Making an Impression: The Influence of Self-Esteem, Locus of Control, Self-Monitoring and Narcissistic Personality on the Use of Impression Management Tactics

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Abstract

In today's competitive work environment, people use impression management tactics to influence others and increase their perceived value to the organization. People also use impression management tactics to improve social image, gain approval or protect self-image, yet not all individuals use impression management tactics in the same way. With a sample of 132 undergraduate students, a positive relationship was reported between locus of control, self-monitoring, narcissistic personality and the use of impression tactics. Additionally, narcissistic personality and self-monitoring are the best predictors of impression management tactics. The findings of this study add another dimension to the long-standing debate between management and leadership by suggesting that future researchers explore the differences between impression management and leadership.

In work settings, people at all levels use impression management tactics to increase their perceived value to the organization (Zivnuska, Kacmar, Witt, Carlson & Bratton, 2004). Leaders use impression management tactics to influence customers, colleagues and employees (Harris, Kacmar, Zivnuska & Shaw, 2007). Subordinates use impression management tactics to create favorable impressions in order to be liked, influence manager appraisals, appear competent or receive better job assignments (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Jones, Gergen, Gumpert & Thibaut, 1965; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Liden & Mitchell, 1988; Raistion, 1985; Rao, Schmidt & Murray, 1995). Employees use impression management tactics to avoid unpleasant tasks, excuse poor performance, look good, satisfy a need for power, strengthen leader-follower relationships or increase self-esteem and job involvement (Becker & Martin, 1995; Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley & Gilstrap, 2008; Kacmar, Carlson & Bratton, 2004; Rosenfeld, Giacalone & Riordan, 1995; Snyder & Copeland, 1989). By managing impressions effectively, employees can present themselves to their superiors as committed organizational citizens and obtain higher overall performance ratings, promotions and career success (Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Bolino, Varela, Bande & Turnley, 2006; London, 2003).

Managers and leaders who understand how personal factors influence the use of impression management tactics will gain greater clarity when making hiring, placement or promotion decisions, assessing on-the-job performance or designing and developing human resource development intervention activities (Bolino et al., 2006). Being able to distinguish between impression management behaviors and high performance is an important element in the process of developing employees (Bolino et al., 2006).

Throughout the available literature, personality traits such as self-esteem (Wells & Marwell, 1976), locus of control (Silvester, Anderson-Gough, Anderson & Mohamed, 2002), self-monitoring (Riordan, Gross & Maloney, 1994), and narcissistic personality (Raskin, Novacek & Hogan, 1991a, 1991b) have been shown to have a direct influence on impression management success. While previous researchers have devoted significant effort to understanding the factors that influence when people use various impression management behaviors (Boney-McCoy, Gibbons &
narcissism on impression management. Individuals with certain personality traits are more likely to use impression management tactics than others (Ferris & Judge, 1991; Guion & Highhouse, 2006; Kristof-Brown, Barrick & Frank, 2002); therefore, not all individuals use impression management tactics for the same purposes, in the same way or with the same frequency (McFarland, Ryan & Kriska, 2003).

The type of people who use impression management tactics represents the focus of this research. With a sample of business students from a large university in the Midwest, the personal factors that influence the use of impression management tactics are examined. Figure 1 displays the hypothesized relationships between self-esteem, locus of control, self-monitoring, narcissistic personality on the use of impression management tactics.

Figure 1. Model of hypothesized relationship of self-esteem, locus of control, self-monitoring and narcissism on impression management.

**Model Development**

People take several kinds of information into account when they form intentions that guide action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Carver & Scheier, 2003). Intentions are formed by attitudes and subjective norms, and subjective norms develop from two social contingencies. People consider not only the expectations that relevant others hold, but they also consider the extent to which they desire to do what other want them to do (Ajzen & Fishbein). By considering what others expect and desiring to make a good impression, some people will alter their self-presentation to fit the situation.

**Impression management**

Impression management represents a multidimensional construct and refers to the behaviors that individuals use to control the way other people perceive them (Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Jones & Pittman; Rosenfeld et al., 1995; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Wayne & Ferris, 1990). Jones and Pittman (1982) identify five impression management tactics that include ingratiation, self-promotion, exemplification, supplication and intimidation. When employees use ingratiation tactics, they make flattering comments or do favors for others in an attempt to be viewed as likeable (Jones & Pittman). Self-promotion involves touting abilities and accomplishments (Bolino & Turnley, 2003). Exemplification tactics are used to foster positive public images associated with moral virtues, honesty, integrity, generosity, conscientiousness, dedication and self-sacrifice (Leary, 1996). When employees describe themselves as people who work too hard and take the job home with them (Rooney, 2009), the are using self-promotion and exemplification tactics in combination (Rooney, 2009). Rooney explains that when employees throw themselves at the mercy of those in higher power, they are using supplication tactics. Out of self-presentation concern, similar to self-handicapping behaviors, people who use supplication tactics attempt to exempt themselves from personal responsibility or failure (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982).

Threatening or bullying behaviors represent intimidation impression management tactics (Jones & Pittman, 1982). People who use intimidation tactics will attempt to appear dangerous and tough, and these people enjoy being feared (Rosenfeld et al., 1995; Manzur & Jogaratnam, 2006). Bolino and Turnley (1999) explain that intimidation may be more likely to be used by supervisors when groups are hierarchical. Neither supplication nor intimidation tactics are used frequently (Becker &...
Martin, 1995; Bolino & Turnley), but people who utilize these impression management tactics are most effective when they use them in combination with the other impression management tactics.

**Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem refers to how much people like or dislike themselves and the degree to which they believe they are worthy or unworthy as persons (Robbins & Judge, 2009). Rosenberg (1965) describes self-esteem as basic feelings of value or worth. Individuals with high self-esteem become more concerned with enhancing their self-presentation as social stakes increase; they tend to point out their good points, boast or emphasize their sterling qualities when attempting to influence others’ perceptions (Schlenker, Soraci & McCarthy, 1976; Borden & Horowitz, 1991).

A relationship between self-esteem and impression management has been established through previous research (Koydemir & Demir, 2008; Wells & Marwell, 1976). Based on this support in the literature, there is a hypothesized relationship between self-esteem and the use of impression management tactics.

H$_1$: There is a positive relationship between self-esteem and the use of impression management tactics.

**Locus of Control**

Locus of control determines the degree to which people believe their behaviors influence what happens to them (Ivancevich, Konopaske & Matteson, 2005). There are a number of studies which investigate the connection between locus of control and impression management tactics (e.g. Keenan, 1982; Cook, Vance & Spector, 2000). Fletcher (1990) explains that locus of control influences the use of impression management tactics during selection interviews, and internals are better at seeing themselves as masters of their own destiny. Interview candidates with an external locus of control use impression management tactics less effectively than internals according to Silvester et al. (2002). An extensive review of the literature provides conceptual and empirical support for the hypothesized positive relationship between locus of control and the use of impression management tactics.

H$_2$: There is a positive relationship between locus of control and the use of impression management tactics.

**Self-Monitoring**

Self-monitoring is defined as one’s ability to guide behavior out of concern for social appropriateness (Snyder, 1974). High self-monitors are aware of the impression that they are making on others (Bordens & Horowitz, 2001) and will modify their self-presentation based on social cues in order to influence others. Self-monitoring is considered one of the most widely researched personality traits related to impression management (Riordan et al., 1994). Turnley and Bolino (2001) conducted an empirical study to explore the role that self-monitoring plays in the use of impression management tactics. They report that high self-monitors are more likely to be perceived as likeable, competent and dedicated when using ingratiation, self-promotion and exemplification impression management tactics. Turnley and Bolino assert, “high self-monitors possess superior impression management skills” (p. 358). In another report, Bolino and Turnley (2003) state there is a positive relationship between high self-monitors and the use of impression management tactics.

Previous research illustrates that high self-monitors are concerned with the impressions they make on others, and they possess the ability to tailor their behavior to fit the social situation (Snyder & Copeland, 1989). Various researchers report that high self-monitors are more likely than low self-monitors to use impression management tactics effectively (e.g. Anderson, 1990; Caldwell & O’Reilly, 1982; Turnley & Bolino, 2001; Zaccaro, Foti & Kenny, 1991). Given the previous research on self-monitoring and its influence on self-presentation, support exists in the literature for the hypothesized positive relationship between self-monitoring and the use of impression management tactics.
H₃: There is a positive relationship between self-monitoring and the use of impression management tactics.

Narcissistic personality.

People with a narcissistic personality have a grandiose sense of self-importance, preoccupation with unlimited success, power and brilliance, and they possess a sense of entitlement (Raskin & Terry, 1988). O’Connor (2007) explains that narcissistic people seek impression management victories through their social interactions. Kets de Vries (2003) reports that many narcissistic people work in positions of leadership. McFarlin and Sweeney (2002) assert that narcissistic leaders engage in excessive impression management tactics. O’Connor notes that narcissistic people brag and exaggerate about their accomplishments in an attempt to received admiration, adulation and compliments from others. Narcissistic personality has been found to be associated with self-enhancement and self-esteem regulation (Raskin, Novacek & Hogan, 1991a). Empirical research reveals a strong, positive correlation between narcissism and grandiosity (Raskin, Novacek & Hogan, 1991b). As masters of impression management, people with a narcissistic personality behave as though they are a cut above the masses and craftily extract compliments from others as a result of their actions (O’Connor). There is extensive literature in the fields of organizational science and psychology that supports the hypothesized positive relationship between narcissistic personality and the use of impression management tactics.

H₄: There is a positive relationship between narcissistic personality and the use of impression management tactics.

Method

Sample and Participant Selection

In order to examine the hypothesized relationships, undergraduate students of junior or senior standing (N = 179) enrolled in business management courses at a large university in the Midwest were invited to participate in the study. Access to these courses required the students to be of junior or senior standing within the university. Participation was voluntary and responses were anonymous and confidential. The actual sample consisted of 132 students representing a 73.7 percent participation rate. The average age of the participants was approximately 25 years (SD = 6.82). The sample was made up of 49 percent females and 51 percent males. The majority of the students participating in the study were of junior academic ranking (63.2 percent).

Assessments and Measures

The self-administered questionnaire that was used for collecting data was constructed using five previously developed scales with high internal consistency, and the items selected were well-supported in the literature. The instrument was used to obtain measures of self-esteem, locus of control, self-monitoring, narcissistic personality and impression management. The item pool for the self-administered questionnaire consisted of 108 items. The item pool was created using Rosenberg’s (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale, MacDonald’s and Tseng’s (1971) 11-item locus of control scale, Snyder’s (1974) 25-item self-monitoring scale, Raskin and Terry’s (1988) 40-item narcissistic personality indicator scale, and Bolino and Turnley’s (1999) 22-item impression management scale. The independent variables for the study were self-esteem, locus of control, self-monitoring and narcissistic personality. The dependent variable was impression management. The control variables age and gender were self-reported by participants on the questionnaire.

Impression management tactics.

Impression management was measured using Bolino and Turnley’s (1999) 22-item scale. Responses were obtained using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). A sample item statement is “Make people aware of your accomplishments.” Using Bolino and Turnley’s impression management scale, Bolino et al. (2006) report the use of impression management (IM) tactics positively relates to positive supervisor ratings, likeability and job performance. Kacmar, Harris and Nagy (2007) report that Bolino and Turnley’s IM scale has strong...
psychometric properties, is unrelated to organizational citizenship behaviors but correlates with perceptions of politics. The Cronbach’s alpha for the present study was .79.

**Self-esteem.**

Self-esteem was measured using Rosenberg’s (1965) 10-item self-esteem scale. Responses were obtained on a 4-point Likert scale with 1 (strongly agree) and 4 (strongly disagree). The data were transformed according to Rosenberg’s instructions during data analysis to obtain measures of 0, 1, 2 or 3 with 0 (strongly disagree) and 3 (strongly agree). A sample item statement is “I feel I have a number of good qualities.” The Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale remains a widely used measure of self-esteem designed to assess the extent to which individuals consider themselves worthy, hold a positive attitude toward themselves, or alternatively feel useless (Koydemir & Demir, 2008). For the present study the Cronbach’s alpha was .79.

**Locus of control.**

Locus of control was measured using MacDonald and Tseng’s (1971) 11-item locus of control scale. Responses were obtained on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). A sample item statement is “Many times I feel that I have little influence over the things that happen to me.” Cherry and Fraedrich (2000) tested the scale and reported that external locus of control was related to teleological and action-oriented reasoning, and people with internal locus of control placed greater emphasis on deontological reasoning and rule-based decision making. MacDonald and Tseng’s locus of control scale was recently used by Cherry (2006) in an empirical study that examined the influence of locus of control on attitudes, judgments and behavior intentions. For the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .71.

**Self-monitoring.**

Self-monitoring was measured using Snyder’s (1974) 25-item scale and true-false responses were obtained. A sample item statement is “I would probably make a good actor.” In a self-monitoring study, Snyder reported the internal consistency of the scale was .70 with a test-retest reliability of .83. Oner (2002) reported the internal reliability of the scale was .82. The self-monitoring scale has been used for testing a wide variety of phenomena, including student integration in higher education (Zweigenhaft & Cody, 1993), materialism (Browne & Kaldenberg, 1997), fashion branding (Auyt & Elliott, 1998), impression management (Montaglini & Giacalone, 1998) and leader flexibility across multiple group situations (Zaccaro, Foti & Kenny, 1991). For the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha falls below the desired .70 level at .63.

**Narcissistic personality.**

Narcissistic personality was measured using Raskin and Terry’s (1988) 40-item scale. Responses were obtained on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 (not at all accurate) and 5 (completely accurate). A sample item statement is “I think I am a special person.” The validity of Raskin and Terry’s narcissistic personality scale has been established in empirical studies that report a positive relationship between narcissism and self-esteem (e.g. Emmons, 1984; & Morf & Rhodewalt, 1993) and positive illusions about the self (John & Robins, 1994). In an empirical study on narcissistic personality, Gabriel and Critelli (1994) reported the internal consistency of the scale was .86. For the present study, the Cronbach’s alpha was .92.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Responses from the self-administered surveys were entered into SPSS (Version 15.0) statistical software and used to compute descriptive statistics. The means and standard deviations are displayed in Table 1. Self-esteem was measured using a 4-point Likert scale. Self-esteem and locus of control were measured using a 7-point Likert scale. Self-monitoring was measured using true-false responses, and narcissistic personality and impression management were measured using a 5-point Likert scale.
There is a positive and significant relationship between locus of control and impression management \((r = .20, p < .05)\), high self-monitoring and impression management \((r = .26, p < .01)\), and narcissistic personality and impression management \((r = .36, p < .01)\). No relationship was found between self-esteem and impression management \((r = -.01, ns)\). Yet significant correlations were found between self-esteem and locus of control \((r = -.22, p < .05)\) and self-esteem and narcissistic personality \((r = .22, p < .05)\). Correlations were also found between gender and high self-monitoring \((r = -.28, p < .01)\) and gender and narcissistic personality \((r = -.18, p < .05)\).

### Hierarchical Regression Analysis

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the contribution of self-esteem, locus of control, self-monitoring and narcissistic personality on the use of impression management tactics. The control variables gender and age were entered into the analysis to determine the influence of extraneous variables on impression management in Step 1. Self-esteem, locus of control, self-monitoring and narcissistic personality, the additional predictor variables, were added to the analysis in Step 2.

The combination of predictor variables in Step 2 significantly predicted the used of impression management tactics, \(F(6,125) = 5.30, p < .01\); adjusted \(R^2 = .16\). The beta weights indicated that narcissistic personality was the largest contributor to the regression equation (\(\beta = .35, t = 4.13, p < .01\)), and the next significant contributor to the regression equation was self-monitoring (\(\beta = .18, t = 2.10, p < .05\)). The adjusted \(R^2\) for Step 2 was .16 indicating 16 percent of the variance in impression management was explained by the second model. The adjusted \(R^2\) values increased from less than 1 percent to 16 percent in model two thus indicating that model two provided a better explanation for the personality differences that were influential on the use of impression management tactics. The hierarchical regression analysis is displayed in Table 3.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics \((N = 132)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>25.02</td>
<td>6.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Self-esteem</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Locus of control</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Self-monitoring</td>
<td>13.81</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Narcissistic personality</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Impression management</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a. gender was coded 1 for female and 2 for male

Table 2: Correlations and Internal Consistencies \((N = 132)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Locus of control</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Self-monitoring</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>(.63)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Narcissistic personality</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.18*</td>
<td>(.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Impression management</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a. gender was coded 1 for female and 2 for male

Hierarchical Regression Analysis – Impression Management \((N = 132)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impression Management</th>
<th>(B)</th>
<th>SE (B)</th>
<th>(\beta)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External locus of control</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High self-monitoring</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narcissistic personality</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.35**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \(R^2 = .01\) for Step 1. Adjusted \(R^2 = .16\) for Step 2, *\(p < .05\); **\(p < .01\)
Hypotheses Testing Results

No relationship was found between self-esteem and the use of impression management tactics ($r = -.01$, ns); therefore, hypothesis one is not supported. Hypothesis two predicted a positive relationship between locus of control and impression management, and the correlation analysis provides support for hypothesis two ($r = .20$, $p < .05$). Hypothesis three predicted a positive relationship between self-monitoring and impression management ($r = .26$, $p > .01$), and the data provides support for hypothesis three. Hypothesis four predicted a positive relationship between narcissistic personality and impression management, and the correlation analysis supports this predicted relationship ($r = .36$, $p < .01$). Hypothesis four is supported.

Through multiple regression analysis, the linear relationship between self-esteem, locus of control self-monitoring and narcissistic personality on the use of impression management tactics were examined. The results revealed that self-esteem ($\beta = -.05$, $t = -.56$, ns) and locus of control ($\beta = .16$, $t = 1.92$, $p = 0.57$) did not significantly contribute to the regression equation, but self-monitoring ($\beta = .18$, $t = 2.01$, $p < .05$) and narcissistic personality ($\beta = .35$, $t = 4.13$, $p < .01$) did significantly contribute to the prediction of the use of impression management tactics.

Discussion

The people who were the most likely to use impression management tactics in this study sample were narcissistic high self-monitors. Individuals with a narcissistic personality attempt to make a good impression on other people in order to bolster their image through self-enhancement (Raskin & Terry, 1988). High self-monitors modify their self-presentation based on clues from others and tailor their behavior to fit the situation (Borden & Horowitz, 2001; Snyder & Copeland, 1989). In the study sample, narcissistic personality ($\beta = .35$, $t = 4.13$, $p < .01$) and high self-monitoring ($\beta = .18$, $t = 2.10$, $p < .05$) were the most significant predictors of the use of impression management tactics in the linear regression equation.

Future researchers interested in expanding on this study may find it helpful to examine the tendency for people to differentiated self and how self-differentiation influences self-monitoring tendencies and the use of impression management tactics. Bandura (1997) states “the differentiation of oneself from others is the product of a more general process of the construction of the self” (p. 167). Self-differentiation refers to an individual’s ability to differentiate self-from others. Bar-Tal (2000) explains “whereas individuals with low self-differentiation define and describe themselves in terms of the group in which they are members, individuals with high self-differentiation view themselves as unique and thus define and describe themselves in differential terms from their group” (p. 13). Bar-Tal also indicates that social desirability, high self-monitoring and low self-differentiation are related constructs. Based on this line of reasoning, it seems plausible that a relationship exists among high self-monitoring and low self-differentiation on the use of impression management tactics and presents an avenue for future research on impression management.

Conclusion

In the field of economics, it is reported that the “rich get richer” because they have the capital to invest, but the “poor get poorer” because they do not have investment capital (Garland, 2001). In business and academics, recognition and rewards often go to the people who have established a reputation; therefore, making a good impression at the start of the employment relationship or career may have long-term advantages. Likewise, people who do not establish a reputation through the use of impression management tactics may find that disproportionate credit accrues to the most visible rather than to those making the greatest contribution (Creamer, 2001). The psychosocial process associated with the use of impression management tactics shapes both the private and public images of an individual based on “communally validated testimony of significant others” (Merton, 1968, p. 56).

High monitoring and narcissistic people who work in an organizational context may be skilled as using impression management. Such findings raise
an important question regarding the different people skilled at using impression management tactics and people who possess leadership abilities. In leadership studies, scholars debate the difference between management and leadership. The results of this study introduce another potential argument into the debate between managers and leaders between impression management and leadership. Kets de Vries (2003) asserts that many narcissistic people work in positions of leadership. He states “their sense of drama, their ability to manipulate others, their knack for establishing quick superficial relationships serves them well in organizational life” (p. 23).

The results of this study confirm that personality differences indeed influence the extent to which people use impression management tactics. Impression management tactics are utilized by people who want to create desired impressions on others. Impression management tactics can help people improve their social image as well as gain approval, affirmation, adulation and applause. Making a good impression may afford opportunities for career advancement, advanced learning and development (Snow, 1994). Those affordances, or opportunities for action (Hicks & Nair, 2009), may provide further opportunities for people to create desired impressions on others through the use of impression management tactics and additional opportunities for promotion or career advancement.

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