endowment Foundation, 2020) in few cases. The success of online classes can also be measured by analysing a student's ability of virtual learning (Sarwar, Akhtar, Naeem, Khan, & Waraich, 2020). Price (2020) defines that macro Information Technology (IT) infrastructure is already practiced in Korea to online learning. At least half a dozen digital universities record lectures in classes and use the institute's online system to term papers and grade students.

Korea's 'impressive IT infrastructure and government's proactive steps' to a rapid transition to online classes do not express to considerable online classes acceptance. As Kalenzi, Back, and Yim, (2020) reveal the students' experiences and their dissatisfaction regarding remote classes and indicated many students considered taking a leave of absence in their next semester. Students cite a lack of technical skills to study in e-learning environments. The majority of students do not have the experience to participate in online classes. Universities conducted trials before switching in-person classes to online classes, shared videos to make familiar with the system, and computer-supported learning to students. These could enable students to gain a better understanding of the development of online classes and effective learning. In countries that are not more advanced in technology support learning systems like Pakistan and African states; students benefited from a trial run and it also helped them to develop their learning skills to participate in online classes.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A total of 156 international students (78 Pakistani + 78 African) in Korea participated in the study.

The survey was conducted on international students from Pakistan and Africa studying in Korea to analyze their perceptions in online classes during the year 2020. The correlational and cross-sectional research design was used for the present study. The survey was conducted using Google forms and a questionnaire consisting of 23 questions was circulated online among students. Students from

different disciplines participated in the survey including medical science, engineering, IT, arts and humanities, social science, and Korean language course. Undergraduate, masters, MS leading to Ph.D., graduate, Korean language course students responded to the survey.

The survey questionnaire was prepared using Google Forms. Digital media forums (media and email) were used to disseminate the questionnaire. The questionnaire was pretested by using a sample of master and graduate students who participated in online classes. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was tested by using Cronbach's Alpha. An acceptable level of internal consistency of the questionnaire was found ($\alpha$= .52) for the first variable, "online teaching mode and learning environment". An acceptable level of internal consistency ($\alpha$ = .51) was seen in the second variable, "students' personal characteristics and factors towards online learning". The survey was based on three parts. In the first part, students were asked regarding their demographic information. In the second part, survey respondents expressed their opinion about online verses in-person teaching mode and learning environment in Korea. In the third part, students were responded about personal characteristics and factors in online learning in the year 2020. A five-point Likert scale was used in the second and third part of the survey to assess the Pakistani and African students' perspectives about online learning in Korea amid the COVID-19.

**Data Analysis**

To organise and analyze the data, Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) version 26 was used. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the characteristics of demographic variables and the study variables. An Independent t-test was used to find the differences between Pakistani and African students on their mean score of online systems, learning environment in Korea, and students' personal characteristics and factors involved in online learning. An

Independent t-test was used to find the differences between male and female on their mean score of online systems, learning environment in Korea, and students' personal characteristics and factors involved in online learning. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed for predicting attitude towards online teaching while using the country of the respondents and personal attributes of the respondents as predictors.

**Results**

The survey results are discussed into three parts; first, a cross-case analysis of Pakistani and African students' perspective about remote classes; second, analysis of Pakistani and African students separately, and third, analysis of Male and Female students separately. A sample size of 156 participants (78 Pakistani + 78 African) was collected. Collective results for both populations presented in this study defined the overall perception of international students towards the online learning system in Korea. Separate results for each population were presented to understand the perception of Pakistani and African students.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the sample (*N*=156)

| Variables | Category | n | percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | Male | 125 | 80 |
| | Female | 31 | 20 |
| Age (in years) | Less than 20 | 3 | 02 |
| | 21-30 | 76 | 48.7 |
| | 31-40 | 77 | 49.3 |
| Current Student Status | Undergraduate | 3 | 02 |
| | Master | 59 | 38 |
| | MS leading to PhD | 26 | 16.7 |
| | PhD | 68 | 43.3 |
| Major | Medical Science | 10 | 06 |
| | Engineering | 104 | 67 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Information Technology | 26 11 | 17 07 |
| | Humanities and Arts | 4 1 | 2.5 .5 |
| | Social Science | | |
| | KoreanLanguage Course | | |
| Origin of Country/ Continent | Pakistan | 78 | 50 |
| | Africa | 78 | 50 |
| Stay in Korea (in years) | One | 39 | 25 |
| | Two | 66 | 42 |
| | Three | 33 | 21 |
| | Four | 9 | 06 |
| | More than Four | 9 | 06 |

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the study sample. Half of the sample was based on Pakistani nationals, whereas 50 percent of the sample was African nationals, residing in Korea. The majority of the sample was male students (80 percent) and only 20 percent sample comprised of female students. A majority of students (67 percent) in the major field of engineering responded relative to medical science (6 percent), IT (17 percent), humanities and arts (7 percent), social science (2.5 percent), and Korean language course (.5 percent). The attrition rate in the engineering field indicated higher than for other majors. In terms of current student status, Undergraduate were 2 percent, Master 38 percent, MS leading to PhD 16.7 percent, and PhD 43.3 percent. With regards to age, 48.7 percent of participants fell within the 21-30 years of age and 49.3 percent within 31-40 years of age, and 2 percent of participants less than 20 of age. The length of stay indicated that 25 percent participants stay was one year, 42 percent of participants stay two years, 21 percent participants stay three years, 6 percent participants stay four years, and 6 percent of participants stay more than four years.

Table 2: Opinion for Online versus in-person teaching mode and learning environment (*N*=156)

| Questions | Strongly Disagree *n* (%) | Disagree *n* (%) | Neutral *n* (%) | Agree *n* (%) | Strongly Agree *n* (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Online classes are more effective relative to in-person classes | 54 (35) | 64(41) | 22(14) | 11(07) | 5(03) |
| My teacher is good at teaching in online classes | 3 (02) | 9 (06) | 28(18) | 58(37) | 58(37) |
| My teacher helps/guides me to learn digital skills of online classes | 1(.6) | 9(06) | 20(13) | 53(34) | 73(46.4) |
| I interact less with teacher during online classes | 45 (29) | 87(56) | 13(08) | 10(6.5) | 1(0.5) |
| Online classes are more convenient relative to in-person classes | 8(05) | 24(15) | 82(53) | 28(18) | 14(09) |
| Online classes affect academic performance relative to in-person classes | 2 (01) | 9(06) | 100(64) | 30(19) | 15(10) |
| My learning experience remains high in online classes relative to in-person classes | 20(13) | 101(65) | 20(13) | 8(05) | 7(04) |
| Online classes are less organized than classroom based in my | 87(56) | 35(22) | 21(14) | 10(06) | 3(02) |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| institute | | | | | |
| Online classes are termed as a better way to save time | 2(01) | 8(05) | 21(14) | 49(31) | 76(49) |
| I face many technical problems that impede my learning in online classes | 95(61) | 26(17) | 17(11) | 14(9) | 4(02) |
| It is difficult for me to understand the material in online classes | 22 (14) | 101(65) | 17(11) | 9(06) | 7(04) |
| I learn less from my peers in online classes | 38(24.5) | 88(56.5) | 19(12) | 11(07) | 00 |

Table 2 shows, 41 percent of students disagreed that online classes are more effective relative to in-person classes. 37 percent of students agreed, and additionally, 37 percent of students strongly agreed that they are satisfied with the teacher/instructor mode of teaching. However, 46.4 percent students strongly agreed that teacher helps students to learn digital skills of online classes. Majority of participants 56 percent voiced disagreement about their less interaction with the teacher during online classes. The vast majority of respondents 65 percent of students disagreed that their learning experience remains high in online classes relative to in-person classes. 56 percent of students strongly disagreed that online classes are less organized than classroom-based in their institutes. 49 percent strongly agreed that online classes are termed as a better way to save time. A number of 61 percent of students strongly disagreed that they face many technical problems that impede their learning in online classes. Most students 65 percent strongly disagreed that it is difficult for them to understand the material. Whereas, 56.5 percent of students disagreed that they learn less from their peers in online classes.

Table 3: The number and the percentages of responses on five-point Likert scale about the opinion for Personal attributes and factors in online classes (*N*=156)

| Questions | Strongly Disagree *n* (%) | Disagree *n* (%) | Neutral *n* (%) | Agree *n* (%) | Strongly Agree *n* (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| It is difficult to participate in online classes due to lack of computer skills | 3(02) | 16(10) | 75(48) | 37(24) | 25(16) |
| I participated effectively in a discussion in online classes relative to in-person classes | 74(47) | 40(26) | 23(15) | 13(08) | 6(04) |
| Fewer factors interfere with my ability to grasp and follow in online classes | 37(24) | 78(49) | 31(20) | 7(04) | 5(03) |
| I get distracted in online classes | 73(47) | 36(23) | 22(14) | 14(09) | 11(07) |
| I feel a few interruptions by classmates in online classes | 60(39) | 41(26) | 27(17) | 21(14) | 7(04) |
| I get less anxious in online classes | 3(02) | 11(07) | 27(17) | 44(28) | 71(46) |
| It is difficult to concentrate in online classes | 17(11) | 36(23) | 27(17) | 56(36) | 20(13) |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I am idle and less interested in online classes | 53(34) | 44(28) | 35(22) | 21(14) | 3(02) |
| I have a lasting impact on my educational achievement due to online classes | 10(06) | 14(09) | 32(20) | 54(35) | 46(30) |
| I am not motivated to class discussion in online classes | 23(15) | 33(21) | 33(21) | 54(35) | 13(08) |
| I will opt to participate in an online class if I give the choice of a hybrid class | 72(46) | 24(15) | 28(18) | 23(15) | 9(06) |

Table 3 shows, 47 percent students strongly disagreed that they participated effectively in a discussion in online classes relative to in-person classes. A number of 49 percent respondents disagreed that fewer factors interfere with my ability to grasp and follow. While 47 percent of students disagreed that they get distracted in online classes. The majority of 39 percent of students strongly disagreed that they feel a few interruptions by classmates. The vast majority of the students 46 percent strongly agreed that they get less anxious in online classes. Respondents 36 percent agreed that it is difficult to concentrate in online classes. Participants 34 percent strongly disagreed that they are idle and less interested. A number of 35 percent of students agreed that they have a lasting impact on their educational achievement due to online classes. The same number of participants agreed that they are not motivated to class discussion. Most students 46 percent strongly disagreed that they will opt to participate in an online class if they are given the choice of hybrid class.

Table 4: Mean scores about Online versus in-person teaching mode and learning environment; and students' personal attributes and factors in online classes

| Variables | Pakistani Students (*n*=78) | | African Students (*n*=78) | | | | 95% *CI* | | Cohen's *d* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *T* | *p* | *LL* | *UL* | |
| Online verses in-person teaching mode and learning environment | 41.56 | 5.20 | 45.16 | 2.87 | -5.35 | <.001*** | -4.93 | -2.27 | .86 |
| Personal attributes and factors in online classes | 35.48 | 4.40 | 35.93 | 3.35 | -.716 | .095 | -1.68 | .79 | .12 |

*Note , ***p < .001*

Table 4 shows, an independent-samples t-test was used to compare mean score on online versus in-person teaching mode and learning environment of Pakistani students (*n*=78) and African (*n*=78) students. A significant difference was found in the mean score of Pakistani students and African Students on teaching mode and learning environment in online classes in the year 2020; *t* (156) = -5.35, p < .001, with significant effect size, Cohen's d .86. African Students (*M*=45.16, *SD*=2.87) were more satisfied with the teaching mode and learning environment in online classes than the Pakistani students (*M*=41.56, *SD*=5.20). Results also showed an insignificant difference in the mean score of Pakistani students (*M*=35.48, *SD*=4.40) and African Students (*M*=35.93, *SD*=3.35) on personal characteristics and factors involved in online classes; *t* (156) =-.716, *p* =.095, with low effect size Cohen's d .12.

Table 5: Independent Samples t-test between Male (*n*=125) and Female (*n*=31) students on their mean scores about online versus in-person teaching mode and learning environment; and students personal attributes and factors in online classes

| Variables | Male Students (*n*=125) | | Female Students (*n*=31) | | | | 95% *CI* | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* | *T* | *p* | *LL* | *UL* | Cohen's *d* |
| Online verses in-person teaching mode and learning environment | 43.52 | 4.46 | 42.72 | 4.96 | .89 | .433 | -.99 | 2.6 | .18 |
| Personal attributes and factors in online classes | 35.94 | 3.84 | 34.77 | 4.09 | 1.50 | .473 | -.37 | 2.7 | .30 |

As Table 5 shows, an independent-samples t-test was used to compare the mean score on online versus in-person teaching mode and learning environment of male (*n*=125) and female (*n*=31) students. An insignificant difference was found in the mean score of Male students (*M*=43.52, *SD*=4.46) and female Students (*M*=42.72, *SD*=4.96) on teaching mode and learning environment in online classes in the year 2020; *t* (156) =.89, p = .433, with low effect size Cohen's d .18. Results also showed an insignificant difference in the mean score of male students (*M*=35.94, *SD*=3.84) and female students (*M*=34.77, *SD*=4.09) on personal characteristics and factors involved in online classes; *t* (156) =1.5, *p* =.473, with medium effect size Cohen's d .30.

Table 6: Predictors of attitude towards online learning

| | | | Attitude towards online learning | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 95% *CI* | |
| Predictors | Model 1 B | Model 2 B | LL | UL |
| Constant | 37.96 | 25.60 | 19.59 | 31.62 |
| Country | 3.60 | 3.44 | 2.18 | 4.93 |
| Personal Attributes | | .35 | .19 | .52 |
| R | .40 | .50 | | |
| $R^2$ | .16 | .25 | | |
| F | 28.66** | 25.20** | | |
| $\Delta R^2$ | .15 | .24 | | |

$^{**}p$ <.01; $^{*}p$ <.05; B for Unstandardized regression coefficient; CI for Confidence interval

Table 6 shows, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed for predicting attitude towards online teaching while using the country of the respondents and personal attributes of the respondents as predictors. The country of the respondents emerged as the strong predictor of attitude towards online teaching that accounted 16 percent of variance in total attitude towards online teaching, $\beta$ =.38, $t$ = 5.39, ***$p$ < .001. Personal attributes also emerged as a significant predictor for attitude towards online teaching, $\beta$ =.30, $t$ = 4.30, ***$p$ < .001 which accounted for 9 % variance in the attitude towards online teaching.

**Limitations of the Study**

The limitation of the present survey-based study includes collecting equal data only from Pakistani and African students studying in Korea. The purpose of the research was to analyze the impacts of

online learning, students' perspectives, and the capacity to succeed in a computer-mediated communication system in Korea taking international students' perceptions towards online classes in a comparative way. However, this research does not show a true picture of all international students as it is limited to Pakistani and African students. Further study can be done on international students from China, Vietnam, and Uzbekistan as they form the largest group of international students.

## CONCLUSIONS

Countries have implemented social distancing policies to deal with the widespread of COVID-19. The closure of educational institutions has tested the advanced technology with the adoption of online teaching and switching from in-person classes to online classes. Though online classes cannot be a replication of face-to-face classes, it is an alternative method to continue students' academic development amid the pandemic. The present research is the first survey-based cross-case analysis conducted to assess the perceptions of Pakistani and African students towards online classes studying in Korea. The findings from the present research explored that service quality, digital pedagogy, e-learning skills, system rules, and computer skills of instructors perceived effective and led to increasing online learning for Pakistani and African students. However, issues and challenges experienced by respondents in online learning as they did not express their satisfaction and acceptance in regard to their personal characteristics and factors with this new paradigm. Excellent IT infrastructure of Korea has an insignificant effect on students learning in online classes. A well-structured online mode of teaching could not provide improved and effective student learning outcomes relative to a classroom-based mode of teaching. Korea's 'impressive IT infrastructure and government's proactive steps' to a rapid transition to online classes do not express to considerable online classes acceptance. Students' experiences reveal

dissatisfaction regarding remote classes and cite a lack of technical skills to study in e-learning environments**.** However, this study suggests that rapid transition of in-person classes to online classes can prepare a model of Online Education in Korea due to its excellent IT infrastructure and digital pedagogy.

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