

Implications and Lessons Learned from COVID-19 Crisis to Marketing field: Experience from Tanzania Universities' Students

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ABSTRACT

This is a survey article sharing experiences from COVID-19 crisis in developing country like Tanzania. COVID-19 crisis in Tanzania was announced early this year. Since then the government and people of Tanzania have been trying on fighting the pandemic. Tanzania decided not to take the common way of lock downs like most countries in order to contain the spread of the disease. The government urged people to take precautions while continue working. One of the precautions was closing universities. Now this article is putting forward the implications and lessons learned from COVID-19 by marketing students after closure of the universities. Experience is drawn from 26 students using snowball sampling procedure where in- depth interviews were conducted to undergraduate and working part-time graduate students. The sample was taken from public and private universities and cross section research design was used. Content analysis was carried out. Collaborations and sharing digital learning experience before crisis universities and businesses were the summary findings. Thus there are lot to learn by universities, students and businesses as a result of the crisis.

Key words: COVID-19, Tanzania, marketing field, implications, lessons

INTRODUCTION

On Monday 16 March, 2020 the Tanzanian health ministry confirmed the country's first case of COVID-19 at the government-run Mt. Meru Hospital in the centre of Arusha (The citizen, 2020). It was 18th march 2020 when the announcement was made to close universities and colleges after Tanzania confirmed the first corona-virus case. "Most students of higher learning institutions are now on holiday, therefore they shouldn't go back to colleges until further notice and for those who are in examinations, they should stop with immediate effect, so that to avoid mass gathering" the Prime Minister (PM) Mr Kassim Majaliwa directed (Africa Press Office, 2020). The PM however, insisted that people should continue with their day-to-day activities as the government constantly assesses the situation and will be updating the public with accurate information frequently. These two situations (the universities closure and continuing of daily activities) might bring effect to both current marketing students and working graduate students. This is especially due to the fact that students have to return and remain in their homes and those working adjust their activities in their work place to accommodate the COVID-19 interruptions (Edwards, 2020).

As students are at their homes instead of finishing their semester at the University, the situation brought the following question what are the implications and lessons brought by university closure and continuing daily activities at the same time to our students both undergraduates and working graduates. That is, how COVID-19 interruptions have affected marketing learning and field? COVID-19 interruptions might have brought effect to all academic disciplines however the nature of marketing field which require high and updated technology, more interaction with customers and time saving discipline has made this study important. Marketing helps businesses to sell their products and services. That is, the bottom line of any business is to make money and marketing is an essential discipline to reach that end goal. Thus, without marketing many businesses or disciplines would not exist (Urbonavicius and Dikcius, 2008). From this then the following questions were deduced what is the COVID-19 response for marketing students and field? and what challenges do marketers overcome during COVID-19 crisis? Marketing students like any other college student have been affected by COVID-19 crisis academically. Considering their field marketing students are

expected to respond differently and innovatively to COVID-19 pandemic to go hand in hand with maintaining contact with markets as the field require. Marketing profession is supposed to be change oriented (resilient with whatever situation found in the market) (Urbonavicius and Dikcius, 2008). The students also are expected to behave accordingly. Resilience in marketing field is of paramount importance to the students, businesses and universities (Tamrat and Tefera, 2020; Moorman, 2020). The study used undergraduate students who are in their final year of marketing studies and graduate students who are working in various industries to explore their perspectives on lessons and implications of COVID-19 crisis after closure of the universities. The closure of Universities has brought and necessitates a need for changes to the university education conduct.

According to Linney (2020) COVID-19 has created a new normal for the higher education sector, revolutionizing the online learning landscape, reshaping application processes, and refreshing crisis management strategies. In Tanzania, this statement might be partially the case. Universities are not accustomed to online system of learning. That is, digital system is still underutilised for providing education to college students. Therefore, the current study was carried out with an intention of uncovering in-depth details of students' experience and perspective on this subject.

The onset of COVID-19 and its repercussion to marketing field

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a respiratory disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (OSHA, 2020). Ever since the virus crossed the continent's borders, regular bilateral and multilateral consultations among African leaders have philosophically revolved around the need to rethink our multifaceted responses to COVID-19 and other future threats that have equal or greater potential for disruption (Africa centre for strategic studies, 2020). Measures have been taken by governments responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in African countries. Most of the measures are in some form of executive order or proclamation (public statement) which could not give time to digest or take any other adjustments as the pandemic spread quickly so necessitate quick response (Moulds, 2020). As could be predicted given how easily COVID-19 spreads in crowds, most of the measures heavily curb the freedom of movement and of peaceful assembly (ICNL, 2020). Depending on the severity of COVID-19's impact, these

measures can affect all aspects of daily life, including travel, trade, tourism, food supplies, financial markets and education systems (African renewal, 2020). It is obvious that the pandemic is likely to hit some sectors the hardest. Firms and businesses which harbours graduates from universities in African cities are highly vulnerable to COVID-19 related effects, especially SMEs which account for 80% of employment in Africa (Edwards, 2020). In particular, the approximately 250 million Africans in informal urban employment will be at risk (African renewal, 2020). Not only businesses, education system is also likely to be affected by COVID-19 crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has however brought challenges in education systems in Africa. Most countries around the continent have temporarily closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the pandemic. According to UNESCO (2020) and Tom (2020) 1.5 billion learners worldwide (91% of the world's student population) and 9.8 million African students are unable to go to school or university, due to measures to stop the spread of COVID-19.

However, while universities are closed in many countries during the pandemic, for Tanzanian education and other African countries, learning isn't on hold: for some, it has moved on line (OECD, 2020a; Tamrat and Teferra, 2020). For example, Ali Hassan Mwinyi Elite school, Feza schools, Ubongo kids and other apps, radio and television learning programmes, some graduate programmes at University of Dodoma for Tanzania and Nairobi and Daystar universities online learning programmes in Kenya were established during the pandemic. To access digital learning, however, students need access to a home computer or digital device (like smart phones) and the technology skills. Yet, not all students have such access, and the devices may need to be shared among parents/guardians and siblings (OECD, 2020b). Thus, those from privileged backgrounds will find their way around closed college doors to alternative learning opportunities, supported by their parents/guardians and eager to learn. Those from low income backgrounds will remain shut out if the college shuts down especially those who are living in remote areas (OECD, 2020a). This crisis exposes the many inequities in the country's education systems, from the internet broadband and computers needed for online education up to the supportive environments needed to focus on learning. Also shown to be relevant is the value of empowering universities to

design reactions tailored to address the complexities of their unique local contexts (OECD, 2020b). Given the importance of timeliness and building on existing institutions, such locally adaptive efforts are vital (ibid). Thus as a response and to reduce the impact of COVID-19 outbreak conditions on universities, businesses, workers, customers, and the public, it might be important for all employers to plan in advance for not only COVID-19 but also unexpected crisis like this (OSHA, 2020). The lessons, challenges and responses from COVID-19 crisis could guide responses to future similar crisis for universities, businesses, students and graduates to reduce impact to learning in Africa generally and Tanzania in particular.

Methodology

Qualitative Interviews and Analysis

Interviews conducted from 26 students from various universities in Tanzania who are studying marketing from Ruaha Catholic University (RUCU), The University of Dodoma, University of Dar es Salaam and St Augustine University. These Universities were selected basing on the availability of willing students who were mentioned by their fellow students during snowballing and the type of university (that is private and public). These interviews were carried out as a qualitative study that aimed to explore the students' views on implications and lessons learned from COVID-19 crisis so as to inform strategies to improve marketing education in Tanzania and thus marketing field. To be eligible for interview, undergraduate students had to be in their final year of study in marketing field. These were selected since they were about to finish studies (they were supposed to start final semester) and thus some have already planned for new jobs and start using marketing skills they acquired at the university and some have already applied for graduate studies. Graduate (part time) students had to be working in a small business firms during the COVID-19 crisis. Participants provided verbal consent before the interviews. Thus the sampling was purposive in nature. Due to the situation with COVID-19 crisis face-to-face interview was discouraged. Furthermore, in order to get information from students of various economical back ground, University information (such as where they live, telephone number, parent's/guardian economic activities) was sought to get addresses of few of them and telephone was the only means of communication (digital technology) available to all students. Snow ball sampling

technique was used to get more students to participate. During the interviews questions based on 3 key themes namely lessons learned from COVID 19 in marketing field, response to COVID-19 crisis as a marketer and challenges brought by COVID-19 crisis to marketing field. Interviews were recorded in which most conversations lasted 20-30 minutes and audio-transcribed (converting speech into text). Then the students' narratives contents were analysed using Nvivo software coding their views and perspectives according to their experiences on the crisis.

Interview Results and Discussion

Before going to the lesson learned, Avery and Edelman (2020) while pointing to the importance of social demographic information, declared that it enhances the ability of the researcher to make informed conclusion and recommendation to various interested in the conducted research work. In order to achieve this, three demographic variables, namely; the age of respondents; education levels; and gender were identified. Due to the qualitative nature of the study the information was summarised as follows: 12 third year students in marketing degree programme, aged 22-26 years old among them 5 were females and 7 were males. As for the masters' students studying Business administration major in marketing and marketing degrees, there were 14 students with age ranging from 28-36 years old, among these 10 were males and 4 were females. As the data from the selected students suggest there are few females who are studying marketing and available to provide information for the study.

The study had the following students with social demographic characteristics as follows;

Lessons learned

The following findings were obtained from marketing students from the universities under study in Tanzania so as to get information to answer the questions above.

Undergraduate marketing students' views on the lessons learned from COVID-19 crisis

Tanzania universities just like developing countries ones, have not advanced in using digital technologies in their teaching methods. The use of chalks, board marker pens, black and white boards is common during face to face lectures (Kihzoza, Zlotnikova,

Bada and Kalegele, 2016). Online systems are used only in limited as the access of digital technologies to instructors is very minimal. One undergraduate student when asked about the use of digital system in local universities, these were his views

“Using digital system in local university teaching is possible due to advancement of technology in the country. People can access internet even if they are in remote villages. I believe that every student can access a smart phone if not his/hers but at least from his/her father or any relative. The problem will be when a student wants a direct face to face interaction from the instructor. A system or program could be established by recording lecturers and set time limit for the availability of the lecture”.

It has to be admitted that there are universities which are specialising in offering online education and those which offer face to face lectures. However, the world is not static. Today the country is facing a COVID-19 crisis brought by corona virus which is very contagious and so far has caused loss of many lives. The implication of this is that the country should be prepared all the time. Another undergraduate student suggested that

“Universities should prepare an early warning system for not only COVID-19 crisis but for other future crises as well”.

That is the students and Universities should be prepared all the time instead of waiting for crisis to appear and take actions. The student went further into suggesting that

“Community should change their perceptions about university degree programs especially marketing”.

To understand the meaning of this, the student commented further

“students and parents/guardians should understand that marketing is not just like any other discipline/field of study. If a student is enrolled should be prepared by being conversant with digital applications. That is should be able to access digital technology”.

That is, if marketing field in the country has to go further in terms of technology and be resilient to pandemic like COVID 19, it has to be in bondage with digital world. These findings also mean that only students who can afford digital technologies should be admitted to universities to study marketing. Or the government especially loan board should find a way to include digital technology in their student loans. And what if the student wasn't able to get a loan? The parent/guardian has to afford that otherwise the

student has to find another profession in which it is not always the case. Another student has also his share to say on lessons learned from COVID-19 especially concerning the preparation of universities against future pandemics in the marketing field as follows

“Employers in all industries have seen the importance of going digital in their marketing works”.

That is to say universities should see the importance of utilising digital technology in marketing courses so as to increase flexibility during pandemics. Thus, concurring with this, Hultigren (2020) suggested that flexibility especially in acting on unprecedented situations so as to adjust quickly to new marketing tactics. Universities like any organization should be flexible especially when it comes to teaching methods. COVID-19 interruptions are supposed to be a big lesson to local universities.

“Some universities wanted to apply online teaching after the crisis unfortunately it seemed like they didn’t prepare the students so they had to dismiss the idea”.

This was quoted from one student in one of the local University of Tanzania.

Working Graduate marketing students’ views on the lessons learned from COVID-19 crisis

These students are studying at the universities while have been employed or have their own businesses to run. When asked about the lessons brought by COVID-19 crisis in marketing education, one-part time graduate student said the following concerning lesson learned

“The COVID 19 crisis interruptions has taught us to make sure universities design curriculum for marketing students which is appropriate for digital applications”

However, digital application is used by most local universities in developing countries like Tanzania omitting distance learning institutions; but for other purposes than facilitating learning such as admissions of students, registration of students, announcements to the university websites and the most recent one, payment of fees (Muhammad et al., 2020). Kihzoza, Zlotnikova, Bada and Kalegele (2016) explained that learning institutions in Tanzania are facing challenges in digitalising learning and that

most of the challenges identified were associated to the lack of infrastructures, readiness to change and lack of competencies on pedagogical digital applications. Adding to the lessons learned another graduate student asserted that

“Each marketing students who is in the university should have online business skills.

She went further into suggesting that digital access to students and universities be seen as utility like electricity. The student finished by commenting that *“online business skills using digital systems should be included in each marketing course offered by the university and every work field”*. This implies universities have to review their marketing programmes and make changes in their course contents. Another lesson brought by COVID-19 was offered by another graduate who said that

“Universities should collaborate with other universities which offer online programs to share experiences before any crisis”

That is, it should be the norm for universities to cooperate so as to offer quality education and helping each other during the time of crisis. World Economic Forum and Business Insider, (2020) suggested the following lessons learned from COVID-19 crisis namely: availability of a speedy and trusted systems, broadband access to the internet, digital health applications, flexible ethics and equity of which some of these have been suggested by the students in the study. Generally lessons learned from both undergraduate and graduate students in Tanzania were as follows: introducing digital technology in university teaching system, access to affordable internet in villages, universities to be prepared for crisis management, community to change their perceptions on marketing degree program, university to design marketing degree program which is applicable to digital technology, students should have online business skills before joining marketing degree programs as the course itself has some contents which relates to online business and as the previous studies suggested that marketing field require digital technological skills for it to be resilient to any unprecedented situation and last but not the least collaboration between universities which offer online programs and those which do not.

Response of marketers during COVID-19 crisis in Tanzania

Like other marketers in other countries, marketers in a developing country like Tanzania have designed ways to respond to COVID-19 crisis in their field. However, the response for marketers in Tanzania could be a little bit different from their colleagues in developed world due to lower advancement in technology use and contextual reasons.

To undergraduate marketing students

In reality most university students especially those who have parents/guardians who are well off economically, digital technology is not an issue to them. However, the problem is to the majority who cannot afford digital technologies their responses to COVID-19 are supposed to be different. When asked how she responds to COVID-19 crisis in respect to his studying profession, one undergraduate student said

“I normally read news concerning COVID-19. In our country people have been ordered to continue working, I am not working yet but I get a lot of news from various WhatsApp groups I joined when I was at the University”

Another marketing student agreed with the later student by saying that

“I normally communicate with my fellow students using emails and WhatsApp concerning covid-19 and what should be done to continue studies while at our homes”.

But these responses are different with another student who said that

“I am responding to COVID-19 crisis by helping into family business”.

She thinks that this is the time for assisting family business chores. She continues that

“Our family lives in the village and is poor we are depending on my mothers’ small business to survive. My father is a farmer once it is not raining he goes hunting for many days. So most of the time, he is not at home”

As one can see a family like this responding to COVID-19 crisis using digital application is a nightmare. UNESCO (2011) reported basic characteristics of professional teachers in universities is: (1) ability to learn using digital technologies, (2) ability to solve complex real world problems using digital technologies and (3) ability to create new knowledge using digital technologies. If for example the university teachers/

instructors are able to do all that it will be meaningless if their students cannot access digital technology.

To working graduate marketing students

Graduate students were a bit different to their counter parts in responding to COVID-19 crisis. The response also depends on the size of the business the student is working

“As to the nature of my job (sales and marketing officer) since the business is still small, I do not interact much with people especially during the time like this of COVID-19 crisis. The only time I do interact with people is when I go to the bank however all the time I use masks, sanitizers and washing my hands with soap to prevent myself from corona virus”.

Another student who is working in a big company has to say this

“I and my fellow marketers in our organisation have agreed to cut costs. We have slashed this year budget for marketing activities as we expect depression in the economy and so sales of our products will decline”.

He continued further by saying that

“We have changed our promotion strategies and marketing tactics generally”

In response to COVID-19 crisis, many consumer-facing businesses have announced layoffs and some have gone further into slashing workers' salaries (Hultgren, 2020). This evidenced from one of the local private institution which announced the possibility of deducting half of the workers' salaries since they are not fully working and most of the time had to stay at home. Many other organisations have closed their doors since the crisis was announced in the country and are conducting the now common work-from-home experiment. As graduate part time students, who work in these organisations obviously had to go with these changes by adjusting promotion strategies and tactics. Moorman (2020) agreeing with the findings above, asserted that, regardless of the changes businesses are facing, marketing teams should practice agility during the time of uncertainty. She continued that marketers are crowding into virtual “war rooms” to cope with the new challenges brought by COVID-19 crisis. These marketers are likely to be at the front lines of developing new business strategies and tactics in real time while simultaneously learning to work virtually for the first time.

Further another graduate said that

“We respond to COVID-19 crisis by continuing investing as people shy away from investing, our management see as a right time to invest, as prices have gone down. However, we are working very hard from home. We have formed alignment with the company marketing team and other companies’ teams. It is like we have joined forces to work in time of battle”.

Avery and Edelman (2020) argued that instead of pulling back from advertising during the crisis, going dark, while fearing of offending or of being accused of taking advantage of an unfortunate situation for corporate gain in time off COVID-19 crisis, marketer should respond by educating the public on prevention and fighting against it, offer free or lower priced products, shift factories over from making consumer goods to products needed to fight the crisis and bring people together to help bridge the physical distance imposed by social distancing by facilitating community, offering empathy, and providing social support. Generally, businesses responded differently in handling their marketing activities during the COVID-19 crisis. To mention few identified responses by undergraduate and graduate students involved in the study; getting as much information as possible about COVID-19 from reading and communicate with fellow students, involving in family business, operating while keeping distance, reducing budget, changing promotion strategies and joining hands with other businesses in handling marketing activities.

Challenges brought by COVID-19 to marketing field

Most business marketers who rely on trade shows, conferences and in-person meetings to generate leads and engage with customers have been affected by COVID-19 crisis. With face-to-face events currently at a standstill while the world attempts to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis, marketers have been forced to reallocate funds to other aspects of the marketing plan to fill in the gaps (Chief marketer, 2020). This could be one of the many measures which are taken as explained by part time students above. Thus let us see the reason that makes marketers indulge themselves into these measures: *Undergraduate students*

Responding to what challenges COVID-19 has brought one student said

“I was hoping this time to be finishing my last semester at the university but now I am facing a major delay in my purpose. I wished to join graduate studies in the next semester. This is not possible anymore. I will have to change my plans since my sponsor is starting to renege”. The COVID-19 has brought financial challenges to my sponsor too”.

The COVID-19 crisis has brought challenges to students who are depending on private sponsorship. Now students are wondering if they will be able to finish their studies. Bjorklund and Salvanes (2011) in time of crisis education policies are supposed to support family background especially financial capability. There some students who are sponsored privately which the sponsorship could expire with time. That is, the policies should be modified to consider students from all background during and after the crisis. However still there is a delay in starting new semester, hopefully eventually everything will fall into place and go back to normal. *“Delays in finding a job of my dreams after graduating studies”*. This is another challenge that was said by another student as a challenge brought by COVID-19 crisis. The student went further by saying that

“I was anxious to start new life after finishing my studies by getting a job and start living on my own expenses. However, this expectation is being delayed by COVID-19 crisis”. Now I am not sure what will happen as everyone is complaining about economic downturn even employers in different industries”.

This is the worry for not only students but also workers who have been laid off in the marketing field. However, Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) suggested that for new graduates and job seekers; country policies should support their entry to the labour market to avoid longer unemployment periods. This could be one of the solutions to the students upon finishing their studies to avoid further delay.

Another student said concerning COVID-19 challenges that

“Since I cannot access digital technology especially internet services, I cannot access COVID-19 news even other news transpiring in the world as I am in remote area where technology is not much advanced”.

This voice represents most students who went to live in remote areas with their parents/guardians or who cannot afford advanced digital technologies after university closure due to COVID-19 crisis. Testing the system of digital teaching in Denmark, Andersen and Nielsen (2019) look at the consequence of a major IT crash as a result of

this, some children could not take the test. The authors find that participating in the test increased the score in a reading test two years later by 9% of a standard deviation, with similar effects in mathematics however these effects were largest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. This implies that if universities have to apply digital system in teaching programs, preparation is very important otherwise students with low economic status will be disadvantaged. Burgess and Sievertsen (2020) reported that these educational interruptions may not just be a short-term issue, but can also have long-term consequences for the affected students and are likely to increase inequality not only to students but also to the general public. *Working Graduate students*

On responding to challenges brought by COVID-19 crisis, one part time student said that

“the big challenges we are facing is the impact of COVID-19 on sales meetings. Social distancing has caused people to avoid each other. We do not meet with our customers face to face as we used to. This has affected our sales”

Another student volunteered that

“Working from home is different from working in office environment. At home especially for us women, there are things which make it no conducive for working. Remote working does not fit for everyone”.

Another student also added that

“Sometimes we have to go see our customers however securing time to meet with our customers is also a problem as they are in certain mood and it is not easy to convince them live their homes while they have been told to stay at home whenever necessary. It could have been better if our customers could be able to access digital technology. But the truth is, majority cannot afford them”.

Another student who has a big position in his business firm reported that

“Squeezing marketing budget has brought chaos in the field. We are not sure what is important to be done first especially with the small budget and customers’ mood in time of COVID-19 crisis”.

He also added that

“We also face difficulties in coordinating decision makers. Marketers depend very much on decision makers in different environments from homes to other businesses who are our customers”.

When interviewed by Avery and Edelman (2020), Dr Nabbaro said “global COVID-19 crisis has drastically changed the way people are relating to each other and as a result changed consumers’ relationships with and expectations of brands”. Concurring with one of the student views, she continued saying “Consumers want to hear from brands but only when that communication is comforting and reassuring to them and provides specific information about what brands are doing to respond to the pandemic”. Chief Marketer staff (2020) also reported that while the world attempts to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis, marketers have been forced to reallocate funds to other aspects of the marketing plan which are pertinent to social distancing so as to fill in the gaps.

Summary of the Findings

The paper conducted a study on the lessons learned from and implications of COVID-19 on marketing field for Tanzania universities experience. The study conducted using in-depth interviews with undergraduate students and working graduate students to get useful insights. It is therefore deduced that there are many lessons which can be learned from COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, there are lessons which are directed to students and other which are directed to universities. The following lessons were discovered which are directed to students; accessing digital technology should be a must and building skills on online business for students from universities the following are lessons to be learned; designing university marketing curricula that fit digital technologies, preparation for early warning systems for future crisis, creating collaborations with universities offering online education and change in perception of marketing university degree. Implications from COVID-19 were based on the response of the students and challenges brought by COVID-19 to the marketers. Thus the study also observed that there are implications directed to the students and others directed to businesses. Most mentioned responses to the crisis which are directed to students are updating oneself with COVID-19 information, helping in handling family business. Businesses were responding to the crisis by slashing budgets, forming alignments, changing marketing strategies and investments. Likewise, challenges brought by COVID-19 were also directed to students and businesses as well. Some challenges mentioned are delayed

time in joining graduate studies, finding jobs and starting new life for students. Also impact is on sales meetings, remote work, securing face time with customers and difficulties in coordinating decision makers for businesses.

Conclusion

These findings reflect how Tanzanian universities students and the institutions have dealt with COVID-19 pandemic albeit its implications and lessons learned to marketing field. For undergraduate students, it is their time to reflect how the choice of the university and field can have impact in their future life. For graduate students who are working in small businesses it is their opportunity to learn the reality they are going to face in time of crisis in their work places. Both groups of students have been in better position to recommend on the redesigning of teaching methods of marketing in universities especially after facing with the pandemic consequences. The study recommends to students, universities and businesses to apply the lessons from COVID-19 which were mentioned in this study. The study was limited to qualitative information and thus recommends future quantitative studies on the implications of COVID-19 to marketing field in any context not necessarily universities. The study is also limited to students thus future studies are needed to their teachers or instructors for that matter and university administrations so as to get their views on improving marketing field teaching in time of crises.

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