

Research article

Influence of online searches for campaign messages on voting behaviour in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This study ascertained the influence of political party campaign message information search on the behaviour of voters in Ghana. The researchers however conducted this study by applying the perspectives of consumer behaviour to voter behavior with an objective to examine how the behaviour of consumers (voters) is influenced by the search for information on election campaign messages in their decision-making process. The examination used quantitative research to determine the relationship between voting behaviour and political campaign with the cross-sectional survey deployed to collect data from 7203 voters in Accra. These voters were selected through random sampling and the data was collected with questionnaires. The study measured voter (consumer) behaviour from three dimensions namely psychological, social and personal behaviour. The Structural Equation Model (SEM) in Amos was used for the analysis to establish the relationship between the variables. The study revealed that significant positive relationship between campaign message information search and voter psychological behaviour. Likewise, information searches on campaign messages significantly influence voters' social and personal behaviour. The study concluded that the behaviour of voters is influenced by their search for content or details of political campaign messages. The study concludes that there are opportunities for political marketing and change in voter behaviour. Still, sufficient attention should be given to developing and deploying a consumer behaviour model that recognises the challenges and changes with political-marketing campaigning for vote in Ghana Political parties/candidates should make available adequate information on their campaign promises and manifestos to voters to influence their behaviour towards winning their votes. This study has contributed significantly to the knowledge of literature in the field of political marketing. Nonetheless, further studies should be conducted in other jurisdictions other than Ghana to validate the model or test the hypotheses.

1. Introduction

In the field of political marketing, studies conducted over the years confirmed the claim that voters could be likened to commercial consumers. Just as in commerce, consumers are ever becoming sophisticated, so it is with political consumers whose behaviour is becoming complex and difficult to predict. Fundamentally, two schools of thought explain the changing nature of voters to become consumers. At one point, consumers are seen as becoming more assertive, critical and sometimes cynical and the other school of

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thought believes that the voter now considers politics a basic commodity [1]. Voters today are shifting away from the view of politics as public service [2], voters would choose not what satisfied their interests, but what promoted the good of others. This philosophy sought to discourage voters from adopting the idea of individualistic preferences being promoted in the field of commerce. This shift towards consumerism led [3] to proclaim that “we are now living in a more selective culture in which people are reflexive about their identities as citizens and more consumerist in making choices.” The interplay between politics and consumerism calls for continuous extensive research into the changing behaviour of the voter to the consumer, using consumer behaviour models.

Studies highlight that the behaviour of voters is influenced by several factors. For instance, socio-demographic factors such as educational level [4], age [5–7]; and gender [8]. Other factors include the social environment and election campaign characteristics. In Africa including Ghana, the behaviour of voters has also been widely discussed. Several have argued that understanding the voting pattern in Ghana and Africa is influenced by factors such as ethnicity, personal linkages, and clientelism [9–13]. The missing link in the literature especially on Ghana is the integration of marketing elements as voter behavioural influencers. One of such important factors considered in this study is the search for information on relevant issues by voters to inform their decision in elections.

In political marketing, political parties use campaigns as their main product to sell their ideas and policies to voters. Campaigns compete by offering different pieces of information and attempting to prime different considerations depending on how their designers want voters to think about the choices they face. There is little evidence that campaigns can alter voters’ basic predispositions; rather, they work by inducing voters to frame the choice in a way that wins voters to their side [14,15].

Popkin [16] argues that campaign communications influence voters by informing them of the connections between their lives and interests, the character of political leaders they choose, the policies the government adopts, and how competently it governs. Political parties or candidates should know that voters usually pay attention to their campaign messages and would look for more information or details about such messages to inform their decisions. The level of search that may be conducted by the voter (consumer) may depend on the strength of her drive, the amount of information available, the ease of obtaining more information, the value placed on additional information and the satisfaction derived from the search. This study, therefore, seeks to provide adequate knowledge on how information search on campaign messages of political parties influences the behaviour of the voter.

2. Research objectives

1. To examine the relationship between campaign message information search and voters’ psychological behaviour.
2. To determine the relationship between campaign message information search and voters’ social behaviour.
3. To examine the relationship between campaign message information search and voters’ behaviour.

3. Literature review

3.1. Theoretical framework

This study is rooted in the theory of consumer behaviour. Specifically, the Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (EKB) decision-making theory. The EKB theory describes the consumer decision process and how decisions are made when choosing a list of available alternatives. The model builds on consumer psychology theories and models such as [17] theory of buyer behaviour and [18] theory of the consumer decision process. According to the EKB theory, a consumer performs an external search for more information, and if dissatisfied, s/he may opt out of making decision. Thus, while the decision-making process happens, the same may not translate into actual buying. However, the information thus gathered may act as feedback for being utilised later when s/he goes out for buying the next time. The EKB theory mainly outlined five decision-making processes, problem arousal/recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, product choice and outcomes.

However, the focus of this study is on the second stage of the process, information search. The study seeks to examine how the behaviour of consumers (voters) is influenced by the search for information on election campaign messages in their decision-making process. After the need for recognition of a product or service, the consumer searches for information on the attributes and contents of the product or service. Consumers actively collect and utilise internal and external information to make better purchase decisions [19].

The voter (consumer) aroused by the needs spelt out in the political campaign messages may or may not search for more information [20]. If the driver of the consumer is strong, and the issues entailed in the campaign messages are satisfying, the consumer is likely to buy. If not, the consumer may store the need in memory or undertake an information search related to the need.

Majumdar [21] argued that since consumers are different, their search for information may also differ depending on their knowledge about the product/service or external information search such as feedback. Likewise, voters (consumers) are not the same; therefore, their reasons for information search, levels of search for information and type of information they are looking for in a political campaign message may differ.

According to Ref. [20], the consumer may simply enter heightened attention at one level. In this study, therefore, the voters’ attention to information on the need or problems recognised and captured in the campaign messages of political parties would be measured. The level of search that may be conducted by the voter (consumer) may depend on the strength of her drive, the amount of information available, the ease of obtaining more information, the value placed on additional information and the satisfaction derived from the search.

Haridasan, Fernando and Sajū [22] outlined that the search for information by consumers is based on factors such as knowledge of the consumer, price, perceived risk, experience, involvement and uncertainty. In political marketing research such as this, information search by voters (consumers) concerns the knowledge, source of information, availability, experience and involvement. The extent to

which voters search for information regarding the contents of campaign messages would be measured in alignment with these characteristics in the search for information as validated by studies [23]. As more information is obtained, the awareness and knowledge of the consumer on the availability increase.

4. Consumer (voter) behaviour

In consumer behaviour models, three key elements were identified that define consumer behaviour. These included psychological behaviour, social behaviour, and personal behaviour. These behavioural attributes similarly relate to the behaviour of the voter in electoral markets. Psychologically, motivation, perception, belief, and attitude significantly influence the behaviour of voters and party members as they relate to consumer behaviour [24]. Auf, Meddour, Saoula and Majid [25] concluded that motivation is among the most important factors that determine consumer buying behaviour. According to a study by Singh (2020), the behaviour of voters is influenced by their psychological motivation. Furthermore [26], opined that consumers psychologically create perceptive imagery towards certain products/services which defines their behaviour and purchase decisions. This claim is also backed by Refs. [27,28]. Just as perception influences the consumer's behaviour, voter behaviour in the political market is also defined by their psychological perception of a political party, candidate, or party. Moreover, it was deduced that consumer's behaviour relates to his or her cognitive and affective attitude towards the product [29]. The attitude of the voter is based on perceptions that will define the choice of political parties/candidates. It has a psychological tendency that affects the choice of a political party [30], during which the behaviour changes according to the psychological and emotional state of the voter.

Social behaviour is another behavioural element that defines consumer (voter) behaviour. The behaviour of the voter (consumer) would be defined by their friends, family neighbours, social groups, co-workers, and other social influencers [31]. Per the findings of [32], these social influencers change the behaviour of consumers towards a brand or products/services. From the psycho-social theory, it is assumed that the behaviour of the voter is a function of partisanship. Voters, therefore, behave socially to please their social influencers and fulfil their social value in society. Biesta [33] believes people demonstrate great loyalty towards the political values of their family, peers, and organisations. According to Ref. [34], attachment to political parties and a voting decision is associated with social influences, including parents, family members and others.

The study further proposes that the behaviour of the voter is defined by their personal behaviour element. Consumers have individual/personal traits which define their purchasing behaviour. It is argued that consumers show interest in brands and products/services that are consistent with their personality and self-concept [35]. The personal behaviour of voters would define their political self-efficacy. Shang and Lau [36] identified that personal behaviour could lead some voters to behave like "motivated reasoners" who rely heavily on partisan heuristics in voting decisions instead of actively consuming political information available.

Fig. 1 represents the theoretical framework for the study which describes the relationship between information search and consumer behaviour. It explains that the search for information on political party campaign messages by voters could influence their psychological, social and personal behaviour.

4.1. Campaign message information search and psychological behaviour

Empirical literature shows that the search for information by the consumer in the purchase decision-making process has a connection with consumers' psychological behaviour. From a psychological perspective, determinants of consumers' information search behaviour have been identified, including individual characteristics, types of products and task-related variables [37]. The psychological approach is rooted in Ref. [38] motivational approach, which posited that attention, regulated by the stimulus ambiguity-arousal relationship, is the motivational basis of the search. A consumer uses attention as the first source of control to meet the information requirements within the limitation of the stimuli to which he/she is exposed. He/she will be motivated to engage in overt search, that is, the second method of control when the first source is inadequate. Stimulus ambiguity elicits arousal, activating external search until a buyer obtains the necessary information to decide [37,39,40]. Within this motivation context [41], conceptualised information search as a part of the decision process, which moves a consumer from the problem-recognition state to the decision-making state. Scholars perceived a relationship between motivation and information search activities [17,42–45].

Building on the connection between information search and consumer psychological behaviour, it noted that the information search approach of the consumer evolved from the psychological viewpoint [39,40,46]. According to Ref. [47] the extent of information search depends on one's motivation and perceived ability to search, and higher ability induces increased information search

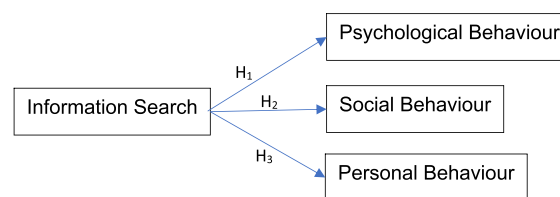


Fig. 1. Theoretical framework.

activities. Empirically, consumers' ability is positively related to information search [40]. In purchasing, the perceived ability to judge products and brands positively affected consumers' information search [48].

Bauer [49] purported that psychologically, postulated that information search is a perceived risk reduction strategy by consumers. According to Ref. [50], perceived risk's natural amount and nature will define consumers' information needs. Therefore, consumers will seek sources, types, and amounts of information that seem most likely to satisfy their particular needs. This also helps to psychologically change consumers' attitudes and beliefs towards a product/service. This study also seeks to hypothetically test the relationship between the search for information embedded in political campaign messages by the voter (consumers) and the voters' psychological behaviour.

H₁: Campaign message information search is positively related to the psychological behaviour of the consumer (voter).

4.2. Campaign message information search and social behaviour

It is believed that information search is related to social behaviour among people. It is depicted that social and behavioural factors affect information search behaviour [51], including family structure [52]. Ip et al. [53] believe that the probability of using websites for searching information on a product/service is higher among young people with high education and high incomes. It can be understood from previous studies that families from high social classes mainly use cognitive criteria, and those with lower social classes mostly use objective criteria and less subjective criteria to evaluate products. On the other hand, in families with a traditional structure, the husband is the only decision-maker that usually uses internal information search for decision-making. In contrast, in modern families, a high level of joint decisions is noticed [53]. Therefore, the desire for internal information search in modern families is less than in traditional ones.

Furthermore, consumers often act as influencers in the decision-making process of others through the provision of information. The social behaviour of consumers has made them influencers [54,55], especially in an advancing technological era. Through social behaviour, the consumer would use information-seeking behaviour through communication and interactions that influence human information search [56]. People are motivated to seek and share information about a product/service with the public through the media, especially social media in recent times, to build their social status and values to seek social approval. These submissions per literature propose that the search for information in the political campaign messages could be related to the social behaviour of the voter (consumer).

H₂: Campaign message information search is positively related to the social behaviour of the consumer (voter).

4.3. Campaign message information search and personal behaviour

Studies have emphasised the relationship between the big five personality traits and information search behaviour [57–59]. It can be understood from such studies that openness to new experiences and extroversion are positively related to motivation for consumers' external information search behaviour. Researchers believe that among the big five personality traits, agreeableness and conscientiousness have the least and the most relation to information search, respectively [60].

Gul, Mahajan, Shah and Nisa [57] revealed positive correlations between openness to experience and information search. Individuals open to experience, being more curious, and willing to learn and experience new things are found to make extra efforts to get the required information. In contrast, people with low levels of openness to experience show less effort towards information search. Gul, Mahajan, Shah and Nisa [57] further show that people with high openness to experience will likely evaluate the retrieved information more critically. These findings were also confirmed by Ref. [61].

Personal behaviour in terms of extraversion was also found to have a positive correlation with information search, according to Ref. [57]. It is added that characteristics such as enthusiasm, activeness and confidence associated with extroverts tend to trigger their efforts in searching for information. Gul, Mahajan, Shah and Nisa [57] further show correlations between information and personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness.

H₃: Campaign message information search is positively related to the personal behaviour of the consumer (voter).

5. Methodology

This study applied the quantitative research method. The objective of ascertaining the relationship between political party campaign message information search and voter behaviour informs the decision to deploy the quantitative method of research. Using this method of research, the study seeks to evaluate and understand the relationship between variables in context. The study further employed the cross-sectional survey research design to gather the needed information from a proportion of voters (consumers) in Ghana for generalization and inferences. The design deployed assisted the study in undergoing a scientific process where the researcher little or no control over the entire research setting.

The population from whom data was required for the study was eligible voters in Ghana numbering 17,029,971 according to the [62]. However, due to the large size of the population, the target was the voter population in Accra, estimated at 3,529,181 voters. Accra, being the capital city of Ghana, the composition of the voter population would be generally representative of Ghana. To determine accurate sample size for the study, Cochran's proportionate sample size estimation formula is commonly associated with a cross-sectional survey design was employed.

$$\frac{Z_{1-\alpha/2}^2 p(1-p)}{d^2}$$

$Z_{1-\alpha/2}$ is the standard normal variate (at 5 % type 1 error with a value of 1.96 and 1 % type 1 error with a value of 2.58). p is the expected proportion of the population. In this research, the expected proportion is estimated as the proportion of voters (2637036) to the total number of registered voters in Accra (3529181), that is,

$$\frac{2637036}{3529181} = 0.75$$

and d is the absolute error or precision. To ensure good precision, the confidence level is 95 % (0.05).

$$\frac{1.96^2 0.75(1 - 0.75)}{0.05^2} = 7203$$

The study, therefore, gathered data from 7203 voters in Accra as its sample size. Questionnaires were used to gather data from participants who were randomly sampled. Political campaign message information search was measured using 6-items, scaled on Likert scale. These items were constructs of consumer information search behaviour adapted from a study by Ref. [23]. Three dimensions were used to measure voter (consumer) behaviour. These include psychological behaviour, social behaviour and personal behaviour. Psychological behaviour of consumers was measured on 5-items validated by Ref. [63]. Social behaviour was measured on 4-items adapted from a study by Ref. [64]. Moreover, personal behaviour was measured in terms of extraversion, agreeableness and openness to experiences. The variable was measured on a 4-item scale, with constructs also adapted from Ref. [64]. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used as an analytical technique to examine the relationship between the variables.

6. Results and discussions

Out of the 7203 participants covered in the study, it is observed that 3609, representing 50.10 %, were between the ages of 24–34, forming the majority. About 37 % were between the ages of 18–24 years. Participants between the ages of 35–54 years represent 11.45 %. Largely (87.45 %) of voters covered in this study are very youthful citizens. With respect to gender, 4137 (57.43 %) of the participants were males, while the remaining 42.57 % were female. Both male and female voters are well represented in the study; hence findings can be attributed equally to both genders.

Regarding religion, the study shows that 4828 (67.03 %) of the participants are Christians, and 31.18 % are Muslims. A little about 2 % indicated to be traditionalists. The religious distribution of the participants seems to have agreed with the country's population distribution by religion. There are many ethnic groups in Ghana; however, the study covered only 5 major ones. These include Akan, Ga-Dangme, Mole-Dagbani, Ewe and Guan. The study shows Akans were more largely represented, constituting 45.98 %, followed by Ga-Dangme at 25.82 % in that order. Largely, the major ethnic groups are represented in this study. The study largely covered the voter population, which is well-educated. It is disclosed that 5359 (73.01 %) are undergraduates, including those with certificates, diplomas and bachelor's degrees. About 21 % also attained levels of high school certificates.

Table 1
Participants' socio-demographic profile.

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Age		
18–24 years	2690	37.35
25–34 years	3609	50.10
35–54 years	825	11.45
55 and over	79	1.10
Gender		
Male	4137	57.43
Female	3066	42.57
Religion		
Christianity	4828	67.03
Muslim	2246	31.18
Traditionalist	129	1.79
Ethnicity		
Akan	3312	45.98
Ga-Dangme	1860	25.82
Mole-Dagbani	891	12.37
Ewe	770	10.69
Guan	370	5.14
Educational Level		
No Education	42	0.58
Primary/Secondary Education (JHS&SHS)	1521	21.12
Undergraduate Education (Certificate, Diploma and Bachelor)	5259	73.01
Graduate Education (Masters, PhD, and Post Doc)	381	5.29

6.1. Campaign message information and voter behaviour

Presented in Table 1 is the determination of the relationship between political campaign message information search and voter (consumer) behaviour. It also explains the causal effect of campaign message information search on voter behaviour. The study sought to answer the question as to whether voters' search for campaign messages would influence their psychological, social, and personal behaviour. The consumer is always searching for information on products/services that could affect their behaviour, influencing decision-making [Table 2].

7. Discussion

The results indicate a significant positive relationship between campaign message information search and voters' psychological behaviour ($\beta = 0.51$, $p = 0.001$). It infers that for any unit change in the campaign message information search, the psychological behaviour of voters would change by 0.51. This positive effect reveals that the change caused by campaign message information search can either increase or decrease the psychological behaviour among voters. The consumer's search for information on the campaign messages motivates them about its contents. Their perception, attitude, and belief of the consumer about the product also change as their information search changes.

It is deduced that the voter's (consumer) psychological behaviour is significantly determined or dependent on the search for information. This assertion is supported by Refs. [17,40,48]. It is purported by these authors that psychologically; the consumer is motivated to search for information about a product/service once the needs of the product/service arouse them. If the voter can get information detailing the contents of a political campaign message, s/he will be pushed to search for more. The degree of the search for information depends on consumers' motivation and perceived ability to search, and higher ability results in increased information search. However, the consumer's motivation, perception and attitude towards a political campaign message could decrease if the search for information reduces or the voter cannot find the needed information. Srinivasan [40] proved that; the psychological ability of the consumer is positively related to information search. The psychological perception of the voter induced by the search for information is critical, as it serves as a perceptual risk reduction strategy for the voter. Having found much information on a political party campaign message, the voter can identify and differentiate between good and bad policies towards satisfying their needs and development based on their perception. This changes voters' psychological attitudes and beliefs about a political brand or party.

Findings further show a significant positive effect of campaign message information search on the social behaviour of voters ($\beta = 0.46$, $p = 0.001$). This is a revelation that for any unit change in the search for campaign message information, there would be a corresponding change in the social behaviour of the voter by 0.46. If the search for information increases, the social behaviour of the consumer (voter) correspondingly increases by 0.46, while any decrease also decreases social behaviour by 0.46. The voter searches for information on political campaign messages to push them to increase their social status and social relationships.

The relationship between information search and consumer social behaviour can be described as bi-directional. While studies [52, 53] proposed that searching for information depends on social and behavioural factors such as educational level, income level, social class, age, and gender. Others [54–56] found that consumer social behaviour is explained by searching for information about a product/service. The search for information by consumers makes them social influencers as they become more knowledgeable about campaign messages and carry the message or information to others. Information search changes the communication and interaction of the voter with others. The voter raises his/her social status and value and shows affiliation and identification with a particular political brand or party as more insight is gained through searching for information. Practically, these occur in the political environment in Ghana, where individuals or party faithful or people seeking to be highly identified with a party consistently seek information about party policy strategies and campaign messages to debate or argue out any emerging issues.

Furthermore, the personal behaviour of voters was also positively affected and influenced by political party campaign message information search. This is shown by the regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.57$) supported by the significant p-value ($0.001 < 0.05$). The consumer's behavioural traits change according to the search for information in campaign messages. A unit increase in information search would increase the social behaviour of the consumer by 0.57, while any decrease in the search for information would decrease personal behaviour by the same margin. The search for information by consumers on campaign messages causes them to get loud, enthusiastic, critical, and conventional about issues entailed in the messages.

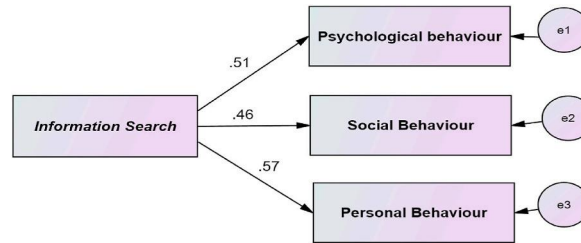
This relationship is proven by scholars [39,58,59]. The voter would like to be very informed about political party campaign messages by the level of their agreeableness, openness to experience and conscientiousness. Voters become more open to experience and conscientious about the campaign message of various political parties once they have derived adequate information from their

Table 2
SEM of campaign message information and voter behaviour.

Variables	Coefficients		Standard Error	p-value
	Unstandardised	Standardised		
INF → PSY	0.54	0.51	0.011	0.001
INF → SOC	0.44	0.46	0.010	0.001
INF → PER	0.54	0.56	0.009	0.001
RESULTS: Measures of fit: NFI = 0.833, TLI = 0.911, CFI = 0.921, RMSEA = 0.072				

INF=Information; PSY=Psychology; SOC=Social; PER=Personal.

search. The activeness, enthusiasm, and confidence level of the consumer (voter) towards a political party would change depending on the search for information and the quantum of available information obtained.



8. Conclusion

Purposely, this study sought to examine the influence of political campaign message information search on the behaviour of voters. It is concluded that political party campaign message information search has a significant positive influence on the voters' psychological, social, and personal behaviour. In other words, it is concluded that at a 95 % confidence level the psychological, social, and personal behaviour of voters in Ghana depends on/is determined by political campaign message evaluation. The Ghanaian voter is looking for content and detailed information on the messages preached by political parties. The voter, as a consumer, wants to be enlightened on the policies and ideas (products) of political parties. To a high degree, the Ghanaian voter also considers evaluating political campaign messages key towards behavioural change. The devotion of time by the voter to understand and have in-depth knowledge and insight about the details of campaign messages causes the voter to express emotions and feelings towards a political party, and vice versa. The voters' social feelings or attachment to a political party also changes because of campaign message information search by the voter. Information search changes the communication and interaction of the voter with others. The voter raises his/her social status and value and shows affiliation and identification with a particular political brand or party as more insight is gained through searching for information. The search for information by the voter also influences voters' personal behaviour.

9. Recommendations

Political parties and candidates should also strengthen communication strategies to ensure campaign messages reach the target consumer (voter). There is also the need to provide information on policies developed by political parties or candidates. This information should be easily accessible by the voter. While in recent times traditional media (radio, television and newspapers) has been used as a means of advertising campaign messages, political parties should explore the use of social media to capture young voters especially the educated.

Data availability statement

The data that has been used is confidential and would be provided on request.

Statement of informed consent

Before administering the questionnaire, consent was obtained from the participants. Furthermore, the participants were duly notified that the data they gave would be kept private and confidential.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stanley Nelvis Glate: Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dennis Yao Dzansi:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Formal analysis. **Darlington Peter Onojaefe:** Validation, Supervision, Methodology.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e31114>.

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