

A Systematic Review of Flexible Work Arrangements in China: Development Trends and Socioeconomic Impacts Over the Last Decade

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Abstract

Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) have increasingly become a key feature of modern work systems, driven by the rapid progression of globalization and information technology. This systematic review synthesizes findings from 25 peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2024 to examine the development, drivers, and impacts of FWAs in China. The review reveals a widespread adoption of FWAs in various forms, such as flexible core hours and telecommuting. Policy changes, particularly adjustments in maternity leave regulations, have played a crucial role in facilitating this shift. The primary drivers behind adopting FWAs include technological advancements, the diversification of workforce needs, and shifts in organizational strategies. Implementing FWAs is associated with positive outcomes, including enhanced job satisfaction, task performance, creativity, work-family balance, and reduced turnover intentions. This review also identifies cultural nuances in adopting FWAs and offers strategic insights for optimizing their application in China.

Keywords: China, Development Trends, Flexible Working Arrangement, Socioeconomic, Systematic Review

Introduction

The rapid advancement of globalization and information technology has significantly transformed traditional work patterns. Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs), initially introduced in the 1970s in Europe and the United States, have since gained widespread adoption in China, attracting considerable attention (Aslan et al., 2022). FWAs represent an organization's recognition of the diverse needs of its workforce, offering flexibility that enhances job satisfaction, task performance, and creativity. These improvements, in turn, contribute to greater organizational effectiveness (Anand et al., 2010; Wang & Shalley, 2018).

Over the past decade, Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) in China have experienced substantial adjustments in response to evolving socioeconomic conditions and increasing labor market diversification. Policy changes, particularly those related to family planning, have profoundly influenced the adoption and promotion of FWAs. The introduction of the two-child policy in 2013, followed by the comprehensive two-child policy in 2016 and the three-child policy in 2021, has intensified the work-family balance challenges faced by female employees, particularly working mothers (Jing et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). These developments have heightened the need for societal attention to women's reproductive rights and organizational efforts to reassess and optimize work arrangements, ensuring better support for the career advancement of working mothers.

The expansion of the digital economy and the widespread adoption of telecommuting technologies have diversified the forms of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs), offering working mothers increased options and flexibility. FWAs have proven effective in alleviating work-related stress, enhancing productivity, and fostering a better work-family balance. These arrangements help reduce the time and energy demands of childbirth and child-rearing, granting working mothers greater autonomy in managing their dual responsibilities (Zhou & Ji, 2023). Despite the growing body of research on FWAs globally, there remains a significant gap in studies addressing China's specific policy context, particularly regarding the implications of policies such as the "three-child" policy for working mothers. The need for more focused research in this area is evident.

Existing studies face challenges in designing scientifically sound and practical Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) that align with the specific needs of enterprises and employees. Ensuring employees' physical and mental well-being, promoting work-life balance, and maintaining organizational efficiency remain critical issues across industries and workforce segments. A segmentation study targeting specific groups or industries would provide valuable insights. This systematic literature review examines the trends and impacts of FWAs in China over the past decade, focusing on their effects on working mothers. The findings will establish a foundation for future in-depth research into the level of organizational support for FWAs, the prevalence of flexible work practices, and their influence on turnover intentions among working mothers. These insights are essential for addressing existing research gaps and advancing the development and implementation of FWAs in China.

This study conducted a systematic literature review of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) over the past decade (2014–2024), aiming to explore their development, the driving forces behind their adoption, and the impacts of their implementation. The research addressed four key questions: (1) What is the current state of FWA in China? This includes an analysis of the main types, forms, and prevalence of FWAs, as well as cross-country comparisons of policies, systems, and cultural practices. (2) What are the primary motivations behind the development of FWAs? (3) How do FWAs affect employee work attitudes, performance, turnover intentions, and work-family balance? (4) How do FWAs vary across cultural contexts, and what are the optimization strategies for FWAs within the Chinese cultural framework? By addressing these questions, this study aimed to provide business managers in China with insights that inform decision-making regarding implementing and optimizing FWAs.

Methodology

This study employed the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to systematically analyze research on Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) in China over the past decade (2014–2024). Originating from meta-analysis in the medical field, the SLR method is recognized for its scientific rigor and has been widely adopted across disciplines, including education and management. By applying this method, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive, objective, and accurate assessment of the current research landscape, development trends, and challenges related to FWAs. This approach facilitates the identification of gaps and offers insights to address key issues in the field, thereby contributing to more informed decision-making and strategic planning.

To ensure the literature's comprehensiveness and representativeness, this study searched several authoritative databases, including Web of Science, PubMed, China Knowledge Network, and China Wipro. The literature was restricted from 2014 to 2024 to capture the most current and relevant research. A targeted search strategy was employed, utilizing precise and well-defined keywords such as "flexible working system," "telecommuting," "home office," and "Flexible Work Arrangements." This approach ensured the inclusion of cutting-edge studies relevant to developing and implementing Flexible Work Arrangements.

Criteria for Selection of Literature

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the literature analysis, it was essential to provide a clear and comprehensive view of the development and adjustment of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) in China over the past decade. Based on the research questions, this study developed specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1) for the initial pool of 129 retrieved articles. The primary screening criterion required that the literature be directly related to FWAs, including their definitions, types, influencing factors, and implementation outcomes. Additional criteria were applied to ensure the quality of the research sample, prioritizing studies published in high-quality journals, such as SCI/SSCI-indexed and core journals. Finally, the literature had to address core research topics, such as the development, adjustment, and impact of FWAs.

Table 1

Literature Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

No.	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
1	The content of the literature is related to flexible working arrangements	Literature does not relate to flexible working arrangements
2	Literature is available in full text on the Internet	Literature is not available in full text on the Internet
3	The article is a journal article	Book manuscripts, conference papers, reports, etc.
4	The article contains at least three pages	The article is less than three pages
5	Literature needs to cover the core research themes of the development, adjustment, and impact of flexible working arrangements in China	The literature does not cover the core research themes of the development, adjustment, and impact of flexible working arrangements in China

Literature Selection Process

This study adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, a widely recognized framework for international systematic reviews. The PRISMA method includes 27 essential indicators (e.g., title, abstract, methods, results, discussion) and follows four key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Liberati et al., 2009). PRISMA enhances the transparency and accuracy of systematic reviews by clearly outlining the process of literature selection and the reasons for inclusion or exclusion. Accordingly, through these four stages, this study applied the PRISMA framework to rigorously assess and filter relevant literature on Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) in China.

The Rayyan tool was utilized following a three-step process during the manual screening stage. First, irrelevant studies were excluded based on their titles and abstracts, ensuring that the remaining literature was closely aligned with Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs), including definitions, types, influencing factors, and implementation outcomes. Second, eligible articles were downloaded for preliminary review, excluding inaccessible literature. Finally, a detailed full-text review was conducted, prioritizing studies published in high-quality journals, such as SCI/SSCI-indexed and core journals, to ensure the inclusion of the most relevant and robust research (Ouzzani et al., 2016). The complete process is illustrated in Figure 1.

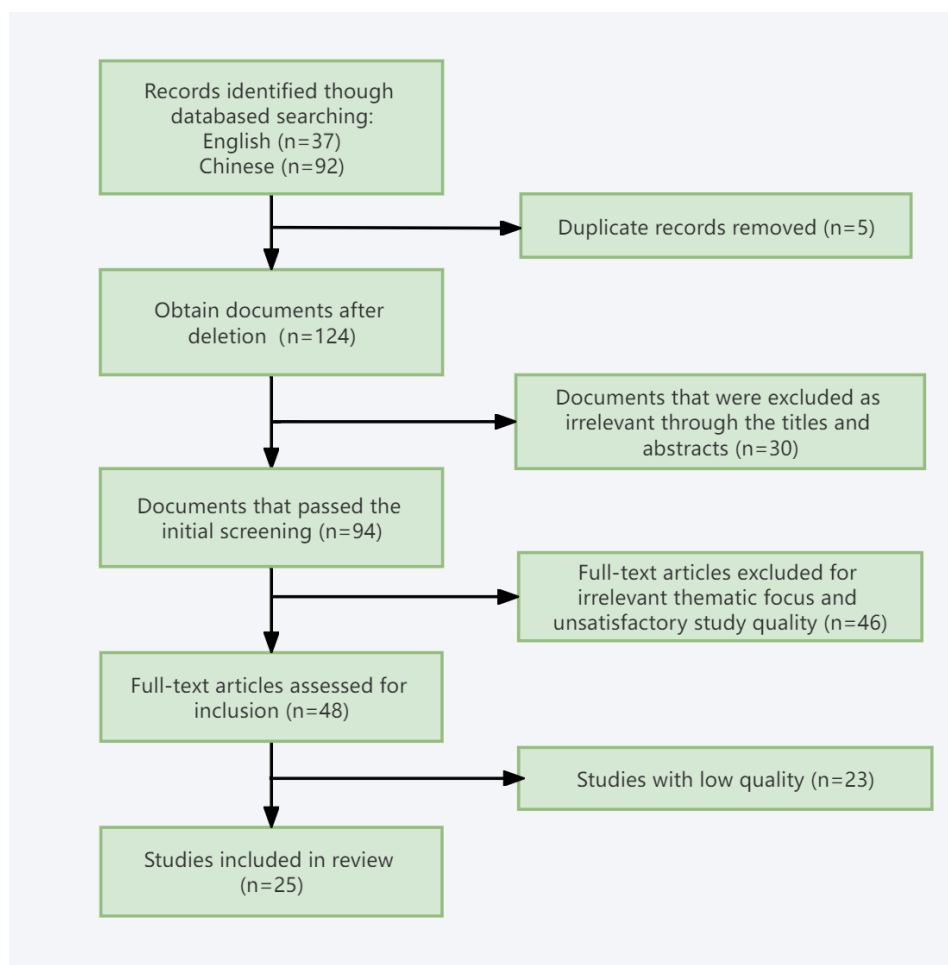


Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram of Search Procedures and Result

Analysis and Result

Following a rigorous screening process, 25 documents were selected for analysis, with publication dates ranging primarily from 2016 to 2023. Notably, research on Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) has become increasingly prevalent since 2019, reflecting growing interest and relevance.

When selecting the literature, priority was given to studies published in high-quality journals. Of the 25 articles chosen, 12 were sourced from core journals, while the remaining 13 came from general journals, indicating that there is still substantial room for further research on Flexible Work Systems (FWS) in China. Additionally, the selected articles cover various topics: some focus on specific variables, while others explore the application of FWS in particular industries or populations. This diversity in research topics highlights the multifaceted nature of FWS studies in China.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis of the Systematic Review

code	year of publication	core journal	Variables or industries studied
1	2023	yes	Female entrepreneurs
2	2019	no	Manufacturing
3	2021	yes	Research workers
4	2023	no	Platform workers
5	2023	no	Well-being
6	2017	no	Political economy
7	2019	no	Employee motivation
8	2023	yes	leadership
9	2021	no	Legal system practice
10	2022	yes	healthcare worker
11	2019	no	Service industry
12	2021	yes	Corporate culture
13	2024	yes	Older people
14	2016	no	Work-life balance
15	2022	yes	Work engagement
16	2017	yes	Impact on traffic relief
17	2022	yes	Work innovation
18	2019	yes	Work performance
19	2024	no	Human resource management
20	2016	yes	Work-family balance
21	2021	no	College counselors
22	2022	yes	Quality of employment
23	2024	no	Ophthalmic nurses
24	2022	no	Work stress
25	2024	no	Primary school teachers

During the document analysis phase, thematic analysis was employed to organize and interpret the selected articles systematically. This approach facilitated an in-depth examination of the current development of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) in China, the motivations for their adoption, and the effects of their implementation. The analysis also

highlighted the variations in FWA practices across different corporate cultures and value systems. The study aims to inform future research and management practices by clarifying these issues and offering insights into optimizing FWAs in diverse organizational contexts.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study systematically reviews the literature to comprehensively analyze the development, driving factors, and implementation outcomes of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) in China over the past decade. The key conclusions derived from this review are as follows:

1) Developments in Flexible Working Arrangements Around the World

In recent years, the scope of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) in China has significantly diversified, with four prevalent forms: core working hours, compressed workweek, flexible commuting time, and teleworking. Core working hours allow employees to organize their own schedules outside of set hours (e.g., 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.), while the compressed workweek reduces the number of workdays by extending daily hours, such as four days of ten-hour shifts. Flexible commuting time permits employees to select their start and end times within a specified range, and teleworking—driven by advancements in information technology—enables employees to work from home or other remote locations. Sun (2022) identified four primary dimensions for implementing FWAs in Chinese enterprises: time, space, employment form, and work content. This study also proposes defining FWAs as a system where organizations and employees negotiate time, spatial boundaries, work content, and contractual arrangements to achieve mutual flexibility.

Analysis of the literature reveals that the degree of policy support and implementation of FWAs varies across regions in China. For instance, Shanghai's recently introduced Regulations on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests allow female employees to negotiate flexible work arrangements with their employers during specific periods, reflecting a focus on women's rights. Shandong Province has implemented the "mama positions" model, balancing women's work and childcare responsibilities through various flexible work methods, including mobile and team-based positions. In Shenzhen, companies are granted flexibility in arranging working hours, provided they adhere to labor laws, with human resources departments overseeing compliance to foster a win-win situation for both employees and employers. Additionally, regions such as Shengzhou and Yichang have experimented with 4.5-day and 2.5-day flexible work systems, respectively, offering valuable insights for diversified FWA practices nationwide. Other regions are similarly exploring locally tailored FWAs.

Differences in FWA implementation also emerge at the industry level. In the technology and internet sectors, where work relies heavily on computer and network technology, employees often work remotely and at varying times, making FWAs more common. The adaptability of working hours and locations in these sectors enhances employee satisfaction and creativity. However, industries such as manufacturing and healthcare face challenges in adopting FWAs due to the need for employees to perform tasks at specific times and locations, ensuring smooth operations and continuity of services. Consequently, these industries must balance operational efficiency and employee needs when implementing FWAs.

Despite these variations, some commonalities exist. FWAs' primary objective is consistent: to improve work efficiency, enhance quality of life, and meet individual needs. Technological advancements and shifting labor market demands have also established FWAs as a critical trend in modern enterprise management.

2) Motivations for the Development of Flexible Working Arrangements

From a macro-environmental perspective, shifts in the socio-economic landscape have been pivotal in driving the emergence of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) as a key trend in modern enterprise management. Several factors have contributed to this development. First, technological advancements have provided robust support for teleworking and online collaboration, significantly accelerating the adoption and application of FWAs. Second, with increasing diversity and personalization in labor market demands, organizations must implement more flexible employment practices to meet employee needs and maintain competitiveness. Finally, policy adjustments have created a favorable external environment for FWAs, with government interventions such as tax incentives and social security subsidies playing a crucial role in supporting their implementation. In summary, socio-economic changes, technological progress, labor market dynamics, and policy reforms have collectively promoted the widespread application of FWAs in contemporary enterprise management.

Internally, enterprise-specific factors have also been instrumental in the development of FWAs. The growing demand for work flexibility and work-life balance among employees has led organizations to reevaluate their employment practices, enhancing employee satisfaction and loyalty. Additionally, shifts in strategic organizational objectives have driven the adoption of flexible employment practices. Organizations must continuously adjust their strategies to maintain a competitive edge and achieve sustainable growth in response to a rapidly changing market and increasing competitive pressures. FWAs, as an efficient employment model, enable enterprises to allocate human resources more flexibly, thereby supporting the achievement of strategic goals. Consequently, diversifying employee needs and evolving organizational strategies have been key drivers of enterprises' growing demand for FWA.

3) Effectiveness of the Implementation of Flexible Working Arrangements

The impact of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) on employee attitudes is substantial. First, regarding job satisfaction, FWAs enable employees to achieve a better balance between work and life, effectively reducing work-related stress and significantly enhancing job satisfaction. Second, FWAs strengthen employees' sense of identity and belonging, fostering greater organizational commitment. By granting employees more autonomy and flexibility, organizations stimulate motivation and loyalty, increasing employees' willingness to contribute to the company's growth. Additionally, FWAs enhance employee engagement, as the ability to control working time and location encourages employees to value their autonomy, resulting in higher enthusiasm and productivity, thereby adding value to the organization. Thus, FWAs positively influence employee attitudes, promoting satisfaction and commitment.

FWAs also affect employee performance, turnover intentions, and work-family balance. In terms of performance, FWAs significantly improve task performance by allowing employees to work in environments and at times that suit them best. Flexible work hours and locations fosters creativity and innovation, enhancing innovative performance. Moreover,

FWAs reduce turnover intentions by facilitating a better work-life balance, allowing employees to minimize work interference with family life. This additional family time helps employees care for their families while maintaining a harmonious balance between professional and personal responsibilities. Consequently, FWAs are crucial in enhancing performance, lowering turnover intentions, and promoting work-family harmony.

In the context of China's family planning policies, particularly for working mothers, FWAs provide essential support by alleviating the pressures of time and energy allocation. Flexible work hours and locations enable working mothers to manage their work and family responsibilities more effectively, reducing the strain that work can impose on family life and fostering a more harmonious work-family balance. FWAs also enhance job satisfaction for working mothers by allowing them to organize their work and personal lives better. Furthermore, these arrangements mitigate the conflicts and contradictions that arise from balancing dual roles, enabling working mothers to better cope with their challenges. Ultimately, by providing improved working conditions and support, FWAs help reduce turnover intentions among working mothers and ensure greater career development opportunities. Therefore, FWAs are vital in helping working mothers navigate work-life challenges, especially within specific policy frameworks.

4) Differences and Insights into Flexible Working Arrangements in Different Cultures

Implementing Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) yields varying effects across different cultural contexts. In many cultures, FWAs provide employees with greater autonomy, promote work-life balance, and enhance overall quality of life and job satisfaction. However, FWAs may inadvertently increase work-related stress in high-pressure, competitive cultures. Regarding efficiency and innovation, Western cultures often view FWAs as mechanisms for fostering innovation and improving productivity. Conversely, FWAs can impact efficiency in collectivist cultures, as employees may prefer fixed work patterns to maintain team cohesion. Regarding social acceptance and fairness, FWAs tend to be more popular in individualistic cultures, where they are seen as equitable. However, in cultures emphasizing teamwork and egalitarianism, FWAs may provoke concerns about unequal work distribution and income disparity, potentially affecting social cohesion. These cultural differences highlight the need for organizations to carefully consider local cultural factors when designing FWA policies to ensure their effectiveness and fairness.

The implementation of FWAs also presents several organizational challenges. First, supervision becomes more complex in a flexible work environment. Traditional oversight methods are often inadequate, requiring organizations to develop new tools and techniques to ensure high productivity in flexible settings. Second, communication and collaboration issues can arise, particularly in telecommuting scenarios, where miscommunication and collaboration difficulties may diminish team effectiveness. Finally, technical support and security are critical to successfully implementing FWAs. Organizations must invest in reliable telecommuting tools and robust information security systems to support employees working across different locations and times. Addressing these challenges requires organizations to adopt scientifically grounded strategies and measures tailored to the demands of flexible work environments.

Personal values also play a significant role in shaping attitudes toward FWAs. Younger employees who prioritize work-life balance are more inclined to favor FWAs, seeking to harmonize their professional and personal lives. In contrast, individuals with more traditional values centered on efficiency and collaboration tend to emphasize the importance of fixed work hours and physical office environments, believing that these factors facilitate effective communication and teamwork. These contrasting values reflect priorities between pursuing personal quality of life and ensuring work efficiency.

In conclusion, the effects of FWA implementation vary significantly across cultures and value systems. To develop effective and equitable FWA policies, companies must carefully account for these cultural and value-based differences, ensuring that policies are tailored to the unique needs of their workforce.

Implications of the study

The systematic literature review on Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) demonstrates that these systems have been widely promoted and applied across China. The driving forces behind their adoption are diverse, encompassing technological advancements, evolving employee needs, and shifts in corporate competitive strategies. Implementing FWAs has resulted in a more flexible and dynamic work environment, leading to improved job satisfaction and organizational performance, thereby contributing to the overall development of enterprises.

However, companies face significant challenges in implementing FWAs. Traditional supervisory methods often struggle to accommodate the flexibility inherent in FWAs, prompting organizations to develop new management tools and techniques. These challenges necessitate the consideration of multiple factors and formulating scientifically grounded strategies to ensure the effective implementation of FWAs.

Several areas require further in-depth exploration, including multidimensional studies of FWAs, cross-cultural comparative research, and analyses focused on the specific needs of particular groups. Future research should prioritize multi-dimensional investigations into the time, spatial, employment forms, and content aspects of FWAs to uncover their intrinsic connections and impact mechanisms. Comparative studies of FWA policies and practices across regions and industries should also be strengthened to provide more tailored insights for various enterprise types. Additionally, more focused research on applying FWAs for specific groups, such as working mothers, is essential.

The literature review highlights that FWAs are indispensable in facilitating a harmonious balance between work and family for working mothers. In the context of policies such as China's "three-child" policy, FWAs offer working mothers the flexibility to manage work and family responsibilities better, reducing work-life interference and enabling them to structure their lives according to personal circumstances. This flexibility helps to alleviate work-family conflicts, enhances job satisfaction by providing more supportive working conditions, and decreases turnover intentions. Future research should focus on specific groups, such as working mothers, with particular attention to their work experiences and evolving needs under FWAs, providing a scientific basis for developing relevant policies.

In conclusion, the future role of FWAs as a critical component of modern enterprise management should not be underestimated. Leveraging technological advancements to improve the monitoring and evaluation of FWAs will offer more precise decision-making support for organizations. In terms of policy, governments should continue to refine relevant laws and regulations, ensuring their adaptability to local cultures to facilitate the effective implementation of FWAs in diverse settings. Collaboration among academia, governments, and enterprises will be crucial in promoting the continuous optimization and practical research of FWAs.

Theoretical and Contextual Contributions

Based on a systematic literature review, this study conducted a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the development and adjustments in FWAs in China over the past decade (2014-2024). By carefully reviewing the relevant literature, it not only clarified the development status of FWAs in China—including main types, forms of practice, popularity, and regional differences and similarities at the policy, institutional, and cultural levels—but also deeply explored the motivations driving the development of FWAs. This study found that technological advancement, shifts in market demand, and policy and regulatory support were significant factors propelling the ongoing development of FWAs in China. In evaluating the effectiveness of FWAs, this study revealed their positive role in improving employee attitudes, enhancing performance, reducing turnover intentions, and promoting work-family balance through empirical research. These findings not only provided strong empirical support for the impact of FWAs but also offered valuable practical guidance for corporate managers. The study further filled a gap in the literature and highlighted the complex challenges organizations faced when implementing FWAs, such as the need for updated supervisory methods.

The study also examined the variations in FWAs across different cultural backgrounds, with a particular focus on their specific characteristics and optimization strategies within the Chinese cultural context, providing useful insights for cross-cultural management. Notably, in the context of China's "three-child" policy, FWAs have become a crucial solution for working mothers to balance career development and family life. This reflected the critical role of FWAs in addressing China's unique demographic and cultural challenges and offered policymakers ideas for policy adjustments based on practical needs.

In summary, this study aimed to explore the development trends, application effects, and social and economic impacts of FWAs in China. The study not only enhanced the theoretical understanding of FWAs but also established a scientific and practical framework to assist Chinese corporate managers in making informed decisions. It further aimed to guide enterprises and policymakers in effectively leveraging FWAs within China's specific environment, helping businesses maintain flexibility and competitiveness in a highly competitive market while fostering a more harmonious, flexible, and sustainable working environment.

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