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A Pilot Study on the Challenges to Sustain the Authenticity of the Malay Heritage Food, *Dodol*, in the Southern States of Malaysia

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Abstract

This research is a pilot study using qualitative method with phenomenological case study approach. Its objective is to explore the challenges of sustaining dodol among entrepreneurs in the southern states of Malaysia. In-depth, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted on three informants who are also dodol entrepreneurs. There are two research questions in this study. The first research question is “How do the entrepreneurs preserve dodol?” in which three subthemes have emerged i.e., (i) maintaining the use of natural ingredients of dodol, (ii) using traditional tips or petua in the process of making dodol and (iii) maintaining traditional skills in the process of making dodol. The second research question is “What are the challenges faced by their businesses to sustain dodol?” in which four themes have emerged i.e., (i) the preservation of dodol’s authentic taste, (ii) the financial challenges in maintaining the business, (iii) the lack of quality ingredients and sources to produce dodol and (iv) the lack of workforce in the process of cooking dodol. The findings of this pilot study revealed the current challenges to sustain dodol business and to preserve dodol as a Malay traditional or heritage food.

Keywords: Dodol, Authenticity, Malay Heritage, Traditional Food, Entrepreneur, Sustainability, Challenges, Pilot Study.

Introduction

The Malaysians consist of various different ethnic groups like Malay, Chinese, Indian and Orang Asli in Peninsular Malaysia and hundreds other indigenous ethnicities in West Malaysia like Iban, Dayak, Kadazan and Murut. To date, Malaysia has a total of 32.7 million population with Malays as the majority (69.9%), followed by Chinese (22.8%), Indians (6.7%) and others (0.7%) (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2022). The Malays were originally from Malay Archipelago whose existence could be traced back since more than a century ago. At that

time, they were known as sailors, traders, fishermen and farmers. Meanwhile, part of their food diet consists of rice and fish (Kamaruzaman et al., 2020). Rice is a staple food for them and even their desserts are mainly made of glutinous rice for example kueh *seri muka*, kueh *lapis*, *tapai*, *onde-onde* and *dodol*; to name a few. Traditional desserts portray the cultural features and characteristics of a community (Contini, et al., 2016). In this case, traditional desserts demonstrate the authenticity, uniqueness and richness of Malay culture and heritage (Sims, 2009; Kamaruzaman et al., 2020). For the purpose of this research, *dodol* is regarded as a popular Malay dessert but is currently listed as one of the endangered heritage foods by the Department of Malaysia National Heritage.

Dodol is a Malay traditional kueh; sweet, gooey and sticky dessert made of glutinous rice flour, palm sugar and coconut milk (Ahmad, 2012). It is synonymous with the Malays around the world and very popular during festive seasons (Ismail, et al., 2021). In Malaysia, *dodol* is easy to be found during Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Hari Raya Aidiladha. Ironically, *dodol* is also threatened by extinction (Ismail, et al., 2021). Nevertheless, limited research in the past did discuss *dodol* in specific ways, particularly in terms of discussing its authenticity and challenges to preserve *dodol* for the future generation. In Malaysia, scholars have shed light on the issues related to its production (Ahmad et al., 2010; Ahmad, 2012; Zahid et al., 2012). Another aspect that can also be discussed is the authenticity of *dodol* that should not be neglected just because of modernization (Ismail, et al., 2021). In addition, *bahulu* is another popular Malay kueh which has also been investigated in terms of its authenticity, demand and production process (Abdul Wahid, 2015; Abdul Wahid & Mudor, 2016).

As mentioned earlier, past studies mostly focused on the production process of *dodol* in Malaysia but the present pilot study focuses on its entrepreneurial aspects with limited information on ways to preserve the authenticity of *dodol*. This research explores the challenges of sustaining the authenticity of *dodol* among Malay entrepreneurs through two research questions:

RQ 1: How do the entrepreneurs preserve authentic *dodol*?

RQ 2: What are the challenges faced by their businesses to sustain *dodol*?

Literature Review

Dodol's Insight

Dodol is a Malay traditional dessert that has chewy and sticky texture as well as sweet, caramel-like and smoky in taste that is made of glutinous rice flour, palm sugar and coconut milk (Ismail et al., 2021; Seow et al., 2021). It was traced back in 1926 in Indonesia during the ruling of Dutch (Aziz, 2017). Its main ingredient, rice, is a symbol of agrarian culture of the Betawi people (Sudiyanti, 2016). Betawi was translated as "Ancient Java" in Dutch language (Shahab, 2002). *Dodol* has always been so closely associated with the Malays wherever they live in this world. It is also popular and can be found in Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, India and Myanmar (Ismail, et al., 2021). In Malaysia, *dodol* is popular especially during wedding ceremony, Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Hari Raya Aidiladha (Zahid, et al., 2012; Ahmad, 2012; Ismail, et al., 2021). Malaysians in general call it *dodol* but those from two southern states in Malaysia, Malacca, call it *kelamai* or *gelamai* while in Negeri Sembilan it is known as *penganan* (Ismail, et al., 2021).

A Malay Traditional Dessert

Gastronomically, traditional food is a product that remains its ingredients and process without undergoing any manipulations. The recipe has been passed down across many generations for ages (Guerrero, et al., 2009). Trichopoulou et al (2006) discussed that traditional food refers to the use of similar ingredients and process from the past until today with identifiable geographical origins. *Dodol* is one of the traditional Malay desserts categorised under these characteristics (Zahid, et al., 2012; Ahmad, 2012). In the case of current research, *dodol* has always been known to be produced using familiar ingredients surrounding places in Malaysia i.e., glutinous rice flour, palm sugar and coconut milk which can easily and freshly be found in this country (Figure 1) (Ismail & Ariffin, 2015). In the process of making *dodol*, the glutinous rice is pounded and sieved into flour, the coconut milk is freshly squeezed from grated coconut meat in which the fruits are plucked from coconut trees planted everywhere in the country and the palm sugar or *gula melaka* is cooked for hours to produce something sweet, dark and creamy taste (Ismail, et al., 2021). Furthermore, the cooking process of *dodol* in Malaysia has been preserved since the olden days to maintain its authenticity (Ismail, et al., 2021) i.e., manual labour, usage of firewood and traditional cooking utensils (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Matured coconut (left), palm sugar (middle) and glutinous rice (right) are the main ingredients of *dodol*.

Source : Personal picture by Norsyahidah Ismail (left), google image (middle & right)



Figure 2. Traditional methods of processing *dodol* using manual labour, usage of firewood and traditional equipment.

Source : Personal picture by Norsyahidah Ismail

Sustaining *Dodol* Tradition among Entrepreneurs

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is the biggest contributor in Malaysian economy which is of great significance to the people income and country's economic development and growth (Samsudin et al., 2015). Additionally, services sector makes up the largest number of business establishments whereas micro-size establishments are the majority (Musa & Chinniah, 2016). At the moment, there are lack of studies focusing on traditional food products among micro-size SME particularly the Malay traditional food and specifically the *dodol*. As micro enterprises are crucial in the stability and strength of Malaysia's economic development towards vision 2030, this study aims to explore deeper viewpoints of the traditional food as a way to support the country's future economic development. Scholars have mutually agreed there are many external and internal factors that contribute to the sustainability of a business. For instance, in Indonesia, in order to get customers' attention, entrepreneurs need to deal with various issues and problems related to sales and marketing, financial management, human resources and limitation in creativity and innovation (Sudarmiatin & Suharto, 2016). Meanwhile, Damardjati (1999) listed the availability of raw materials as well as finance and marketing are the main problems faced by traditional food business owners. Todiruca (2018) added that traditional food businesses in Italy struggled with the issues of inflation, perishability and seasonality. Therefore, effective solutions to overcome the problems must be investigated and discussed in order to create business sustainability (Sudarmiatin & Suharto, 2016). Ismail et al (2013) identified several external and internal factors as the determinants of traditional cuisine manufacturing. Zain et al (2012) discussed the barriers of sustaining business among Malay food entrepreneurs which are increased raw material prices and overhead costs, cash flow problems and lack of external financing. The external problems listed are government support, credit facilities and the current economic environment. Therefore, a clear statement about the right source of internal and external factors needs to be clarified so that the investigation of current problems among *dodol* entrepreneurs are clear and can be applied to future *dodol* entrepreneurs. In order to have a sustainable business and keep producing authentic *dodol*, this pilot study is useful in analysing the current economic situation and in discovering the entrepreneurs' strengths and weaknesses to survive and expand their businesses (Hashim, 2015).

Methodology

This research is a pilot study using qualitative method with phenomenological case study approach. Phenomenological case studies were applied to understand the phenomenon of interests from the informants' experiences in the current phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, this kind of method is appropriate in this study as it focuses on the "what" and "how" elements to explore and gain in-depth understanding of the phenomena in the setting. In this case, the entrepreneurial challenges in sustaining *dodol* as a traditional food are investigated. Case study design employs a unique explanation of study design and generates new knowledge and experience from informants (Silverman, 2013). At the same situation, its design allows the researcher to have an in-depth investigation of a complex phenomenon based on the context of real life (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Case studies were applied in this study to focus on the research setting in the southern states of Malaysia which include Johor, Malacca and Negeri Sembilan. Three active *dodol* entrepreneurs were selected as informants i.e., Entrepreneur 1, 2 and 3 using purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. The informants were contacted via telephone for the researcher to explain about the purpose of

study and to discuss on the time, availability and location of the next physical appointment where a one-hour, face-to-face interview was conducted. The in-depth, semi-structured interview has allowed the researcher to probe for more details from the informants. Epoche was applied during the data collection to avoid the researcher from misinterpreting research data using her own lens and understanding. It is an important part of interview to protect the purity of data according to informants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). All interviews were recorded using a voice recorder after gaining the informants' consent. The interview was transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis using Nvivo software to establish codes, categories and development to create themes and answer the research questions.

Results and Discussion

Table 1

Informant's Profile

No	Informant	Age	Gender	Experience	State
1	Entrepreneur 1	62	Female	22 years	Johor
2	Entrepreneur 2	45	Male	20 years	Negeri Sembilan
3	Entrepreneur 3	35	Female	20 years	Malacca

Table 1 shows the informants' profiles in this study. The three informants are *dodol* entrepreneurs from the southern states of Malaysia i.e., Johor, Malacca and Negeri Sembilan. They possess at least 20 years of experience in *dodol* business so they understand the challenges to sustain *dodol* as a Malay heritage in Malaysia. The data was analysed following the research objectives. The main themes of this pilot study were developed by highlighting the informants' experiences and perspectives. Most importantly, the developed themes fit the two research questions. The first research question is "how do the entrepreneurs preserve authentic *dodol*?" in which three subthemes have emerged i.e., (i) maintaining the use of natural ingredients of *dodol*, (ii) using traditional tips or *petua* in the process of making *dodol* and (iii) maintaining traditional skills in the process of making *dodol*.

Maintaining the Use of Natural Ingredients of *Dodol*

Dodol is made from glutinous rice flour, palm sugar and coconut milk in which the informants still use the same ingredients in order to preserve the authenticity of *dodol*. Entrepreneur 1 from Johor stated that she uses white glutinous rice flour as the main ingredient of *dodol* instead of black glutinous flour.

"...for example, to prepare dodol, we need to choose the flavour. If white glutinous rice flavour, we use white glutinous rice as the source... we pound, sieve and soak..."

Next, the quantity and quality of coconut milk can greatly affect *dodol*'s taste and appearance. Thus, it is important to measure the quality and quantity of coconut milk properly to produce the right taste and texture. The perfect amount and freshness can help *dodol* holds its moisture and chewy texture. Entrepreneur 1 further explained she still processes coconut milk manually using machine at her premise. She grates coconut meat and squeezes it using machine to extract the freshest coconut milk. This step is economic and can maintain the freshness of coconut.

“...it depends on the sugar and coconut milk used. The amount of sugar and coconut milk must be good enough. The coconut needs to be fresh and must be cooked properly...”

Meanwhile, in Negeri Sembilan, Entrepreneur 2 mentioned he uses sugarcane-based palm sugar as one of *dodol* ingredients. He thinks the best type of sugar for *dodol* is *gula enau* that gives a uniquely fragrant taste to the sweet dessert.

“...dodol uses palm sugar from sugarcane but the best is gula enau. The cooking method is still the same. The taste of gula enau... its aroma makes the dodol fragrance. If not using gula enau, dodol’s taste is still good, but less “kick”. Gula enau or gula melaka is the best! Another thing is... the colour it gives... more attractive... darker...”

Using Traditional Tips or *Petua* in the Process of Making *Dodol*

In Negeri Sembilan, Entrepreneur 2 emphasised on the importance of applying traditional tips or also known as *petua* in preparing *dodol*. One of the tips for having a good texture and taste is by using the right wrapping techniques or skills for long-term storing purpose. For example, *dodol* needs to be cooled down before wrapping it in *topong* which is a woven basket made of *mengkuang* leaf. This part in the wrapping process needs to be done on the same day to avoid the formation of moulds and fungi as the *dodol* cools down.

“...dodol is poured in topong while still hot. Then, we let it cool just like that because if you want to wait until the dodol is cooled down, it will be difficult for moulds to form. That is why I just pour it into plastic packaging. It is easy for me...”

In addition to that, Entrepreneur 2 mentioned that at his *dodol* stall, he uses a food cover on the top of *dodol* container for an easy cooling process and avoid the *dodol* from moulding.

“...when pouring the dodol in the topong quickly after finishing cooking dodol? No! It will get moulded easily. You need to wait until dodol is cooled down. You may use a cover... a food cover. Don’t cover it completely. It turns to moulds very quickly. You need to let the dodol cool down... as easy as that...”

Similarly in Malacca, the informant also repeated that *dodol* needs time to rest or cool down for at least one night. At this time, direct touching from the bare hand must be avoided to prevent cross contamination. After that, airtight packaging is applied as soon as possible to preserve the good quality of *dodol*.

“...let’s focus on the handling process of dodol. You cannot touch dodol with your bare hand. No direct touch! If we want to seal that, we use airtight packaging. We cannot hold the packaging process. It must be done as soon as possible. It is hot... you need to cool it down for one night. Only then, you can start the packaging process. At that time, I need to hire people to do overtime to finish the packaging process...”

Maintaining Traditional Skills in the Process of Making *Dodol*

Next, one of the traditional skills in the process of making *dodol* is the right stirring technique by understanding the right level of liquidity of *dodol*. Entrepreneur 1 from Johor shared that stirring *dodol* requires different styles at every stage of liquidity. *Dodol* is easy to be stirred when it is still in liquid form, but as it becomes thicker, the stirring speed needs to be quicker and the stirrer needs to reach to the bottom of the wok during the stirring process. According to her, if this step is skipped, *dodol* will have crusts or known as *kerak dodol*.

"...it is different. When in liquid form, you may use one hand like this... the stirrer needs to reach to the bottom of the wok to avoid crusty dodol and when it becomes thicker, the dodol needs to be stirred carefully... otherwise it will stick to the wok. Crusty!"

Entrepreneur 2 agreed with the statement as he repeatedly saying that *dodol* needs to be constantly and slowly stirred until it thickens. As it thickens, the *dodol* needs to be stirred at higher speed to avoid burning.

"...you need to stir it constantly... slowly... when it becomes concentrated, you need to add your speed... if not, dodol will burn..."

Moreover, the stirring of *dodol* keeps changing when reaching certain stages of liquidity. Entrepreneur 2 said he will keep on stirring it until the texture becomes chewy, creamier and heavier. Then, the push and forward technique is applied until the cooking process completes.

"...stirring styles are specified according to the time of dodol gets cooked. Dodol is concentrated in which we use the style... mmm... pull and push forward..."

Next, for research question two, four themes were identified to highlight the challenges faced by entrepreneurs to sustain the authenticity of *dodol* and their business i.e., (i) preserving the authentic taste of *dodol*, (ii) financial challenges in maintaining *dodol* business, (iii) lack of sources of the original coconut fruit as the main ingredient, rubber firewood as the flame and *mengkuang* leaves as the traditional packaging and (iv) lack of workforce in the process of making *dodol*.

Preserving the Authentic Taste of *Dodol*

Entrepreneurs still preserve the authentic taste of *dodol* in order to attract customers in which they maintain a balance amount of sweetness, smokiness and coconutty flavour in *dodol*. In Negeri Sembilan, informant 2 mentioned that authentic taste *dodol* is preferred and has always been the favourite of many. For him, the use of freshly grated coconut will keep the aroma of coconutty flavour in *dodol* while the sweetness comes from the use of palm sugar.

"...in my opinion, the taste must be there. It needs to have the creamy taste of original coconut milk, grated from fresh coconut. Then it should have sweet taste. Not too much, but still sweet. I still practice it in my business..."

Another informant from Johor also said that although different people have different opinions and preferences about how good *dodol* should taste like, her customers love her *dodol* because of its authenticity i.e., soft and smooth texture and this is why she has many regular customers.

"...it depends on the person. Everyone has their preferences. Group A likes dodol to taste like this due to its softness. They are looking for the special dodol, which my

worker cooks. Customers look for sticky dodol, soft, and smooth dodol. Yes, that's it... if you want to ask about it, you can ask the customers. My customers want the special taste of dodol. Coconutty, dark brown and sweet. Like what I am producing now..."

Next, the informant in Malacca added that the chewy texture *dodol* tastes good and complies the authentic taste of *dodol*, but she prefers the fresh and soft texture of *dodol*. These criteria need to be followed by the entrepreneurs in the business although there have been many adjustments being made throughout modernisation. Although the new generation likes the altered taste of *dodol*, Entrepreneur 3 keeps on producing the authentic *dodol* as it contributes the highest margin for the business.

"I like soft dodol. I like the sweet dodol, coconutty taste, chewy, fresh dodol. I am still producing it. I mean the authentic dodol as many customers like it very much. The sales of authentic dodol is quite ok and I also produce variety of flavoured dodol but in small quantities..."

Financial Challenges in Maintaining Dodol Business

The next challenge to sustain the authenticity of *dodol* is the financial challenge. The overall costs of the main *dodol* ingredients are high. For instance, in Malacca, Entrepreneur 3 shared that she spends RM100,000 per month to bear the costs of ingredients. However, as her *dodol* business is quite big, the high costs can be covered by the profit gained.

"Every month the costs of dodol operation reach RM100,000. This is for dodol only. Expensive right? Imagine I need to maintain for a year... yes, it is challenging and tough. If any batch of dodol is spoilt, I need to cut the costs for that particular month. But so far I can still manage it and I also gain high profit..."

Consistently, Entrepreneur 1 in Johor also opined that the costs for making *dodol* are high and not all entrepreneurs can afford the business in the long term. For her business, she need to spend for about RM1,000 for one wok of *dodol*. She needs to absorb the costs if the *dodol* is spoilt during the production process.

"...Yes, there is. I like it, but not them. The cost of making dodol is too high. For one wok of dodol, the capital is RM1,000. Just imagine, what if the dodol gets spoilt during the cooking process? The loss is RM1,000. Now, the cost is expensive..."

She further stated that she has to spend RM1,000 just to purchase *dodol* ingredients. The cost is increasing nowadays compared to the past, whereas the raw ingredients only cost her RM600-RM700 per wok of *dodol*. This is mainly because authentic *dodol* uses natural ingredients such as freshly grated coconut and original palm sugar i.e., *gula melaka*. Unfortunately, nowadays the prices of raw ingredients are accelerating but at the same time they are struggling to maintain the authentic quality of *dodol*.

"...yes, we need to buy all ingredients. It is one thousand Ringgit. That is why I need to control the quality. One wok of dodol costs me one thousand Ringgit. Last time, when the price of ingredient was still low, we only spent 600-700 Ringgit per wok. Now the capital of one wok of dodol has reached one thousand Ringgit."

Lack of Sources of Original Coconut Fruit as the Main Ingredient, Rubber Firewood as the Flame and Mengkuang Leaves as the Traditional Packaging

Another challenge to sustain the authenticity of *dodol* is the lack of flaming sources such as rubber firewood, original coconut and *mengkuang* leaves. For example, in Negeri Sembilan, Entrepreneur 2 shared that the source of coconut is decreasing at his place. According to him, in the past, his house was surrounded by many coconut trees, thus the coconut sources is available at any time. However, currently, only a few of coconut trees are available. Thus, he has coconut shortage and needs to outsource coconuts from other places.

"...coconut... yes, last time the coconut tree is near us. Now, most of the trees have died. Also, many trees have been cut down. There is a lack of sources of coconut now. I need to buy the coconut from somewhere else..."

Informant from Johor also opined that the source of traditional flaming i.e., firewood has also declined. Rubber firewood is hard to find at the moment compared to the olden times. According to her, the number of trees is declining due to new house schemes that have existed around her house. Thus, the availability of rubber firewood is decreasing and this affects the determination to maintain the authenticity of *dodol* using natural sources.

"...yes, the method of cooking remains but the usage of firewood is changing. Now it is hard to find the firewood from rubber tree. Trees are rarely seen around my house. Many houses have been built nearby, replacing the rubber tree. Last time, I just look around and can collect them easily. This is only one example. This is the different than the olden times..."

In addition, Entrepreneur 3 from Malacca shared that *mengkuang* leaves also face the same problem just like other natural ingredients due to modernisation. At the same time, the experts who know how to wove dried *mengkuang* leaves into *tampin*, a traditional basket-like *dodol* packaging are also decreasing in number. In this case, the usage of *mengkuang* leaves has been widely replaced by plastic packaging.

"The basket from woven mengkuang leaves., now it's hard to find... it is hard. Because the old people used to be the experts in making the basket. Sadly now there are not many of them left in this world..."

Lack of Workforce in the Process of Making *Dodol*

The last challenge is the lack of workforce in the process of making authentic *dodol*. As discussed in the earlier section, production of traditional *dodol* is hard, especially the pre- and during the production process. Furthermore, the selling and marketing part remains as a huge challenge for many entrepreneurs. Entrepreneur 3 from Malacca explained that she has problems with employee shortage. For example, the marketing department requires skilful IT staff to handle the company's website. She also claimed that the new generation is impatient, cannot afford additional workload when necessary and cannot accept the management order while working.

"Oh... customers can pay throughout shoppee. Yes, I am interested in doing this paying method. Lack of workers is the main reason I hold that... it is good to have a website. Yes... people will regard or company has high profile. Yes I am interested but I don't have enough staff to handle that. I need to monitor all things. Kids nowadays... sorry I have to say this. Kids nowadays cannot tolerate and we cannot give advice to them. If they don't want to accept the advice or warning... they will simply leave the job. They can't stand for the challenge. Don't want to work harder... too sensitive. That is the factor."

Another argument about the lack of workforce in *dodol* business has also consistently been repeated by the same informant. She shared having to face the problem of high percentage of workers quitting from her company. As a result, they need to always recruit new employees in which this has become so time consuming for her. She has to spend time, money and energy to provide training for her new employees and cannot focus on other areas of the business.

"...sometimes, if we need to focus on business, but the workers keep on changing, yes we have problems with that. We need to train new workers. We are not a listed company. The big company has human resources department but me? I am still crawling in this business..."

Conclusion

The results of this pilot show that the entrepreneurs involved manage to preserve the authenticity of *dodol* and their businesses by maintaining the traditional ingredients and processing methods although there are many challenges that they have to face internally and externally. As this is only a pilot study, the preliminary results shown are not final until the research is fully completed and the data cannot be used to explain the whole phenomena being investigated. Further recommendations are needed to improve this research.

Recommendation

Improvements are needed during real data collection which include improving the interview protocols with specific interview questions to gain in-depth understanding and to explain the phenomena in the setting, especially on preserving the authenticity of *dodol* and additional challenges in sustaining the business. Moreover, the process of data collection must be improved to stabilise the data. For instance, triangulation of data needs to be supported by observation from entrepreneurs and additional number of entrepreneur to strengthen the data until reaching the saturation point. Hopefully the recommendations will improve the real process of data collection and generate meaningful data in the real research.

Declaration

Availability of data and materials

All data and materials are used in accordance of the guideline and listed in the reference section. Image are owned by the authors and some provided from google images.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' Contribution

All authors have contributed their ideas and in the overall construction of this manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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