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Effect of Victimization and Perceived Support on Maintenance of Dating Relationships among Mexican College Students

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College Students

Abstract: This study analyzes the influence of the victimization suffered (sexual, physical, coercion, humiliation and emotional punishment) and the support network available (as independent variables-IIVV) on the trajectory of young couples (feeling trapped in a relationship, dependent variable-DV). A total of 990 Mexican university students (X=19.5, SD=1.82 years) of both sexes (66% women) participated in the study.

Family and friends were perceived as providing the greatest support (in over 85% of respondents), while the resources provided by the university (teachers, central resources) were regarded as unhelpful by 40%. A linear regression analysis showed that the feeling of being trapped in the relationship was influenced by all the VVII (*p<.05), although perceived support proved to be a poor predictor (*beta* = -.053). A path analysis reflected a negative effect of coercion (regression weight = -.533) and physical violence (-.926) on perceived support, with all forms of victimization being precursors for feeling trapped in a relationship.

These results show the negative effect of victimization on expectations of support in young people, which may make it difficult to begin the process of seeking help. They also highlight the need to increase the visibility of resources available in educational settings to provide an early response to intimate partner violence.

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Introduction

Dating violence is an extremely prevalent phenomenon that may occur in a person's early relationships. Among the community population (which is not drawn, for example, from the prison population or victim assistance resources), the existence of aggression and abuse from early adolescence in both men and women, regardless of their sexual orientation, or ethnic origin has been extensively reported (for a review, see Esquivel-Santoveña, Lambert & Hamel, 2013, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Misra, Selwyn & Rohling, 2012).

Variables such as gender and sexual orientation could have a modulating effect. The best documented discussion in this regard is the so-called *gender-symmetry debate*, which began with Archer's meta-analysis, and its main conclusion: males and females seem to experience physical aggression with similar frequency when community samples are studied (Archer, 2000; Desmarais et al, 2012a; 2012b). This finding has been carefully discussed in light of the existence of various aggression patterns, including *common partner violence* (sporadic, contextual, overrepresented in community samples, and gender symmetrical) and *intimate terrorism* (less frequent, based on control, , associated with severe health outcomes, and gendered; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Ramos & Saltijeral, 2008). A similar debate has developed around sexual orientation, with some authors claiming that cross- and same-sex relationships foster violence with similar frequency when community samples are studied, although sexual diversity would appear to be overrepresented among the most severe cases (Barrett & Pierre, 2013; West, 2012). Thus, figures and conclusions drawn from research change when the severity of aggression is taken into account.

Questionnaires and screening tools are the most commonly used methods for assessing violence in the scientific literature (Costa & Barros, 2016; López-Cepero, Rodríguez-Franco, & Rodríguez-Díaz, 2015), each of which includes an implicit –and sometimes, unique- definition of violence (Schinkel, 2010). In order to obtain comparable, uniform information, the most frequent expressions of violence in the literature are usually classified into four categories: physical, sexual, psychological-emotional violence, and coercive control (Esquivel-Santoveña et al., 2013). Within psychological-emotional violence, the distinction between *overt* aggression -such as humiliation- and subtle violence -such as ignoring or refusing to help- has also been clearly established (Marshall, 1992).

Overall, the literature shows a number of dominant subjects in the study of intimate partner violence. These include detection (e.g. studies of prevalence or the development of instruments), predictors of violence (e.g. risk factors), associated health outcomes (e.g. psychopathology) and the development and implementation of intervention programs. However, the process whereby the victim of violence initiates help-seeking has received significantly less attention, both in publications on intimate partner violence (regarding people of any age) and on dating violence (referring to adolescence and early adulthood; López-Cepero, Rodríguez-Franco Rodríguez-Díaz & Bringas, 2014) (see table 1).

Please insert table 1

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These figures contrast with the strategic value of help-seeking behavior, understood as all the actions undertaken by victims to deal with their situation and obtain resources that facilitate breaking off an abusive relationship (Frias & Agoff, 2015). The process of seeking help includes three components: problem detection, assessment of available support and access to formal (public or private institutions) and/or informal networks (personal relations; Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005).

Previous literature has shown that the detection and labeling of abusive relationships (in which violence appears) as *abuse* is inconsistent in adults, adolescents and youths (Anderson & Kobek-Pezzarossi, 2011; Hamby & Gray-Little, 2000). In a series of studies conducted on Spanish emergent adults of both sexes, it was estimated that 5.0% of participants reported having felt mistreated in a relationship, 10.3% admitted feeling afraid in their relationships, and 26.3% felt trapped (López-Cepero et al., 2015). In this respect, López-Cepero, Lana et al. (2014) describe how physical violence is the main precursor for feeling abused in an intimate partner relationship, while experiencing coercive control is the main precursor for being trapped. This same study, however, shows that coercion was four times more common than physical violence among emergent adults. Alternative labels for abuse (e.g. fear, a feeling of being trapped) have been shown to be associated with intermediate levels of victimization, proving the usefulness of this label in the early detection of abuse (López-Cepero et al., 2015).

Of all the personal, social and cultural resources that can facilitate breaking off an abusive relationship, perceived social support is the factor that has been most frequently analyzed in the literature (Liang et al., 2005; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). The

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closest social environment (family, friends and colleagues) is the most frequently sought source of support among Latino and Latin American emergent adults (Ocampo, Shelley, & Jaycox, 2007; Sabina, Cuevas, & Rodríguez, 2014). Traditionally, Mexican families have exercised a great deal of influence over the trajectories of intimate partnerships as indeed they continue to do, although this has evolved somewhat (Martínez & Solís, 2009; Ortega, Ortiz, Santillán & Viloria, 2016). Families are also the network providing the greatest satisfaction (Machado, Hines, & Matos, 2016), although research provides inconsistent findings on the effect of family support on the course of intimate relationships (Copp, 2015; Sabina, Cuevas, & Cotignola-Pickens, 2016; Weisz & Black, 2009).

Formal support from public and private institutions is sought less than informal support (Machado et al, 2016; Ocampo et al, 2007), but its perceived importance grows as the severity of violence increases, in both young men and women. Thus, psychological violence and coercion often activate circuits of informal assistance, while physical violence usually triggers the search for formal resources (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Cho & Huang, 2016; Elias-Lambert, Black & Chigbu, 2014).

In a study conducted on US adolescents, Gallopin and Leigh (2009) found three main reasons to avoid telling their parents about relationship problems: fear of being judged and/or blamed for the situation, fear of making the situation worse through adults' participation, and fear of public exposure of their status as victims. Among young Mexican women, being pressured to terminate the relationship has also been described as a typical fear (Adams, Rankin & Nagoshi, 2015). In a recent study conducted on Latino families living in US, adolescents mentioned the importance of having their parents show support without overreacting to the situation of violence

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(Black & Preble, 2016). The ambivalence between the expectation of help and fear of disapproval from informal networks frequently appears in the literature (Overstreet & Quinn, 2013; Sylaska et al, 2014), and seems to be particularly important among the Latino population (Kyriakakis, 2014; Martínez et al., 2009; Mookerjee, Cerulli, Fernández & Chin, 2015; Ortega, et al., 2016; Rizo & Macy, 2011).

Although much of the previous literature has focused on studying men and women separately, comparative research shows that women make more use of both informal and formal resources (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Sylaska et al ., 2014). Fortin et al. (2012) note that social support is a modulating factor of the stress associated with victimization in women, although not in young men. To our knowledge, no studies have focused on these differences among Mexican youths.

For all the above reasons, this study has three main objectives. First, to determine Mexican university students' assessment of various help resources; second, to analyze the effect of gender on their expectations regarding these help resources; and third, to study the role perceived social support plays in whether or not they maintain relationships with various levels of violence.

Method

Participants. The study involved the participation of 990 emergent adults of both sexes (66% female, 34% male), ages 18 to 26 (X=19.5, SD=1.82 years). All of them were students at a public university in the metropolitan area of Guadalajara (State of Jalisco, Mexico), a city with a population of over 4.5 million inhabitants (National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics [INEGI], 2015). Fifty-three per cent

of participants reported an income of 20,000 Mexican pesos a month or more (the national average household income being 17,000 Mexican Pesos, equivalent to 900 USD; INEGI, 2014), with approximately 20% living in low-income households (under 8,000 pesos a month). Around 27% reported being employed at the time of the survey. Since all the respondents were adults, they were informed of the study objectives and gave their informed consent to participate voluntarily.

Instruments. The study measured three aspects: experience of victimization in an intimate relationship, perceived social support for breaking off the relationship, and labeling (general perception) of the relationship itself.

First of all, an eight-item (DVQ-8) scale summarizing the contents of the *Dating Violence Questionnaire* (DVQ) was administered (Rodríguez-Franco et al., 2010). This questionnaire assessed the victimization experience on the basis of *detachment, humiliation, sexual, coercive, physical, gender-based, emotional, and instrumental* violence. Each item was answered on a scale of frequency (1-never, 5-continously), and the questionnaire obtained a global EAP-based reliability estimate of .928. The study used information from five items, related to physical, sexual, coercive, and psychological-emotional (including overt -humiliation- and subtle -emotional punishment- aggression), to represent the typologies present in the existing literature (Esquivel-Santoveña et al, 2013;. Marshall, 1992).

A second instrument, created *ad hoc*, assessed the support participants expected to obtain from seven social resources (friends, relatives, classmates, teachers, university resources, resources from the City Council and community organizations such as non profits or associations) in the event of needing help with breaking off a relationship. It was answered on a five-point scale (1-None, 5-A lot). This instrument, called PSPV

(*Perceived Support in Partner Violence*), showed adequate consistency (global EAP-based reliability estimate = .837).

Third, participants were required to label the partner experience, based on the feeling of having been abused, being afraid, or feeling trapped in the relationship, using the same five-point rating scale (1-never, 5-continously), and including a question about whether they have ever needed help with breaking off a relationship with a partner (yes/no).

Procedure. Respondents reported on their latest relationship (preferably a current one). The evaluation was conducted through a web application during the enrollment period. Prior to the start of the test, the application provided information on the voluntary nature of participation, anonymity and the confidentiality of the results obtained, requesting respondents' consent before they proceeded to participate. Contact information was also provided to answer any questions that might arise at the time or in the future.

In order to maximize the correspondence between the original DVQ contents and the short form, DVQ-8, the instrument was developed with the support of two researchers who participated in the original Spanish validation of DVQ. Two local practitioners specializing in intimate partner violence participated in the adaptation of the contents to Mexican Spanish.

As for the statistical procedures, this study included the use of descriptive analyses (frequencies, central tendency and dispersion measures); comparison of means through the T test (robust even when normality requirements are not met); effect size calculation using the *d* index (Cohen, 1988; negligible for values $d<.20$; moderate

d<.80, large d=.80 or over); exploratory factor analysis (EFA) through FACTOR software, version 10 (using polychoric matrices and oblimin rotation and following the procedure used by Ferrando & Lorenzo-Seva, 2014), which provided global EAP-based reliability estimates (> .700; Ferrando & Lorenzo-Seva, 2016); and path analysis using AMOS software, version 22 (p < .05; X^2/gl < 5; CFI > .90; RMSEA < .08, following Arbuckle's recommendation; 2011).

Results

First of all, the distribution of various forms of aggression was analyzed. It was confirmed that the highest frequencies were found in the coercion and humiliation items, while sexual and physical attacks were the least frequent, in keeping with the findings of the literature. It was also found that men and women's scores were statistically similar in four out of the five measures included. These results are detailed in Table 2.

Please insert table 2

        Second, expectations of the support that could be provided by various social resources in the event of wishing to break off a relationship were analyzed. Since the PSPV was created *ad hoc*, an AFE was developed to determine its structure. The AFE recommended a one-factor solution (GFI = .96), which combined 50.8% of explained variance and an internal consistency (global EAP-based reliability estimate) of .866, as a result of which the sum of the seven items was used as a measure of perceived

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support. The means of the scale was X=21.6 (SD=5.56), with a difference between men

and women of 1.00 points, which was significant in the Chi square test (*p < .05) but of

negligible size (d = .17). Women reported having more trust than men in teachers and

community organizations (*p < .05), albeit with small contingency coefficients (C =

.073 and C = .116, respectively). Overall, it was confirmed that the circle of friends and

family were perceived as the most important form of support, with City Council

services being perceived as being the least useful (Table 3).

Please insert table 3

A linear regression analysis was subsequently performed to determine the

relative importance of victimization and resource appraisal (IIVV) in the feeling of

being trapped in a relationship (DV; direct scores between 1-5 were used). The equation

fitted correctly (F = 71,831, df = 916; ***p < .000), obtaining an adjusted R^2 of .351.

All the IIVV achieved statistical significance, although standardized beta coefficients

showed that perceived support was the variable with the least influence on the feeling of

being trapped in a relationship (Table 4).

Please insert table 4

In view of these findings, a path analysis was conducted to distinguish between

the direct and indirect effects of victimization on the feeling of being trapped. Two

measures were included in the model: the score obtained on the scale of perceived

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support, and the answer to the question, *"Have you ever needed help in breaking off a relationship?"* A model with 44 elements and 43 parameters (df=1) was configured, which obtained adequate levels of fit (X^2/df = 2.021, CFI = .999; RMSEA = .032).

The estimated regression coefficients corroborated, first, that expected support was the only independent variable that did not significantly affect the feeling of being trapped in a relationship, whereas the other measures had a positive effect. Secondly, it was found that having experienced coercion, emotional punishment or humiliation increased the need for help with breaking off the relationship, while having experienced sexual violence decreased this need. However, the regression coefficients were small (less than or equal to .08). Third and last, a negative relationship was found between two forms of victimization (coercion and physical violence) and expected help, which also had the highest number of coefficients of all the variables included (see Table 5).

Please insert table 5

Discussion

First of all, the analysis of the responses obtained from PSPV showed that participants do not distinguish between formal and informal supports, with the EFA determining a single-scale solution. These results contrast with the formal/informal distinction maintained in the existing literature (Liang et al., 2005). The question is whether this difference can be explained by the origin of the sample, since the respondents were young Mexicans living in Mexico rather than the United States (as is

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the case in Mookerjee et al., Ocampo et al., Sabina et al., 2014, Sabina et al., 2016), which would eliminate some of the legal and language barriers migrants may encounter when seeking formal help (Rizo et al., 2011). This possibility should be tested in future studies.

Moving on to the analysis of the results of the PSPV, the initial finding that perceived support does not appear to play a significant role in the likelihood of being trapped in an intimate partner relationship is striking. The regression coefficients showed that expected support played a significant role, albeit significantly below that of having experienced emotional punishment, humiliation or coercion. Path analysis made it possible to expand the interpretation of this result, indicating the existence of a relationship between the victimization suffered and the perception of available help. Thus, coercion and physical violence demonstrated a large, negative influence on the perception of support by respondents. In other words, the greater severity of the aggression, the lower the victim's confidence in the potential support from his or her environment. This result calls for new hypotheses to explain the findings drawn from previous studies developed in the United States, in which victimization and available social support do not seem to be directly related to the likelihood of breaking off an abusive relationship (Copp et al, 2015; Sabina et al., 2016; Weisz et al, 2009). In the case of Mexican youths, these results could be explained by cultural values, such as victims' concerns about revealing their situation for fear of being pressured to leave the abusive partner (Adams et al., 2015).

In the model proposed in this study, it is essential to clarify that physical attacks were much less common than coercion, the principal form of abuse in both men and women. Its dual effect (encouraging the partner to become trapped in the relationship

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and reducing confidence in available resources) and its high frequency call for more campaigns for the prevention and awareness of behaviors associated with jealousy, monitoring through social networks (*cyberstalking*) or pressure to reduce contact with friends or family (*isolating*). It should also be noted that coercion appears in the early stages of abuse, but that young people do not appear to associate it with *abuse* or *maltreatment*, terms that seem to be avoided by youths (López-Cepero, Lana et al, 2014). Although we do not recommend removing the contents concerning low-frequency aggressions (e.g. physical), the results seem to show that although Mexican youths have no difficulty recognizing either abuse or maltreament, they do have a problem coping with victim blaming.

The inclusion of the question, *"Have you needed help with breaking off a relationship?"* made it possible to assess an important aspect of this situation. Although people who suffer aggression from their partners are able to detect the existence of a problem, they often find it difficult to break off the relationship, remaining trapped. Regardless of whether they use the label *maltreatment* or *abuse*, maintaining the relationship does not seem to be due to a lack of awareness of the problem, but rather to an absence of resources to take the step with guarantees that they will be safe.

Elaborating on this, an analysis of the responses to the various PSPV items made it possible to draw conclusions about the image the Mexican youth population has of available resources. Firstly, respondents agreed that they would turn to family and friends if they needed to break off a problematic relationship (around 90% acceptance), followed by their classmates (over 70%). These results do not match those of the literature (Kyriakakis, 2014; Mookerjee et al, 2015), although previous studies were undertaken with Latina women of all ages living in the United States. In any case, the

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fact is that family and friends appear to be the networks of choice for Mexican youths when they are in trouble, so it could be of interest to develop prevention programs designed to heighten their awareness of intimate partner violence and the resources available to help one break off a relationship.

At the opposite end of the scale are formal or institutional resources, such as those offered by the City Hall (with only 30% acceptance) or even the university and its faculty, which are only perceived as useful resources by 60% of respondents. Although these results do not evaluate the actual usefulness of these resources, they do underscore the lack of confidence these forms of assistance inspire in potential victims, in keeping with previous literature on Latino populations (Ocampo et al, 2007; Sabina et al., 2016). It is therefore essential to develop campaigns to highlight the problem and facilitate access to existing aid mechanisms for Mexican youths. More specifically, the university is a context of great interest for fostering this development, given both its social visibility and the increasing numbers of Mexicans enrolled in higher education (from 10.9% in 2000 to 16.5% in 2010; INEGI, 2010). Consequently, teachers are a key element for implementing an integrated, wide-ranging change in the community.

On another note, there is a striking statistical similarity between men and women in many of the measures used, such as frequency of victimization. These results match those reported by other studies conducted through self-administered questionnaires on community populations (Desmarais et al, 2012a; 2012b), with the same constraints. Given that the most continuous and severe forms of abuse –intimate terrorism- usually occur in a relatively small percentage of relationships, while sporadic aggressions are more frequent, the use of community samples may mask gender-based differences regarding victimization, risks and health issues (Johnson et al., 2000; Langhinrichsen-

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Rohling et al., 2012). Nonetheless, this result highlights the fact that both males and females are involved in relationships where violence is an everyday feature, meaning that they engage in potentially dangerous interactions. The specific influence of the respondent's gender in the model described, as well as other identity variables (sexual orientation and identity, belonging to ethnic groups, etc.) and the type of aggression in the relationship should be explored in future research.

This study has limitations that must be addressed. First, the representativeness of the findings should be qualified, since the sample was not selected using sociological methods. However, the sample size (approximately one thousand), the inclusion of both male and female respondents, and the selection of a small age range (18 to 26) make it possible to find interpretations of interest to professionals involved in the treatment and care of young people. Second, this study fails to provide information on certain aspects that could be useful in the intrapersonal field (e.g. coping styles, adherence to traditional gender schemas or fear of being blamed for violence -*victim blaming*-) or possible ambivalence towards informal social support (Mooskajee et al, 2015; Overstreet et al, 2013; Rizo et al., 2011), which should be incorporated into the model in future studies. And third, this study fails to shed light on the influence variables such as gender or sexual orientation may have on the help seeking process. This information is essential to developing programs to meet the needs of a diverse population. However, it does provide an overview of the difficulties faced by Mexican youths when they seek social resources, improves our knowledge of Latin-Americans' experience of victimization, and enables us to develop new, more advanced hypotheses.

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Table 1. Results reported by PsycINFO in various areas (October 2016)

Subject	Searching terms	IPV	DV
Assessment	Assessment /evaluation / test / measure	1,588	381
Intervention	Treatment / intervention / therapy	2,290	393
Predictors	Risk factor / predictor	1,291	346
Health outcomes	Disorder / symptom	1,051	98
Help seeking	Help seeking	231	30

Note: a truncation search was conducted within abstract (AB) in combination with

"*intimate partner violence*" (IPV) or "*dating violence*" (DV). / = OR.

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Table 2. Descriptive information and comparison of victimization in men and women.

	Total		Male		Female		T-test			
	X	dt	X_m	SD	X_f	SD	t	p	$|Xm\text{-}Xf|$	d
Humiliation	1.36	.83	1.40	.85	1.35	.81	.900	.368	.051	.06
Sexual	1.10	.46	1.13	.55	1.08	.40	1.436	.152	.049	.11
Coercion	1.42	.89	1.46	.96	1.41	.86	.843	.400	.053	.06
Physical	1.14	.54	1.26	.75	1.08	.37	4.078	.000***	.178	.33[+]
Emotional Punish.	1.24	.71	1.30	.78	1.21	.66	1.839	.066	.093	.13

***$p < .001$; [+]d small.

Table 3. Factorial saturation, response rate and descriptive mean of support expected

from various social agents (PSPV)

Social agents	EFA 1	% affirmative answers				Descript.	
		Total	Male	Female	p	X	SD
Friends	.411	93.0%	92.4%	93.2%	.655	4.14	.978
Relatives	.539	87.5%	85.6%	88.4%	.213	4.05	1.195
School partners	.598	72.2%	74.0%	71.3%	.379	3.09	1.127
Professors	.806	56.1%	50.9%	58.5%	.023*	2.69	1.185
University	.782	61.1%	57.6%	62.9%	.105	2.85	1.263
City council	.709	31.0%	27.4%	32.7%	.092	1.96	1.094
Community org.	.676	59.7%	51.7%	63.8%	.000***	2.83	1.350

Note: *a bit, quite a lot and a lot* were counted as affirmative answers. Chi square test *p < .05; ***p < .001

Table 4. Linear regression coefficients on the feeling of being trapped.

	B	Standard Error	Beta	t	p
(Constant)	.398	.128		3.108	.002**
Humiliation	.255	.040	.225	6.411	.000***
Sexual	.163	.069	.077	2.360	.018*
Coercion	.218	.033	.212	6.541	.000***
Physical	.172	.058	.097	2.985	.003**
Emotional Punish.	.215	.044	.163	4.935	.000***
Support (PSPV)	-.009	.004	-.053	-1.979	.048*

*$p<.05$; **$p<.01$; ***$p<.001$

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Table 5. Regression coefficients obtained for path analysis

	Predictor	Coefficient	Standard Error	*p*
Perceived support (PSPV)	Coercion	-,533	,244	,029*
	Physical	-,926	,398	,020*
	Sexual	-,297	,474	,531
	Humiliation	,131	,285	,644
	Emotional Punish.	,166	,314	,596
Needed help to break off	Coercion	,075	,016	,000***
	Physical	,020	,026	,433
	Sexual	-,080	,031	,009**
	Humiliation	,045	,019	,014*
	Emotional Punish.	,042	,020	,041*
Trapped in relationship	Coercion	,180	,032	,000***
	Physical	,227	,052	,000***
	Sexual	,180	,062	,004**
	Humiliation	,186	,037	,000***
	Emotional Punish.	,212	,041	,000***
	Needed help	,477	,064	,000***
	Perceived support (PSPV)	-,007	,004	,095

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