



EXPLORING THE CONTRIBUTION OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT FOR ENHANCING TEACHING QUALITY IN THE TERTIARY EDUCATION LANDSCAPE OF MAURITIUS

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to investigate the various determining constructs for promoting student engagement in the tertiary education landscape of Mauritius. It further examines the relationship between student engagement and teaching quality for tertiary education providers in Mauritius.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper applies the data reduction technique using exploratory factor analysis on a sample of 221 respondents from a leading tertiary education provider in Mauritius and condenses a set of 35 attributes into a list of eight (8) comprehensible dimensions contributing towards student engagement in the tertiary landscape.

Findings: The factor analysis identified that students visualise the contributing dimensions of student engagement as a combination of eight (8) factors: 'effectiveness of lecturers' skills and competencies', 'lecturers' feedback and attitudes in class', 'physical appearance and educational setting', 'lecturers' aptitude in developing a relationship with students', 'teaching atmosphere', 'type of cooperative learning in class', 'effectiveness of break and group assignments' and 'quality of lectures'. The correlation analysis has also shown that there is a positive relationship between student engagement and teaching quality.

Practical implications: This paper provides valuable knowledge on the effectiveness of student engagement strategies, which can assist both private



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and public tertiary institutions in enhancing teaching quality that will be favoured by students, academic practitioners and industry practitioners.

Originality/value: Although teaching quality and student engagement have been important research topics for several decades, hardly any research has focused on the contribution of student engagement in the tertiary education landscape in the context of emerging countries. This research is still pioneering work on student engagement and its contribution to teaching quality in the context of Mauritius, which is still a developing nation.

Keywords: Student engagement, Teaching quality, Students, Higher education landscape, Mauritius

INTRODUCTION

The higher education world is currently in a state of flux and evolution as a result of rapid advances in information and communications technology and the subsequent changing needs of students. Indeed, competition is a growing reality in the education sector and it is high time for tertiary institutions to promote active student engagement. Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly important to listen to and engage in dialogue with students and in turn, influence their motivation towards learning through effective student feedback mechanisms. In addition, students have more bargaining power due to the increasing number of tertiary education providers in Mauritius and the policy of the government to increase student intake numbers at tertiary level. Hence, tertiary education providers should enhance the overall student learning experience through teaching excellence and effective student engagement strategies. Indeed, several research works have explored the concept of teaching quality and student engagement in developed countries (Jones, 2008; Lovat and Clement, 2008; Devlin *et al.*, 2010; Trowler, 2010; Dahl and Sminou, 2011). However, there is limited research shedding light on student engagement and teaching quality and these two concepts have been under-researched as blended concepts in the field of teaching and learning. Indeed, there has been little empirical research on the contribution of student engagement to enhance teaching quality in the context of developing countries. Hence, this study aims to fill the gap in the existing body of literature pertaining to the contribution of student engagement for enhanced teaching quality. Thus, the results of this study will give a new impetus to the findings of previous studies on student engagement and teaching quality in Mauritius.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the contribution of student engagement for enhancing teaching quality in the higher education landscape. The main objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To explore the various determining constructs for promoting student engagement in the tertiary education landscape of Mauritius.
2. To examine the relationship between student engagement and teaching quality for tertiary education providers in Mauritius.

EXPLORING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND TEACHING QUALITY IN THE TERTIARY SECTOR

Student engagement has become the latest focus of attention among universities aiming to enhance learning and teaching in higher education (Kuh, 2003; Trowler, 2010; Coates, 2009; Willms *et al.*, 2009; Young and Bruce, 2011). However, it is not always easy to ensure student engagement, although it should be the aim of all institutions and students (Dunleavy *et al.*, 2010; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Harris, 2008; Krause, 2011). One of the important goals that educators want to achieve is the development of student involvement in learning (An *et al.*, 2007; Ahlfeldt *et al.*, 2005; Devlin *et al.*, 2009; Kirby and DiPaola, 2011) as it improves teaching and learning at tertiary level (Trowler, 2010). Similarly, Biggs (2001) and Dahl and Smimou (2011) have stated that teaching quality is actually of key concern for tertiary education providers.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AS A MAJOR DETERMINANT FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

It has been clearly found that student engagement is radically related to different student outcomes, mainly, academic performance, persistence and achievement (McClenney and Marti, 2006; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008; Devlin *et al.* 2009; May, 2009). Moreover, various authors have stated that there is a positive link between engagement and student academic achievement (Handelsman *et al.*, 2005; An *et al.*, 2007; Dunleavy, 2008; Kuh *et al.* 2008; Trowler, 2010). Trowler (2010) stated that student engagement leads to student motivation and in turn, students are more likely to succeed in their efforts while they participate actively in the learning process (Weaver and Qi, 2005).

ESTABLISHED LINK BETWEEN TEACHER ENGAGEMENT AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Engaged and enthusiastic teachers are a requirement for engaged students (Dolezal *et al.*, 2003; Bryson and Hand, 2007; Jones, 2008; Sarwar *et al.*, 2011). An *et al.* (2007) illustrated that students are more engaged and achieved higher levels of academic confidence when their teachers care for them, treat them equally and endorse questions in class. Likewise, other authors noted that student engagement is higher in classrooms where there are supportive teachers (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Akey 2006) and in turn, teacher involvement is a strong predictor of student engagement leading to student learning (Handelsman *et al.*, 2005; Ferguson, 2008).

COOPERATIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES, INCENTIVES AND REWARDS AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Bryson and Hand (2007) have affirmed that academic and classroom involvement can be improved by establishing active exercises in class. Moreover, an effective two-way communication between tutors and students can be achieved through valuable training (Kuh, 2003; Ahlfeldt *et al.*, 2005; Sarwar *et al.*, 2011). However, the traditional way of teaching related to instructive lectures and note memorisation is still dominating some learning cultures (Porcaro, 2011). Moreover, incentives and rewards are major factors that help students to engage in tertiary institutions (McClenney and Marti, 2006; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Bryson and Hand, 2007; Jones, 2008).

TEACHERS' COMPETENCE AND TEACHING QUALITY

Students perceive higher teaching quality when the lecturers know their subjects well, deliver these subjects in a flexible way, are well organised, are prone to listen to students and help students in learning (Dolezal *et al.* 2003; Hill *et al.*, 2003; Dahl and Smimou, 2011). In a similar way, Dahl and Smimou (2011) observed that acknowledgement and development of original and excellent teaching in classes enhance the teaching quality. Moreover, Kavaliauskiene and Anusiene (2008) and Devlin and Samarawickrema (2010) have also pointed out that ongoing teacher development enhances teaching quality.

Teaching quality has proved to have a great impact on student success (Alton-Lee, 2003; Devlin *et al.*, 2009; Lovat, 2010). According to Alton-Lee (2003) and Wechsler and Shields (2008), teaching quality leads to higher student performance. Lovat and Clement (2008) and Quint *et al.* (2007) observed that teaching quality is the instantaneous indicator of student achievement, while Portner (2008) found that quality education depends on the relationship between teachers and students and that high teaching quality results in high student achievement. Ramsden (2008) and Dahl and Smimou (2011) also noted that enhancing teaching quality and building up student experience is a real challenge for tertiary institutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In line with the present study's main objective of exploring the contribution of student engagement for enhancing teaching quality in the tertiary education landscape, a structured questionnaire comprising several sections was developed. The various sections of the questionnaire relate to a list of 35 attributes related to contributing factors of student engagement, teaching quality and student achievement; the last part of the questionnaire addressed the demographic characteristics of respondents.

SAMPLING PLAN

In the present research, the targeted population of the study consisted of students of tertiary institutions in Mauritius. The target population sampled was the students of a leading tertiary education provider in Mauritius. The sample size of this study amounted to 221 students through the judgmental sampling technique, and the response rate was 68 per cent.

INTERNAL CONSISTENCY OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The Cronbach's alpha value for the entire questionnaire was 0.887 and such a high figure suggests that the questionnaire is a good indicator of what the researcher wants to investigate. According to Hair *et al.* (1995), a coefficient of less than 0.6 indicates marginal-to-low internal consistency and a value of 0.6 or more indicates satisfactory internal consistency reliability (Churchill, 1979).

TESTABLE HYPOTHESIS OF THE STUDY

The relationship between student engagement and teaching quality

Several researchers have found that the level of student engagement depends highly on the quality of teaching delivered and supported by the tutor, since teaching quality helps in engaging students to learn to their full capabilities and to achieve higher levels of academic confidence (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; An *et al.*, 2007; Lovat and Clement, 2008). The following hypothesis has been posited:

H₁ There is a significant relationship between student engagement and teaching quality at tertiary level

THE LINK BETWEEN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Various authors have stated that engaged students are more prone to perform well in their studies, leading to superior academic outcomes and better student achievement (Trowler, 2010; Centre for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008; Kuh *et al.*, 2008; Dunleavy, 2009). Moreover, engaged students are usually prone to perform better, thus leading to student achievement (Kirby and DiPaola, 2011). Hence, the following hypothesis has been formulated:

H₂ There is a significant relationship between student engagement and student performance in the tertiary education landscape of Mauritius

THE CONTRIBUTION OF TEACHING QUALITY ON STUDENT PERFORMANCE

Research has shown that teaching quality leads to higher student performance and the higher the level of teaching quality, the higher will be the level of student performance (Alton-Lee, 2003; Wechsler and Shields, 2009). Indeed, enhanced teaching quality aims at improving student achievement (Lovat and Clement, 2008; Portner, 2008). Hence, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H₃ There is a significant relationship between teaching quality and student performance in the tertiary education landscape of Mauritius

DATA ANALYSIS

Factor analysis was carried out on the 35 attributes found in the questionnaire and was used to assess the relative significance of the attributes for improving student engagement at tertiary level in Mauritius. Only factors with even value equal to or greater than one were considered significant and chosen for interpretation. A variable with factor loadings of 0.40 was considered, that is, items less than 0.40 were excluded. Moreover, correlation analysis was carried out to test the hypothesis.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Part A: Demographic profile of respondents

Part B: Empirical survey findings

Factor analysis

Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation was conducted and eight, representing 78.63 percent of the explained variance, were extracted from the 35 attributes. The empirical estimates have depicted that ‘effectiveness of lecturers’ skills and competencies’, ‘lecturers’ feedback and attitudes in class’, ‘physical appearance and educational setting’, ‘lecturers’ aptitude in developing a relationship with students’, ‘teaching atmosphere’, ‘type of cooperative learning in class’, ‘effectiveness of break and group assignments’ and ‘quality of lectures’ are the significant predictors of student engagement, as shown in Table 2. below.

Variables		Per cent
Programme	Full time	83%
	Part time	17%
Gender	Male	48%
	Female	52%
Age	18 –20 years	53.3%
	21–23 years	25%
	24–26 years	11%
	27–29 years	2%
	>29 years	9%

Table 1.
Demographic
profile of sample

Factor items	Loadings	Eigenvalues	% of Variance explained	Cronbach Alpha
Factor 1 – Effectiveness of lecturers’ skills and competencies		9.46	20.1	0.847
The lecturers’ engagement	0.844			
The lecturers’ competences	0.823			
The lecturers’ teaching competencies	0.757			
The lecturers’ flexibility in delivering lecture	0.633			
The lecturers’ ability to solve your problem in class	0.547			
Factor 2 – Lecturers’ feedback and attitudes in class		4.72	10.0	0.854
Provide feedback on class test	0.844			
Provide feedback on assignment	0.793			
Promote interactive session	0.762			
Provide feedback on performance	0.707			
Crack jokes at the right time	0.498			
Factor 3 – Physical appearance and educational setting		3.67	7.8	0.754
The seat comfort in class	0.768			
The number of students in the class	0.755			
The class temperature	0.724			
The lecturers’ gender	0.713			
The size of the class	0.581			
Individual assignment	0.468			
Factor 4 – Lecturers’ aptitudes in developing a relationship with students		3.06	6.5	0.844
Ability to motivate students to participate in class	0.839			
Ability to involve students during the whole class	0.819			
Ability to develop good relationship with students	0.797			
Ability to communicate clearly to students	0.604			

Table 2. Factor items and loadings

IJSR 3,2	Factor 5 – The teaching atmosphere		2.75	5.9	0.754
	The language used by the lecturers	0.847			
	The lecturers' engagement	0.797			
	The classroom atmosphere	0.725			
	The amount of instruction given to students	0.604			
	The size of the class	0.529			
<u>175</u>	Factor 6 – Type of cooperative learning in class		2.47	5.3	0.788
	Your friends' attitudes in class	0.865			
	The team spirit among students	0.853			
	Group discussion in class	0.615			
	Factor 7 – Effectiveness of break and group assignments		2.09	4.4	0.760
	Group assignments	0.883			
	Class presentation for group assignments	0.781			
	The number of breaks during a class	0.570			
	Factor 8 - Teaching materials and quality of lectures		2.00	4.3	0.548
	Use of PowerPoint Presentation to deliver lecture	0.697			
Working out case studies in class	0.676				
The lecturers' communication skills	0.586				
Use of books/handouts in each session	0.525				
Total		36.96	78.6		

Factor 1 – Lecturers' skills and competencies

Factor 1 has an eigenvalue of 9.46 and explains 20.1% of variance. This factor groups 5 attributes pertaining to the effectiveness of 'lecturers' skills and competencies' for tertiary education providers. Empirical findings have depicted that 'lecturers' engagement' (*Loading=0.844*), 'lecturers' competences' (*Loading=0.823*) and 'teaching competencies' (*Loading=0.757*) can influence the level of student engagement. Likewise, 'lecturers' flexibility' (*Loading=0.633*)

and 'lecturers' ability to solve students' problem' (*Loading=0.547*) are other contributing factors to enhance student engagement in the tertiary education landscape.

Factor 2 – Feedback, interactive sessions and humouristic attitudes of lecturers

Factor 2 has an eigenvalue of 4.72 and explains 10.0% of variance. This factor groups 5 attributes pertaining to feedback, interactive sessions and humouristic attitudes of lecturers. The research revealed that 'feedback on class test' (*Loading=0.844*), 'feedback on assignment' (*Loading=0.793*), 'promoting interactive sessions during lectures' (*Loading=0.762*) and 'ongoing feedback on students' performance' (*Loading=0.707*) are contributing factors for enhancing student engagement. Moreover, 'cracking jokes at the right time' (*Loading=0.498*) is another determining factor shaping lecturers' attitudes and in turn, boosting the engagement level of students.

Factor 3 – Lecturers' physical appearance, physical evidence and educational settings

Factor 3 has an eigenvalue of 3.67 and explains 7.8% of variance. This factor groups 6 attributes pertaining to the physical appearance and the educational setting. Empirical findings have outlined that 'seating arrangement and comfort' (*Loading=0.768*), 'number of students in lectures' (*Loading=0.755*), 'class temperature' (*Loading=0.724*) and 'lecturers physical appearance' (*Loading=0.713*) are effective factors that increase students' involvement level during lectures. The 'class cohort size' (*Loading=0.581*) and 'individual assignments' (*Loading=0.468*) are other factors that boost student engagement.

Factor 4 – Lecturers' aptitudes in motivating, involving and developing relationships with students

Factor 4 has an eigenvalue of 3.06 and explains 6.5% of variance. This factor groups 4 attributes pertaining to lecturers' aptitudes in motivating, involving and developing relationships with students. The research has shown that 'lecturers' ability to motivate students' (*Loading=0.839*), 'lecturers' ability to involve students during the whole session' (*Loading=0.819*), and 'lecturers' ability to develop a good relationship with students' (*Loading=0.797*) will enhance the engagement level of students. Similarly, 'the ability of lecturers' to communicate clearly' (*Loading=0.604*) will further increase the involvement and participation of students.

Factor 5 – The teaching atmosphere, amount of instructions, lecturers’ exposure and mobility

Factor 5 has an eigenvalue of 2.75 and explains 5.9% of variance. This factor groups 5 attributes pertaining to the teaching atmosphere. The research has shown that the ‘language used by lecturers’ (*Loading=0.847*), ‘lecturers’ engagement’ (*Loading=0.797*) and ‘classroom atmosphere’ (*Loading=0.725*) are significant factors to boost the engagement level of students. Furthermore, the ‘amount of instruction given to students’ (*Loading=0.604*) and the ‘lecturers’ constant exposure and mobility during lectures’ (*Loading=0.529*) also promote student engagement.

Factor 6 - Cooperative learning, attitudes of friends and team bonding

Factor 6 has an eigenvalue of 2.47 and explains 5.3% of variance. This factor groups 3 attributes and ‘attitudes of friends’ (*Loading=0.865*) and ‘team spirit among students’ (*Loading=0.853*) can highly influence the level of student engagement. Likewise, ‘group discussion activities’ (*Loading=0.615*) can also contribute to increase the level of engagement among university students.

Factor 7 – Effectiveness of break and group assignments

Factor 7 has an eigenvalue of 2.09 and explains 4.4% of variance. This factor groups 3 attributes pertaining to the effectiveness of the group assignments and the number of break during lectures. ‘Group assignments had the highest loading (*Loading=0.883*), followed by ‘Class Presentation (*Loading=0.781*) and ‘the number of break during lectures’ (*Loading=0.570*).

Factor 8 – Teaching materials and quality of lectures

Factor 8 has an eigenvalue of 2.00 and explains 4.3% of variance. This factor groups 4 attributes and ‘the use of PowerPoint presentation in delivering lectures’ (*Loading=0.697*) has been a significant factor for enhancing the engagement level of students, followed by ‘blending practical case studies during lectures’ (*Loading=0.676*), ‘lecturers’ communication skills’ (*Loading=0.586*) and ‘effective use of handouts by lecturers’ (*Loading=0.525*) are other contributing factors for boosting student engagement for tertiary education providers.

BENEFITS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The research has also shown that when students are engaged in class, they benefit most from greater understanding of the subjects, followed by paying more attention to what is being taught, more persistence, higher student satisfaction, enhanced performance, improved experience, greater motivation to work harder in class, greater achievement, increased learning and finally, their personal lives are enriched. Likewise, it has been found that student engagement leads to better academic performance, persistence and achievement as outlined by several researchers (McClenney and Marti, 2006; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004).

HYPOTHESIS TESTING 1

The relationship between student engagement and teaching quality

H₁ There is a significant relationship between student engagement and teaching quality at tertiary level

Various authors have outlined that teaching quality is the major factor that can increase student engagement (Lovat and Clement, 2008; Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; An *et al.*, 2007). The present research

Ranking	Benefits
1st	Greater understanding of the subjects
2nd	Pay more attention to what is being taught
3rd	More persistence
4th	Higher student satisfaction
5th	Enhanced performance
6th	Improved experience
7th	Greater motivation to work harder in class
8th	Greater achievement
9th	Increased learning
10th	Enriched personal life

Table 3. Ranking of the benefits of student engagement

has demonstrated that there is a fairly weak but positive relationship between student engagement and teaching quality ($r=0.030$, $p<0.01$). Therefore, H_1 should be accepted.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING 2

The link between student engagement and student performance

H_2 There is a significant relationship between student engagement and student performance in tertiary education landscape of Mauritius

Moreover, various authors have stated that the performance of students depends on their level of engagement in class (Trowler, 2010; Centre for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2008; Kuh *et al.*, 2008; Dunleavy, 2009). In a similar vein, survey findings have shown that those students that are more engaged in class are students who perform better ($r=0.236$, $p<0.01$). Hence, H_2 should be accepted.

HYPOTHESIS TESTING 3

The contribution of teaching quality on student performance

H_3 There is a significant relationship between teaching quality and student performance in the tertiary education landscape of Mauritius

Several researchers have affirmed that a higher level of teaching quality will lead to improved level of student performance (Alton-Lee, 2003; Wechsler and Shields, 2009). The empirical findings have shown that students perform better when lecturers deliver a good quality of teaching in class ($r=0.096$, $p<0.01$). Therefore, H_3 should be accepted.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Developing superior teaching strategies that foster ongoing student engagement and provide inspiration to academic staff is a particular challenge across the world. In addition, there is enough empirical evidence shedding light on the lecturers' skills and competencies for enhancing student participation. One significant factor to boost

the level of engagement among students is lecturers' engagement (*Loading=0.844*). Hence, tertiary education providers should organise various teaching seminars for lecturers to empower them on how to promote student engagement in class in order to enhance their overall teaching competencies.

Another major implication of the study relates to feedback, interactive sessions and humouristic attitudes of lectures for boosting student engagement. In a similar vein, it has been found that students learn more about a subject when they practise more and they become more skilled when they get feedback on their work. In other words, students tend to contribute more in the classroom and report a better understanding of the course concepts when they are actively engaged (Jones, 2008; Kuh, 2003; Ahlfeldt *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, it is important for lecturers to provide ongoing feedback on students' overall coursework and their overall performance. In addition, lecturers should also acquire effective coaching skills to deal with students during the feedback sessions. Lecturers should also promote interactive sessions by focusing more on ice breaking sessions, class presentations and role play exercises related to specific topics of discussions.

It is also interesting to note that 'lecturers' ability to motivate students' (*Loading=0.839*), 'lecturers' ability to involve students during the whole session' (*Loading=0.819*), and 'lecturers' ability to develop a good relationship with students' (*Loading=0.797*) will enhance the engagement level of students followed by 'the ability of lecturers' to communicate clearly' (*Loading=0.604*). In this respect, it is highly recommended that tertiary education providers empower lectures with the effective skills to motivate and develop good relationships with students. In turn, tertiary education providers should ensure that the lectures are conducted in small cohorts which will further enable tutors to build one-to-one relationships with students.

The survey findings have also revealed that there is a positive link between teaching quality and student engagement ($r=0.030$, $p<0.01$). The use of PowerPoint presentation in delivering lectures' (*Loading=0.697*) has been a significant factor for enhancing the engagement level of students, followed by 'blending practical case studies during lectures' (*Loading=0.676*). Hence, lecturers should maximise the use of PowerPoint presentation and they should provide case studies during their lectures to encourage student involvement,

which in turn will enhance the overall teaching quality in the higher education landscape.

Survey findings demonstrate that those students that are more engaged in class are those that perform better ($r=0.236$, $p<0.01$). Therefore, tertiary institutions should maximize on effective student engagement strategies to enhance the overall performance of students. The tertiary institutions should also focus on enhanced teaching quality, since there is enough empirical evidence suggesting that students perform better when lecturers deliver enhanced quality in their teaching.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study has highlighted the contribution of student engagement for enhanced teaching quality in the tertiary education landscape of Mauritius. Students are now putting greater emphasis on the importance of lecturers' competencies, feedback and teaching atmosphere amongst others to boost the engagement level of students. Hence, the research results can be useful and form practical tools for policy makers and tertiary education providers who are aiming at promoting student engagement and enhancing teaching quality in Mauritius.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The study had some potential limitations, as the focus was on exploring the contribution of student engagement for improving teaching quality from students' perspectives in Mauritius and the underlying perceptions of higher executives of the tertiary institutions have not yet been tapped. The paper has some serious conceptual limitations in the arena of student engagement and teaching quality for developing countries.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In this respect, research should extend to higher executives of tertiary education providers in order to allow a comparative analysis of the contribution of student engagement for enhanced teaching quality in Mauritius. Likewise, a conceptual model related to the contribution of student engagement for enhanced teaching quality can be proposed and validated in order to overcome the conceptual limitations of the present study.

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