

# The Differences in Factors Influencing Portal News and News Site Application Usages on Smartphones: Focusing on Political Discussion Networks, News Media Use and News Genre Consumption

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## ABSTRACT

*The study aims to reveal the differences in the factors influencing portal news and news site application usages on smartphones in regard to political discussion networks, news use across multiple media platforms and news genre consumption. The results demonstrate that those factors affected both types of application usages in a different manner when controlling for demographics. The more participants conversed politics with homogeneous networks, the more they used portal news on smartphones. Conversely, the more political discussion with heterogeneous networks, the more they used news site application on smartphones. The more frequently Internet and mobile phone were employed for news source and the more soft news genre was consumed, the more the portal news application was used. However, the more frequently traditional and social media were employed for news source and the more hard news consumed, the more news site application was used. The findings imply that portal news application users may increase their likelihood of soft news consumption using Internet and mobile phones for political discussion with close social relations, while news site application users may increase their likelihood of hard news consumption using traditional and social media for political discussion with distant social relations.*

**Key words:** Portal News, News Site Application, Political Discussion Networks, News Media, News Genre, Smartphones.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the proliferation of portal news on the Internet, the way users consume news has changed radically. In 2015, 69.4 percent of adults claimed they used portal news at least once a week [1]. Similarly, due to the general distribution of smartphones in recent years, the pattern of users' news consumption has changed drastically, with mobile news applications becoming increasingly integrated into everyday lives [1]. On the other hand, these news media use patterns allow users to be more selectively exposed to news and information and consequently to become a part of particular user segments.

To date, there have been few studies examining how the characteristics of segmented users are associated with the use of different news applications, particularly portal news and news sites, via smartphones. To explore the characteristics of

users employing portal news and news site applications, the study focuses mainly on the effects of political discussion networks, news use across multiple platforms, and genre consumption. Some studies support the importance of political talk in the filtering of mediated news and participation in civic life [2], and the heterogeneity of political discussion networks advances deliberative democracy by motivating political action [3], [4]. Using diverse media platforms for acquiring news and information can also facilitate access to diverse news sources with different points of view, supporting rational political decision-making. Furthermore, the consumption of hard news rather than soft news can support citizenship, as it increases political knowledge by decreasing uncertainty and maintaining awareness of social issues and public affairs [2], [5].

By considering the changing news use landscape, the present study aims to reveal the differences in factors influencing portal news and news site application usage on smartphones in regard to political discussion networks, news use across multiple media platforms, and news genre consumption.

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## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Smartphone News Applications as Information Sources

Online news provided by portal and news sites has grown along with the advance of the Internet. The development of online news has created an area of “online journalism,” which is different from the traditional journalism provided by newspapers and television.

From the perspective of technology-driven attributes, portal news has been characterized by access convenience, a diversity of information sources, up-to-date news, and flexibility ever since its introduction [6]. In terms of content-driven attributes, portal news features unlimited hypertext including photos and short news video clips [6]. These characteristics have the advantage of allowing users to be news providers and civic reporters simultaneously, which can help them play the role of active citizens [6], [7].

On the other hand, portal news has been criticized for concentrating mainly on the coverage of soft news such as entertainment, sports, and sensational and captivating social issues [8], [9]. Chun and colleagues [3] pointed out that this trend of soft news-centered coverage provided by portal news sites could lead to a bias toward sensationalism. Such biased sensationalism may in turn be associated with slacktivism, which refers to performing social and political actions virtually but hardly engaging in offline actions [10]. In this sense, portal news has been criticized for having a closed system in the form of a walled garden platform based on taxonomy, which mass-produces passive users [3]. This system is called web 1.0, and it is characterized by limited interaction with websites and restricted navigation.

The rapid growth and proliferation of digital and mobile media technologies have changed the news media landscape in general and portal news in particular. With the new functionality of the current mobile environment, LTE-enabled mobile devices have expanded beyond person-to-person conversational devices to become a media-rich platform for delivering news [11], [12]. Moreover, by offering a rich set of content options through diverse applications, the extended functionality of interpersonally centered mobile communication enables users to have more control over content selection [13], [14]. For example, news is among the most popular mobile content [15], as the smartphone interface greatly simplifies the process of accessing news through specific applications such as portal news, social networking sites (SNSs), and even podcasts. As mobile news delivery services have become diversified, users have become increasingly able to select mobile news channels based on their specific preferences [16]. The portability and mobility of smartphones further support individualized and customized news, which traditional fixed media cannot provide to users due to inflexible scheduling [17].

In the past few years, the sharp decline in newspaper circulation and the lower ratings of news programs on national television networks have amplified the likelihood that emerging new media will eventually replace the news and information supplied by traditional media [11], [18], [19]. However, it has also been argued that the co-evolution of old and new news platforms across media will have a complementary effect on each type of platform, maximizing usability and efficiency in

order to choose the best medium and/or content for patterned use of news users. News users select the news sources they will employ from old and new media platforms and then combine them into their news use patterns on a routine basis. In the same vein, portal news and news site applications on mobile and smartphones complement each other. The presence of these platforms can make it easier for news users to actively combine both applications as important information sources into their patterned usages [22].

In regard to the relationship of age with news use via mobile phones including smartphones, male users in their forties show the highest use while those of both sexes in their twenties and thirties show the second highest use among all age groups. Smartphone users are more likely to actively access news via applications than through news websites. Smartphone users also use television news applications more than other types of news applications, and they use economic newspapers, periodical journals, and daily newspaper sites more than other type of news websites [23]. With the development of web 2.0 user-generated content (UGC), mobile news applications can increase the self-produced content of end users for sharing and interacting with others. It is implied from these results that the newly patterned usages are ultimately associated with user segments that more actively select tailored content on smartphones to obtain easy access to in-depth hard news. This eventually contributes to active political engagement, both online and offline.

### 2.2 Political Discussion Networks and News Application Usages

Political discussion networks have played a significant role in the varying levels of political participation in the process of deliberative democracy [24]. This is why political discussion partners are very important. Moreover, political discussion is a mediator that links the opinions users have about the news information provided by various news media with the way in which the users make decisions regarding their level of political engagement [2]. In the traditional media environment, it is likely that rather than having heterogeneous networks, individuals would have more homogeneous networks with like-minded people based on geographic, cultural, occupational, and status proximity. In the social media environment, however, it seems that rather than having homogeneous networks, individuals are more likely to have heterogeneous networks with a range of viewpoints and to contemplate whether to engage in politics and civic life by reflecting these various viewpoints [4].

The present media platforms, particularly mobile applications and social media, provide news and information from different viewpoints. In this kind of media environment, users accessing different stories on the same event are able to have a diverse range of political discussions. Especially, SNSs including the typical attributes of web 2.0, such as self-production, openness, sharing, and participation, create a public sphere where it is possible to actively discuss salient social issues and public affairs with heterogeneous networks. For example, when SNS users obtain news via these platforms, they can increase not only their political dialogues with heterogeneous networks but also their political participation

online and offline [19]. On the contrary, in web 1.0 portal news sites, users may be fragmented into groups with similar opinions and viewpoints. This could lead to political discussions only with limited homogeneous networks [3], [25]-[28].

### 2.3 News Genre Consumption and News Application Usages

Portal news is representative of all types of news forms supplied by broadcasting networks, offline-based news agencies, and online-only news agencies. Portal news is not only a provider that retransmits news supplied by those news organizations but also a gatekeeper that edits and arranges all types of news to attract users [29]. This dual role of portal news has led it to concentrate on dealing with soft news such as entertainment, sports, social and cultural issues, and even gossip and scandals related to celebrities and political figures rather than hard news such as economics, employment, public affairs, and international issues [21]. Consequently, users of portal news have a high probability of accessing sensational news and prefer to use entertainment-oriented news [6]. More importantly, most news users tend to visit portal news sites to keep track of daily occurrences in a habitual manner [6]. On the contrary, news sites supplied by offline-based news agencies and online-only news agencies tend to place importance on hard news. As a result, users of such news sites have a high likelihood of accessing news with professional expertise or in-depth perspectives and prospects and prefer to use information-oriented news [6].

When this tendency is applied to the news provided by portal news and news site applications via smartphones, there is a greater likelihood that portal news applications will have a greater amount of soft news than news site applications [30], [31]. Therefore, there is a far greater likelihood that portal news application use will attract users to read and view sensational news stories. The overall trend towards sensationalized stories in portal news application is inevitably associated with what is called “the softening of news” [33], [34]. One potential problem with this softening of news is that it may contribute to users selecting to view only attractive news articles without considering active civic engagement in serious public concerns. On the other hand, news site application use may be associated with hard news, which nurtures informed citizens who are far more active in political and civic life.

## 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study assumed that portal news and news site applications on smartphones are associated with particular user segments. Based on the prior literature, the study suggested the following two research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: Are there differences in political discussion networks, news media use, and news genre consumption in groups of portal news preference, news site preference, and the balanced use of both types of news?

RQ 2: How do political discussion networks, news media use, and news genre consumption predict portal news and news site application use via smartphones?

Regarding RQ1, the study examined characteristics of the segmented users of portal news and news site applications in terms of three variables of social networks for political discussion, news media use across multiple media platforms and news genre consumption over smartphones. Regarding RQ2, the study investigated the relative extent to which the three variables influenced portal news and news site application usages. RQ1 was analyzed and interpreted by using multinomial regression model and RQ2 by employing multiple regression models.

## 4. METHOD

### 4.1 Data Collection and Demographic Summary

This study conducted an online survey for one week in February 2013, using a stratified quota sampling with criteria including the gender and age of smartphone users from the online pool of Macromill Embrain (Ltd.). The total valid sample was 521 cases. Men accounted for 51.4% ( $N = 268$ ) and women 48.6% ( $N = 253$ ) of the respondents. More than half of the respondents ( $N = 344$ , 66%) had a bachelor’s degree. The average monthly income of the respondents was between US\$3,000 and US\$4,000 ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ). The average age was 38.36 ( $SD = 10.82$ ), with age groups evenly distributed in the ranges of 19 to 29 ( $N = 135$ , 25.9%), 30 to 39 ( $N = 140$ , 26.9%), 40 to 49 ( $N = 131$ , 25.1%), and 50 to 59 ( $N = 115$ , 22.1%) years old.

### 4.2 Dependent Variable

For dependent variables, a principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted. The category of “portal news application” ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ , Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .60$ ) was composed of mobile websites and applications for the acquirement of portal news. The category of “the news site application” ( $M = 1.90$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ , Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .91$ ) was composed of applications of a national network, offline-based newspaper agencies, online-only news agencies, and foreign news agencies such as CNN and the *New York Times*. In the multinomial regression, the dependent variables were classified into three groups: portal news application preference ( $N = 124$ ), news site application preference ( $N = 93$ ), and equal use of both news applications ( $N = 304$ ). In multiple regressions, the dependent variables were employed as the two variables representing the usage of portal news and news site applications (1 = rarely use, 5 = use several times every day).

### 4.3 Independent Variables

*Political Discussion Networks.* Political discussion networks for the last month adapted from the study of Gil de Zúñiga et al. [35] were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = rarely discuss, 5 = discuss several times every day) and performed by PCA. Political discussions with friends and family and co-workers and acquaintances were defined as homogeneous networks. Political discussions with people who agree with me, people who disagree with me, people who are more knowledgeable about politics, and people who are less knowledgeable about politics were also defined as heterogeneous networks.

*News Media Use.* The frequency of news use across multiple media platforms based on the study of Baumgartner and Morris [36] was measured on a five-point scale (1 = rarely use; 5 = use several times every day) and performed by PCA. Traditional news media use was averaged by the measurements of news seeking using TV, radio, and newspapers. Internet and mobile phone use for news seeking were also averaged. Social media use was averaged using the measurements of news seeking with SNS and podcast.

*News Genre Consumption.* After performing PCA, news genre consumption via smartphones was categorized as soft and hard news (1 = rarely use; 5 = use frequently), with reference to previous studies [11], [37], [39]. Soft news was composed of sports, entertainment, and culture and arts. Hard news was composed of politics/current affairs, economics, stocks, social events, technology/science, and world events.

Table 1. Descriptive Summary of Independent Variables

Variables	<i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Cronbach's $\alpha$	No. of Items
Political Discussion Networks	HO-PolDis 2.85(1.09)	.84	2
	HE-PolDis 1.91(.84)	.89	4
News Media Use	TR-Media 2.57(.85)	.48	3
	IM-Media 3.79(1.00)	.53	2
	Social Media 2.15(1.02)	.54	2
Genre Consumption	Soft News 3.14(.79)	.59	3
	Hard News 3.08(.81)	.86	6

Note: HO-PolDis; political discussion with homogeneous networks, HE-PolDis; political discussion with heterogeneous networks, TR-Media; Traditional Media, IM-Media; Internet and Mobile Phones.

## 5. RESULTS

### 5.1 Differences Between the Portal News Preference, News Site Application Preference, and Balanced Use Groups

The full model of multinomial logistic regression (MLR) was considered to be significantly reliable ( $\chi^2$  [22,  $N = 521$ ] = 120.24,  $p < .001$ ). This model accounted for 24% (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .24$ ) of the variance between the portal news preference, news site application preference, and balanced use groups.

Table 2 shows the results of the MLR in terms of the difference between the portal news preference and the news site application preference groups. The portal news preference group was more likely to be younger than the news site application preference group. In political discussion networks, the portal news preference group tended to have more political discussions with homogeneous networks but fewer with heterogeneous networks than did the news site application preference group. In regard to the use of news media outlets, the portal news preference group was less likely to use traditional news and social media than the news site application preference group and more likely to use the Internet and mobile phones as news sources.

Table 2. MLR of the Differences between the Portal News Preference and News Site Application Preference Groups on Smartphones

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Exp(B)
Gender	.31	.32	.93	1.36
Age	-.04	.02	6.91**	.96
Income	.12	.11	1.18	1.13
Education	.00	.18	.00	1.00
HO-PolDis	.34	.17	3.96*	1.41
HE-PolDis	-.56	.22	6.27**	.57
TR-Media	-.66	.22	8.60***	.52
IM-Media	1.20	.21	31.50***	3.31
Social Media	-.79	.18	18.80***	.46
Soft News	.24	.23	1.09	1.27
Hard News	-.26	.26	1.02	.77

Note: Reference group is the news site application preference group. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Table 3 demonstrates the results regarding the differences between the balanced use and the news site application preference groups. In political discussion networks, the balanced group was less likely to be heterogeneous than the news site application preference group. In the use of news media outlets, the balanced use group was more likely to use the Internet and mobile phones and less likely to use social media than the news site application preference group.

Table 3. MLR of the Differences between the Balanced Use and News Site Application Preference Groups on Smartphones

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Exp(B)
Gender	.16	.26	.37	1.17
Age	-.02	.01	1.70	.98
Income	.07	.10	.52	1.07
Education	-.14	.14	1.00	.66
HO-PolDis	.17	.15	1.23	1.18
HE-PolDis	-.53	.18	9.08***	.59
TR-Media	-.12	.18	.40	.89
IM-Media	.38	.17	5.09*	1.45
Social Media	-.45	.15	9.31***	.64
Soft News	-.05	.19	.06	.96
Hard News	.17	.22	.60	1.18

Note: Reference group is the news site application preference group. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Table 4 displays the results in regard to the difference between the portal news preference and the balanced use groups. The portal news group was more likely to be younger than the balanced group. In terms of the use of news media outlets, the portal news preference group was less likely to use traditional news and social media and more likely to use the Internet and mobile phones than the balanced use group. For news genre consumption, the portal news preference group was less likely than the balanced use group to consume hard news.

Table 4. MLR of the Differences between the Portal News Preference and Balanced Use Groups on Smartphones

Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	Exp(B)
Gender	.15	.24	.38	1.16
Age	-.03	.01	4.26*	.97
Income	.06	.09	.43	1.06
Education	.14	.13	1.01	1.14
HO-PolCon	.18	.12	2.28	1.19

HE-PolCon	-.03	.18	.02	.97
TR-Media	-.54	.17	10.0***	.58
IM-Media	.82	.16	25.33***	2.27
Social Media	-.34	.14	6.03**	.71
Soft News	.28	.17	2.82	1.32
Hard News	-.43	.19	5.10*	.65

Note: Reference group is the balanced use group. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

### 5.2 Factors Influencing Portal News and News Site Application Usages on Smartphones

The respective models of multiple regression for portal news and news site application usages were considered to be significantly reliable ( $F [11, 509] = 22.50, p < .001$  for portal news application use;  $F [11, 509] = 33.58, p < .001$  for news site application use). This model accounted for 23% ( $R^2 = .23$ ) of the variance in portal news application use and 34% ( $R^2 = .34$ ) of that in news site application use.

As shown in Table 5, the multiple regression results revealed the relative extent to which the factors had a significant impact on portal news application use. In terms of demographics, age ( $\beta = -.13, t = -3.17, p < .001$ ) was influenced by portal news application use on smartphones, but gender, income, and education were not influenced. For political discussion partners, more frequent discussion with close social relations ( $\beta = .11, t = 2.52, p < .001$ ) was affected by portal news application use on smartphones, but that with distant social relations was not affected. In terms of news media use and news genre consumption, more frequent Internet and mobile phone use as a news source ( $\beta = .34, t = 7.48, p < .001$ ) and more soft news genre consumption ( $\beta = .21, t = 5.03, p < .001$ ) significantly affected portal news application use on smartphones.

Table 5. Multiple Regression on Factors Influencing Portal News Application Usage on Smartphones

Predictors		$\beta$	$t$
Demographics	Gender (male=0)	.04	.99
	Age	-.13	-3.17***
	Income	-.01	-.13
	Education	.00	.00
Networks of Political Discussion	HO-PolCon	.11	2.52***
	HE-PolCon	-.04	-.88
News Media Use	TR-Media	-.03	-.64
	IM-Media	.34	7.48***
	Social Media	.07	1.51
News Genre Consumption	Soft News	.21	5.03***
	Hard News	.07	1.51
$R^2$		.33	
Adjusted $R^2$		.31	
F (11, 509)		22.50***	

$N = 521$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

As shown in Table 6, the multiple regression results revealed the relative extent to which the factors had a significant impact on news site application usage. For political discussion partners, frequent discussion with distant social relations ( $\beta = .15, t = 3.62, p < .001$ ) was affected by news site application use on smartphones, but that with close social relations was not affected. In terms of news media use, more frequent traditional media use ( $\beta = .20, t = 4.70, p < .001$ ) and

social media use ( $\beta = .41, t = 10.43, p < .001$ ) and less frequent Internet and mobile phone use ( $\beta = -.10, t = -2.34, p < .05$ ) as news sources significantly affected news site application use on smartphones. In the use of news genre, hard news consumption ( $\beta = .12, t = 2.03, p < .001$ ) influenced news site application use on smartphones.

Table 6. Multiple Regression on Factors Influencing News Site Application Usage on Smartphones

Predictors		$\beta$	$t$
Demographics	Gender (male=0)	.02	.51
	Age	.09	2.41
	Income	-.06	-1.74
	Education	.03	.92
Networks of Political Discussion	Ho-Polcon	.05	1.15
	He-Polcon	.15	3.62***
News Media Use	TR-Media	.20	4.70***
	IM-Media	-.10	-2.34*
	Social Media	.41	10.43***
News Genre Consumption	Soft News	.07	1.77
	Hard News	.12	2.61**
$R^2$		.42	
Adjusted $R^2$		.41	
F (11, 509)		33.58***	

$N = 521$ . \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

## 6. DISCUSSION

The main purpose of the study is to reveal the differences in the factors influencing portal news and news site application usages on smartphones in regard to political discussion networks, diverse types of news media use, and news genre consumption. First, an MLR was conducted on the three groups to identify the dissimilarities. The results showed differences for the three groups of the portal news preference, the news site news preference, and the balanced use of both types in those factors. When compared to the other two groups, the portal news preference group was more likely to use the Internet and mobile phones and less likely to use traditional and social media for news information. The portal news preference group tended to have more political discussions with homogeneous networks and fewer with heterogeneous networks, and vice versa for the news site preference group. The news site preference group was also likely to be different in having more political discussions with heterogeneous networks and more use of social media compared to the balanced use group. It could be implied from the results that the news site preference group is completely different from the portal news groups in terms of political discussion networks and news media use.

Next, the results of the multiple regressions on portal news and news site application uses on smartphones clearly showed that different factors affect both types of application usage. When controlling for demographic variables, age only affected portal news application use, indicating that the younger the respondents were, the more they used portal news application on their smartphones. There was no effect of gender, income, or education on either type of application usage.

Regarding political discussion networks, the more respondents had political discussions with homogeneous networks, the more they used portal news application on their smartphones. On the other hand, the more they had political discussions with heterogeneous networks, the more they used news site application on their smartphones. The use of a range of news media and the consumption of the news genre also had a significant impact on both types of application usages. The more frequently the Internet and mobile phones were employed as a news source and the more the soft news genre was consumed, the more the portal news application was used. However, the more frequently traditional and social media were employed as news sources and the more hard news was consumed, the more news site applications were used.

The overall findings imply that portal news application users increase their likelihood of soft news consumption using the Internet and mobile phones for political discussion with close social relations, while news site application users increase their likelihood of hard news consumption using traditional and social media for political discussions with distant social relations.

The main contribution of the findings is to reveal the close relationship between the variety of information news source available to users and the normalization of news media use patterns. Despite the changing media landscape for news acquisition due to the emergence of smartphone and social media channels, the likelihood that users have taken consideration of and been adapted to these new channels has the potential to simplify the transformation of patterned news use. Specifically, portal news application use is more likely to contribute to the trend of “the softening of news” [33], [34]. This unbalanced tendency may be problematic in that it could lead to so called slacktivism, that is, clicktivism [3], [10]. Portal news users could also be trapped in a vicious circle because they engage in biased news use by avoiding hard news. On the other hand, news site application use has a higher tendency to lead users to search for in-depth news and maintain an awareness of social and political concerns. The results imply that this divergent tendency between portal news and news site preferences has a high probability of leading to further selective exposure only to specific content, resulting in a significant filter bubble effect, which might cause harm to the development of deliberative democracy.

The other contribution of the findings is to reveal the relationship between particular social networks for political discussion and specific types of news applications. There could be a disadvantage in that political discussions with close social networks through portal news use tend to increase political homophily, which might result in political polarization [39]. Consequently, this might result in group polarization due to bounded information flows and limited resources in the similar network structure. Conversely, there could be an advantage in that political discussions with distant social networks through news site application use tend to increase political diversity due to unbounded information flows and unlimited resources in the dynamics of network change. As a result, this might reinforce political deliberation by facilitating the distribution of news and information quickly and precisely [3], [4].

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, it does not directly measure and explain the relationship between smartphone news application usages and online and offline civic engagement. Therefore, future studies need to closely examine this relationship in order to reveal how the new mobile media landscape for news and information has changed news usage patterns and affected civic life. It also does not directly and indirectly analyze the structural relationship between political discussion networks, news media use, news genre consumption, and smartphone news application usages. The structural relationship will reveal the direct and indirect pathways to portal news and news site news application usages, indicating what roles the other three variables play in creating mediating effects. Second, from the methodological perspective, the data obtained from a set of online panel pool could lead to non-probability samples, which may be limited with regard to generalization of the results. Additionally, some variables such as news media types and soft news consumption have inter-item reliability issue which could raise inconsistency between items of particular variable. Hence, future studies should utilize a probability sampling method for generalization as well as clarify and refine the conceptualization and operationalization of the variables applied in the present study for replication. Third, the competition of news distribution channels that is driven by market forces could be an important structural factor affecting the relationships among the four variables. Future studies should thus focus on the association between media competition and user segmentation in order to reveal this effect more explicitly.

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