Perception of Generation Z towards Leadership in the Workplace (A Study at HIJ Company)

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Abstract: This study investigates Generation Z's perceptions of workplace leadership, emphasizing the core dimensions of Self-Determination Theory (SDT): autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The research aims to explore how these dimensions influence job satisfaction, motivation, and engagement among Generation Z employees. Through qualitative interviews, the study examines how individuals view leadership that promotes autonomy, challenges their capabilities, and nurtures meaningful relationships. The findings reveal that Generation Z highly values autonomy, feeling more motivated and trusted when granted the freedom to make decisions. Competence also emerges as a significant factor, with participants favoring tasks that test their abilities and constructive feedback that supports their growth. Additionally, the relatedness dimension proves crucial, as employees feel more engaged and loyal to leaders who understand their personal aspirations and cultivate inclusive, supportive environments. These insights carry important implications for leadership practices, suggesting that effective leaders should empower employees by fostering autonomy, providing opportunities for development, and building strong interpersonal connections. The results offer valuable contributions to understanding how to successfully manage and motivate Generation Z in the modern workplace.

Keyword: Autonomy, Competence, Generation Z, Leadership, Relatedness

INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, is the first generation to grow up entirely immersed in the digital age and global connectivity. Raised with constant access to information, advanced technology, and social media interactions, they are highly adaptable to technological advancements. Additionally, they are characterized by progressive values, openness to diversity, and high expectations for flexibility and work-life balance. These distinctive traits set them apart from previous generations, such as Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials (Schenarts, 2020).

In the workplace, Generation Z has prompted shifts in paradigms, particularly in communication styles, organizational structures, and leadership expectations. They favor dynamic, inclusive, and collaborative work environments where individual contributions are recognized, learning and skill development are prioritized, and leadership emphasizes positive relationships and support. This contrasts with traditional leadership models, which often focus on hierarchical and authoritarian structures (Janssen & Carradini, 2021). Traditional leadership styles that rely on rigid, top-down approaches are increasingly misaligned with Generation Z's preferences for meaningful work relationships, autonomy, and recognition of creative ideas. Instead, this generation values collaborative, empathetic leadership that encourages open communication and empowers individuals (Wulandari et al., 2023). This research examines how Generation Z perceives and evaluates leadership in the modern workplace, using HIJ Company as a case study. The company serves as a representative model of broader workplace dynamics, allowing the study to explore the leadership attributes Generation Z finds ideal, the impact of leadership on their engagement and productivity, and ways organizations can adapt to meet their expectations.

The generational shift in leadership expectations has posed new challenges for human resource management. Many organizations struggle with bridging the gap between Generation Z's preference for flexible, empathetic, and collaborative leadership styles and the continued reliance on traditional models in some workplaces. This disconnect often leads to dissatisfaction among Generation Z employees, particularly with authoritarian leadership styles that stifle innovation and limit individual involvement. The high turnover rate among Generation Z employees reflects their disconnect from organizational leadership values (Zehetner et al., 2022). Furthermore, a lack of local research on Generation Z's leadership perceptions, especially in Indonesia and within companies like HIJ, complicates efforts to address these challenges. Although many studies explore leadership styles and generational traits, significant gaps remain, particularly in understanding the dynamics between Generation Z and leadership in specific workplace contexts. One critical gap is the limited research in local contexts. Most studies focus on global or Western work cultures, leaving the perceptions of Generation Z in Indonesian workplaces underexplored. Cultural and local contexts play a significant role in shaping Generation Z's views on leadership and their interactions with leaders. Additionally, there is a need for interdisciplinary research integrating psychology, sociology, and management to provide a more holistic understanding of leadership perceptions. Current studies often adopt a single-discipline approach, which fails to capture the complexity of leadership dynamics within groups, organizational structures, and social norms. Lastly, much of the existing research focuses on Millennials, leaving Generation Z, a newer workforce with distinct characteristics such as a stronger preference for technology, flexibility, and collaboration, relatively understudied.

This study aims to address these gaps by providing fresh insights into Generation Z's perceptions of leadership in the workplace. By focusing on a local context and incorporating interdisciplinary approaches, this research seeks to deepen understanding and provide actionable recommendations for human resource management. The findings can help organizations design more inclusive and relevant leadership strategies tailored to younger generations. This is crucial not only for adapting leadership styles but also for improving workforce retention, enhancing productivity, and fostering a more harmonious work environment. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (2017), is a psychological motivation theory that provides valuable insights into understanding individuals' basic needs, particularly in the context of the workplace and leadership—specifically for Generation Z. The theory identifies three fundamental needs that must be fulfilled to foster healthy motivation and optimal development: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Autonomy refers to the need for individuals to feel a sense of control and freedom in making choices and taking actions. In a workplace setting, autonomy means allowing employees to determine how they complete their tasks. Generation Z places a high value on autonomy, seeking control over their work, including managing their time and work environment. They favor leaders who encourage innovation and experimentation, rather than those who micromanage or dictate rigid methods for accomplishing tasks. **Competence** relates to the need for individuals to feel effective in handling challenges and mastering tasks. Generation Z has high expectations for developing skills and expertise in their roles. They want to perform well and value constructive feedback that helps them improve. Leaders who provide appropriately challenging tasks and support their growth through training and mentoring can boost Generation Z's confidence and motivation.

Relatedness reflects the need to feel connected to others, maintain meaningful social relationships, and belong to a community. While Generation Z is highly engaged in digital connections, they also prioritize authentic relationships in the workplace. Leaders who build strong interpersonal connections, demonstrate empathy, and actively listen to their aspirations can strengthen their sense of belonging and loyalty to the organization. In the context of leadership, SDT underscores the importance of a collaborative, flexible, and development-oriented leadership style for Generation Z. This study aims to explore how Generation Z perceives leadership in the workplace, focusing on their preferences and expectations.

METHOD

This section describes the methodology used in this qualitative study. Qualitative research focuses on exploring and understanding human experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena within natural settings. Unlike quantitative methods, it emphasizes an in-depth examination of participants' perspectives, emotions, and motivations. This approach is particularly suitable for studying complex and subjective issues where individual experiences are critical to understanding broader phenomena. Data in qualitative research is typically non-numerical and is gathered through methods such as interviews and observations, offering flexibility to adapt research methods as the study evolves (Creswell, 2019).

Participants

This study employs a qualitative approach, with participants selected through theoretical sampling and snowball sampling. Theoretical sampling was used to identify participants with specific knowledge or experiences relevant to the research questions, ensuring the collection of rich and meaningful data. Snowball sampling complemented this by recruiting additional participants through referrals from initial respondents, broadening the range of perspectives included. Sample sizes in qualitative research are typically smaller than those in quantitative studies, as the goal is to obtain detailed, insightful data from a limited number of individuals. In this study, the sample size was determined based on the principle of saturation—the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data. To achieve saturation, the study included 5 to 10 participants, as recommended for in-depth explorations of individual experiences (Creswell, 2019).

Research Instruments

Open-ended interviews served as the primary research instrument for this study. These interviews allowed participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in their own words, making them especially effective for qualitative research. Open-ended questions provided flexibility and facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives, particularly when addressing complex or subjective topics. The interviews were designed to examine Generation Z's perceptions of workplace leadership through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), focusing on the three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Specific areas of inquiry included:

a. **Autonomy**: (1) The importance of freedom in task execution; (2) The impact of decision-making freedom on work.
b. **Competence**: (1) Challenges and opportunities for skill development; (2) The role of feedback in improvement.
c. **Relatedness**: (1) Personal connections and mutual understanding; (2) Empathy and collaboration within teams.

These questions, grounded in SDT, aimed to identify leadership practices that resonate most with Generation Z and to explore their influence on motivation and workplace engagement.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data obtained from the open-ended interviews was analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis, as outlined by Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2019). The analysis process included three key stages:

1. **Data Reduction**: This stage involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting the raw data into themes or categories. Data reduction ensured that irrelevant information was filtered out, allowing the most significant data to be retained for further analysis. This step was essential for managing and interpreting large volumes of qualitative data effectively.
2. **Data Display**: The data was organized visually, such as in tables or charts, to identify patterns and relationships. Presenting the data in this way facilitated interpretation and helped highlight connections between various elements.
3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification**: In this final step, the researcher interpreted the data to draw meaningful conclusions. This included verifying findings through member checks and triangulation. Member checks involved consulting participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and ensure their perspectives were correctly represented. Triangulation utilized multiple data sources or methods to cross-verify findings, enhancing the credibility and reliability of the conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the interviews was transcribed verbatim and coded to identify emerging themes. This study examines Generation Z's perceptions of leadership in the workplace through the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), focusing on the three primary dimensions: Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness. According to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2017), these dimensions are fundamental to understanding how leadership can foster motivation and well-being in workplace settings. By interviewing Generation Z employees at HIJ Company, this research explores how their psychological needs are addressed and how leadership styles influence their engagement, performance, and overall work experience. The objective is to highlight ways leadership practices at HIJ Company can enhance employee satisfaction and productivity by fulfilling these psychological needs.

Autonomy

The findings from Generation Z employees at HIJ Company emphasize the significant role of autonomy in shaping their perceptions of effective leadership. Participants expressed a strong preference for having the freedom to determine how they complete tasks and make decisions. This autonomy not only boosts their confidence and motivation but also enhances their sense of responsibility and productivity. Leaders who trust employees' judgment and avoid micromanagement are particularly appreciated by this generation. These insights align with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that autonomy is a key driver of intrinsic motivation and satisfaction in the workplace (Deci & Ryan, 2017). By granting Generation Z employees the freedom to make decisions and approach tasks creatively, leaders can cultivate an environment that promotes motivation and engagement, leading to higher performance and job satisfaction.

Interview Excerpts on Autonomy :

1) "Having the freedom to decide how I do my work is really important to me. It makes me feel trusted, and I tend to be more productive when I can choose my own methods." (PS)
2) "A leader once gave me the autonomy to lead a project my way, which boosted my confidence and motivated me to take initiative in other areas as well." (SB)
3) "I appreciate being given some leeway to approach tasks creatively. It makes work feel less rigid." (M)
4) "When my leader allowed me to decide on the strategy for a project, I felt more involved and connected to the outcome." (GMP)
5) "I find it motivating when I'm not micromanaged and have the freedom to decide how to approach challenges." (MIH)
6) "Autonomy is crucial for me. It's motivating when I can choose the way I work without constant oversight." (CA)
7) "I feel more responsible when I'm given the freedom to make decisions. It helps me grow in my role." (DS)
8) "The trust to make decisions on my own makes me feel more engaged and responsible for the results." (STA)
9) "I prefer being able to decide how to organize my time. It allows me to work more efficiently." (ADU)
10) "When my leader gives me freedom in my approach, it shows they trust my judgment, which increases my motivation." (NW)

Competence

In exploring Generation Z employees' perceptions of leadership at HIJ Company, the dimension of Competence within Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emerged as a key focus. This dimension highlights the importance of feeling capable and effective in one's tasks, which is critical for fostering motivation and engagement. According to SDT, employees are most motivated when they face challenges that align with their skill levels and are paired with constructive feedback. This combination enhances their sense of competence, ultimately improving their motivation and performance (Deci & Ryan, 2017). The interviews revealed that Generation Z values tasks that challenge their abilities and foster skill development. Participants highlighted the importance of receiving constructive feedback to help them grow, as well as clear guidance on expectations and success criteria. These findings underscore that providing challenging yet manageable tasks, coupled with specific and actionable feedback, is essential for fostering competence and professional growth. For leadership at HIJ Company, prioritizing these factors can significantly enhance employee engagement, motivation, and job satisfaction.

Interview Excerpts on Competence :

1) "I feel challenged when tasks align with my skills but also push me to learn. It makes me feel capable and appreciated." (PS)
2) "I like that my tasks test my skills, and I feel like I'm constantly growing. I appreciate when leaders challenge me." (SB)
3) "Yes, I'm given tasks that challenge my skills. But sometimes, I wish for clearer expectations on how to succeed." (M)
4) "My tasks usually stretch my abilities. I prefer feedback that helps me improve rather than just praise." (GMP)
5) "I like when leaders provide tasks that are difficult but manageable. It helps me feel like I'm progressing." (MIH)
6) "I appreciate receiving feedback that is constructive. I feel competent when I know exactly how to improve." (CA)

7) "I enjoy tasks that allow me to apply what I know while learning new things. It keeps me engaged." (DS)
8) "Being given challenging tasks is motivating, especially when I get constructive feedback." (STA)
9) "I want tasks that stretch my abilities. Feedback should be specific, showing me where I can improve." (ADU)
10) "I like when tasks are challenging. Constructive feedback helps me develop a sense of accomplishment." (NW)

Relatedness

This study explores the Relatedness dimension of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by examining how Generation Z employees at HIJ Company perceive leadership that emphasizes connection, empathy, and teamwork. According to SDT, relatedness is a core psychological need that significantly impacts motivation and engagement, as it reflects the importance of feeling connected to others and being valued by leaders. Leaders who demonstrate genuine interest in their employees' personal goals, values, and well-being cultivate a supportive and inclusive work environment. This approach fosters trust, loyalty, and collaboration—key factors in building high-performing teams.

The interviews with Generation Z participants at HIJ Company highlighted the importance of leaders who take the time to understand their personal aspirations and create an inclusive workplace where they feel respected and valued. Such leaders are seen as building strong bonds of trust and loyalty within their teams, resulting in a deeper sense of connection to the organization. These findings align with SDT, which emphasizes that meeting the need for relatedness enhances motivation and engagement. Employees who feel understood and connected are more likely to demonstrate loyalty, productivity, and collaboration (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Leaders who prioritize fostering empathy and interpersonal relationships not only strengthen individual and team performance but also contribute to a cohesive and motivated workforce.

Interview Excerpts on Relatedness :

1) "When a leader understands my personal goals, I feel valued and supported. It makes me more loyal to the team." (PS)
2) "A leader who takes the time to know me personally builds trust. It fosters teamwork and motivates me." (SB)
3) "I appreciate when leaders make an effort to know me as an individual. It creates a more inclusive and positive work environment." (M)
4) "When a leader shows interest in my goals, it strengthens my connection to the team and organization." (GMP)
5) "Having a leader who listens to my concerns and values my input makes me feel more connected to the company." (MIH)
6) "I feel more engaged when my leader understands my aspirations and takes them into account in team decisions." (CA)
7) "When a leader makes the effort to connect on a personal level, it improves teamwork and creates a supportive atmosphere." (DS)
8) "Leaders who show empathy and take time to understand their team members foster a positive, collaborative environment." (STA)
9) "I feel more motivated when my leader understands my values and helps align them with the team's goals." (ADU)
10) "I appreciate when a leader takes the time to build relationships with the team. It makes me feel part of something bigger." (NW)

Discussion
Autonomy

The importance of autonomy in shaping Generation Z's perceptions of workplace leadership is evident from their responses. Generation Z employees highly value the freedom to make decisions and independently approach tasks, aligning with Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT, as outlined by Deci and Ryan (2017), identifies autonomy as one of three fundamental psychological needs (alongside competence and relatedness) essential for fostering intrinsic motivation and overall well-being. Autonomy refers to the sense of control over one's actions and decisions, which enhances motivation and engagement. According to SDT, individuals who perceive their actions as self-directed rather than externally controlled experience greater satisfaction, engagement, and motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Generation Z's preference for autonomy reflects their desire for leaders who trust them to make independent decisions. This sense of trust boosts not only their confidence and responsibility but also their productivity. From a psychological perspective, autonomy is a critical element of personal growth and self-actualization. Erikson's stages of psychosocial development highlight autonomy as a vital milestone, particularly during young adulthood, where independence is essential for identity formation (Rorije et al., 2023). Recent research also underscores that autonomy enhances psychological well-being, creativity, and innovation. Studies demonstrate that workplaces fostering autonomy yield higher levels of engagement and job satisfaction (Kovacs et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2017). When organizations allow employees to make independent decisions, they strengthen their sense of mastery, confidence, and overall job satisfaction.

Additionally, research by Ryan and Deci (2017) shows that autonomy-supportive environments promote intrinsic motivation, resulting in higher job performance and satisfaction. Tang et al. (2020) further highlight that autonomy encourages creativity and improved task performance. Similarly, Slemp et al. (2018) found that granting employees decision-making control enhances their ownership of outcomes, fostering greater engagement. Sarmah et al. (2022) observed that autonomy, when combined with other SDT components, nurtures responsibility and accountability—echoing Generation Z's reports of feeling more motivated when entrusted with decision-making power. Moreover, leaders who avoid micromanaging and support autonomous decision-making create dynamic and committed teams (Shih et al., 2022), further validating Generation Z's leadership preferences.

Competence

The Competence dimension of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is crucial for understanding how Generation Z perceives leadership and its influence on their motivation and workplace engagement. Competence, as defined in SDT, refers to the need to feel capable and effective in one's tasks, which directly impacts intrinsic motivation. When individuals feel competent, they are more likely to immerse themselves in their work, strive for mastery, and perform at higher levels (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Generation Z's preference for challenging tasks that push their abilities, combined with constructive feedback, highlights their focus on growth and development. Competence in the workplace extends beyond task performance; it encompasses mastering new skills and expanding capabilities (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Generation Z's responses reveal a clear desire for assignments that challenge their skills while providing opportunities for growth. They also emphasized the need for specific and actionable feedback to help them improve, aligning with SDT's assertion that feedback is vital for evaluating competence and enhancing performance. Constructive feedback helps individuals identify areas for improvement and strengthen their abilities, a sentiment strongly echoed by Generation Z.

Research supports the effectiveness of constructive feedback in fostering a sense of competence. Feedback that offers clear, actionable guidance enhances motivation by helping

individuals recognize their progress and areas for development (Ryan & Ryan, 2019; Mone et al., 2018). This aligns with Erikson's theory, which emphasizes competence and mastery as critical for identity-building and self-esteem during young adulthood (Greene, 2017). Additionally, Goal Setting Theory highlights the role of challenging goals and progress feedback in driving motivation (Kouzes & Posner, 2023). Generation Z's emphasis on challenging tasks and developmental feedback reflects their desire for leadership styles that support competence, growth, and skill enhancement. Studies confirm that providing tasks that align with current skills while pushing employees' limits increases their sense of competence and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2017). Research by Fong et al. (2019) indicates that specific, constructive feedback significantly enhances employees' sense of competence and motivation. Similarly, Yuspahruddin et al. (2024) found that competence correlates with higher job satisfaction and performance. Feedback that clarifies areas for improvement, as highlighted by Li & Grion (2019), resonates with Generation Z's preference for developmental guidance. Opportunities to test skills and receive constructive feedback foster a culture of competence, improving both individual and organizational outcomes (Sleiman et al., 2020; Stebbins et al., 2021).

Relatedness

The Relatedness dimension of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes the importance of feeling connected to others, a key driver of motivation and engagement in the workplace (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness reflects individuals' need to belong to a community or group where their contributions are valued, particularly by their leaders. SDT posits that leaders who demonstrate empathy, take an interest in their team members' personal goals and well-being, and create a supportive work environment significantly enhance team motivation, trust, and collaboration (Duan et al., 2023).

Generation Z participants emphasized their preference for leaders who understand their personal aspirations and foster a positive, connected workplace. Leaders who take a genuine interest in team members' goals and values help create a sense of belonging, which boosts motivation, loyalty, and engagement—factors critical to building high-performing teams. These findings align with SDT's assertion that relatedness drives intrinsic motivation by fostering trust and collaboration within teams. Research supports the notion that fostering relatedness enhances employee performance and well-being. Leaders who cultivate inclusive and empathetic environments strengthen interpersonal connections, resulting in higher team cohesion and productivity (Shih et al., 2022). Studies have also shown that employees who feel connected to their leaders and peers are more engaged and committed to organizational success (Duan et al., 2023). For Generation Z, leadership that prioritizes empathy and interpersonal relationships is critical for creating a motivated and cohesive workforce.

From the perspective of developmental psychology, relatedness plays a crucial role during the transition to adulthood—a significant phase for Generation Z as they shape their identities and seek meaningful connections, particularly in professional environments. Erikson's psychosocial theory emphasizes the "Intimacy vs. Isolation" stage, which highlights the importance of forming deep and significant relationships (Sekowski et al., 2024). This aligns with Generation Z's preference for leaders who demonstrate empathy and take the time to understand them as individuals, fostering emotional security and building trust within teams. Similarly, modern psychology, particularly positive psychology, emphasizes the value of feeling connected and supported by leaders, which contributes to well-being, job satisfaction, and overall life fulfillment (Hooff & Pater, 2019). A strong sense of relatedness in the workplace enhances work attitudes, engagement, and organizational commitment, all of which are essential for personal and organizational success (Hakanen et al., 2018). Relatedness extends beyond forming connections—it involves creating environments where individuals feel recognized and appreciated for their unique selves, not

just their professional contributions. This recognition positively influences self-esteem and self-worth. For Generation Z, whose developmental stage is characterized by identity exploration and the pursuit of independence (Sekowski et al., 2024), relatedness plays a critical role in shaping their career development and attitudes toward work life. By integrating Self-Determination Theory (SDT) into leadership practices, organizations can build environments that support emotional well-being, align employees with the organization's mission, and inspire them to perform at their best. This approach is especially important for younger generations, who increasingly prioritize meaningful work and authentic connections with their leaders and colleagues (Forner et al., 2020).

Research by Deci and Ryan (2017) confirms that fulfilling the need for relatedness significantly boosts intrinsic motivation and organizational commitment. Leaders who engage with employees on a personal level—showing empathy and understanding their individual goals—strengthen employees' sense of belonging to the organization. Suifan et al. (2018) highlight that leaders who invest in personal relationships with their team members foster an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, which resonates with Generation Z's desire for leaders who genuinely value their personal aspirations. Similarly, Rahmadani et al. (2019) link relatedness to work engagement, demonstrating that employees who feel connected to their leaders and colleagues report higher levels of engagement and job satisfaction. Empathy in leadership, as noted by Bajpai et al. (2024), is critical for strengthening workplace relationships, improving team cohesion, and boosting performance. Karsim et al. (2023) further emphasize that collaborative and connected work environments foster higher motivation and job satisfaction. Additionally, Zhou et al. (2022) find that empathetic and understanding leaders are perceived as more trustworthy, increasing employee engagement and motivation. Yang (2019) highlights that inclusive leadership is a key driver of engagement, particularly among younger employees, by creating an environment where individuals feel valued and respected. Collectively, these studies emphasize the importance of relatedness for Generation Z, underscoring their preference for leaders who exhibit empathy, build trust, and cultivate inclusive workplaces that promote individual well-being and organizational success.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights that Generation Z values workplace leadership that aligns with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness. They prefer autonomy, as it enhances motivation, job satisfaction, and performance, with research linking it to creativity and engagement. Competence is also key, as Generation Z is driven by challenging tasks and constructive feedback that promote growth and skill development. Additionally, they prioritize leaders who demonstrate empathy, understand their goals, and create inclusive environments, fostering trust and team cohesion. These leadership traits contribute to stronger organizational culture and improved performance.

Implications

The study's findings suggest future research on the long-term impact of autonomy, competence, and relatedness on Generation Z's career and job satisfaction across various organizational contexts. It also calls for exploring cultural and regional influences on leadership dimensions across generations. Practically, organizations should implement leadership training that fosters autonomy, skill development, and personal connections between leaders and employees, aligning with the SDT framework to enhance engagement, motivation, and performance.

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