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# HOW TO SELL LUXURY FROM A NON-LUXURY STORE

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**ABSTRACT**

Luxury brand manufacturers often do not control the stores that sell their luxury range – in terms of the image of the stores and the management of the salespeople within. This creates challenges for the luxury brand manufacturers in two ways. First, as the store's image may not correspond to the luxury status of the brands they sell, this status discrepancy may hurt the luxury brand performance (i.e., consumers may require more convergence between retail environments and luxury brands) and lead to a conflict of identification for the salesperson (i.e., between the store's and brand's image). Second, the ability of luxury brand manufacturers to energize their downstream channel member sales personnel is likely to be crucial for success in the marketplace. However, it is not clear how luxury brand manufacturers can motivate their retailer's sales personnel in charge of large brand portfolios. Thus, sales management practices may not be aligned in the best interest of the luxury brand manufacturers as (1) training input to strengthen the luxury brand identification of the salesperson, also carries the risk of increasing the status discrepancy, to further worsen the situation and (2) financial incentives may support other brands in the distributors brand portfolio.

This study attempts to show how luxury brands manufacturers' decisions are driven by the tension they experience between maintaining control over their image and the imperative to reach the end market. Specifically, the perceived value derived from training their downstream channel member sales personnel are proposed as important dimensions of market performance.

**KEYWORDS**

Luxury brands, salesforce management, retail sales personnel training, brand identification, social exchange theory, social identity theory.

## INTRODUCTION

In the marketing literature, the counterintuitive nature of marketing of luxury goods and services has been documented (Kapferer and Bastien 2009). Managing luxury brands has contradictions that other brands do not (Nuemo and Quelch 1998). For instance, in terms of distribution, the goal of a luxury brand is not to be more accessible but to control distribution and choose their locations for their symbolism. However to meet the ever-growing demands of luxury products (Bain & Company, Spring 2011 Report - predicts a strong growth trend, estimating a €214 billion to €221 billion market within three years) and to keep the 'dream of luxury' alive, the luxury brand manufacturers often have to go beyond the company-owned boutique into a multi-branded non-luxury store. It is imperative for the luxury brand manufacturers to understand the best way to manage their brands' performance via the multi-branded stores, and essential to this focus is the management of the salespeople who sell the luxury brands from such non-luxury multi-branded stores. The salesperson operating from such a store has to manage this conflicting situation of selling a luxury brand from a non-luxury store.

The academic literature on the benefits of training has already provided evidence for its use as a competitive tool to build organizational identification (Wayne, Shore & Liden 1997; Edwards and Peccei 2010) and brand associations (Roper and Davies 2010). Luxury brand manufacturers often train the company-owned boutique salespeople to align them with the brand values, make them aware of the brand DNA and equip them with sales protocols specific to the luxury brand. While it is ideal to extend the same training inputs to the salespeople of the non-luxury stores, there is a risk attached to this. On the one hand, training on the specific sales rituals of a luxury brand, the myths and legends that make the brand are absolutely essential in defining the essence of the brand and can be used as unique tools to build the brand image, increase brand identification and energize the salespeople. On the other hand, from a salesperson perspective, there exists a competing form of identification (with the luxury brand manufacturer vs. the non-luxury store) that gets more salient as the divide between luxury and non-luxury gets more precise through training from the luxury brand manufacturers. Additionally, there exists a possibility that training these salespeople from a multi-branded non-luxury store may result in the use of the luxury selling skills for another non-luxury brand or a competing luxury brand. Thus there exists a paradox when it comes to evaluating the benefits of training inputs for salespeople who sell luxury via a non-luxury store.

In addition to the notion of brand identification, this study explores a very powerful mechanism potentially available for the luxury brand manufacturers to exploit, in their attempt to design the right kind of training mix to be able to connect with the salespeople of a non-luxury store: reciprocation. The notion of reciprocity norm is that when one person treats another well, the reciprocity norm obliges the return of favorable treatment (Gouldner, 1960). Drawn from social exchange theory (Blau 1964) reciprocity norms become salient when an employee or a salesperson believes that the organization has expended some efforts towards their development. Research shows that training is seen as a form of perceived organization support (Wayne, Shore & Liden 1997), hence a form of effort directed towards the employee. When training is offered to the salespeople of the non-luxury store, we expect a norm of reciprocation to get established. While the training may increase the perceived distance between the luxury brand and the non-luxury store, the reciprocity norm will influence the salespeople to overcome this conflict by expending more efforts towards the brand. The norms of reciprocity will also inhibit the salespeople to use the training inputs in the service of another competing luxury or non-luxury brand, as they will feel obliged to be loyal towards the training-provider. Finally the norms of reciprocity will ensure that the salespeople treat the brand differently and support the idea of its luxuriousness in their subjective conceptualization of luxury.

Overall trainee satisfaction with the training inputs has been studied (Giangreco, Sebastiano & Peccei 2009), but not yet researched is the notion of perceived value of training inputs for the development of brand identification. Building on existing literature, we propose that the training would lead to creation of cognitive (what they learned), relational (who they felt connected to), hedonic (how they felt) and reciprocative (how much effort was expended on them) value, which would lead to build sensitivity towards luxury and eventually to build luxury brand identification. We further propose that the solution to deal with the unique condition of designing training inputs for the salespeople to sell luxury from a non-luxury store is to emphasize on the components that will increase the informative and reciprocative value of the training, which lead to a greater relative brand effort and better brand performance. We now present the research questions, followed by a thorough literature review to build our conceptual model and hypotheses.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the academic and managerial issue identified above, this study intends to answer the following research questions in the context of selling luxury via a non-luxury store –

What is the impact of the contradictory identification process on the effort and performance of the salesperson?

What is the impact of luxury brand training on the effort and performance of the salesperson for the specific luxury brand?

Which components of the luxury brand training have the maximum impact on the effort and performance of the salesperson for the specific luxury brand?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Social Identity Theory, Organizational Identification and Brand Identification*

Social identity theory posits that self-concept of a person is derived in part by the psychological membership in various social groups that he/she belongs to (Tajfel 1978). Social identity theory has been used exhaustively to understand a person's psychological attachment to an organization (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn 1995; Smidts, Pruyn, and Van Riel 2001). In defining their identities, as derived from the organization, members often get a sense of well-being from their organizational membership, sometimes also 'basking in the reflected glory' of the positive image of their organization (Cialdini et al., 1976). Actual membership is not necessary, as it has been documented that a psychological group is far more than an extension of interpersonal relationships (Turner, 1985) and identification can arise even in the absence of interpersonal cohesion, similarity, or interaction and yet have a powerful impact on affect behavior (Ashforth & Mael 1989).

In previous research (Hughes & Ahearne 2010), brand identification has been defined as the degree to which a person defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes defines a brand. Just as formal membership in a group is not required for identification (Pratt 1998) consumers also prefer brands that elicit associations consistent with self-identities either actual or desired (Sirgy 1982). Conflicting identification has also been thoroughly examined in the identity literature (Fiol, Pratt & O'Connor 2009; Burke 1991; Kelman 2006). However it has not been examined in the context of salespeople in the luxury sales context. Several interesting questions arise out of the situation of a salesperson with a conflicting identification (luxury brand vs. non-luxury store) – like the impact on effort and performance due to this perceived conflict, the impact of other external factors like training etc. on strengthening one or the other form of identification and its implications. Thus, the following study attempts to fill this gap by empirically testing the relevant hypothesis.

***Social Exchange Theory and Reciprocity Norm***

Social exchange theory examines the exchange relationship between specific actors as "actions contingent on rewarding reactions from others" (Blau 1964). Social exchanges entail unspecified obligations (Blau 1964); when one person does another a favor, there is an expectation of some future return, though exactly when it will occur and in what form is often unclear (Gouldner, 1960). The notion of reciprocity norm is that when one person treats another well, the reciprocity norm obliges the return of favorable treatment (Gouldner, 1960). Employees develop perceptions of the degree to which their organization values their contributions and cares about their well being (Aselage and Eisenberger 2003; Eisenberger et al. 1986). Social exchange theory and the reciprocity norm has been shown to explain how this perceived organizational support creates a feeling of obligation within employees to care about the organization and help it reach its goals (e.g., Eisenberger et al. 2001; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002). One way of increasing perceived organizational support is via the mechanism of formal and informal training and development experiences (Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997). In the context of our study, a salesperson may be exposed to training inputs from a luxury brand manufacturer and/or from the store. In line with the existing literature, any such training initiative may have an impact on the salesperson's perception of the organizational support, the resulting intention to reciprocate, finally leading to behavior in terms of effort and performance. It is interesting to study how the notion of reciprocity may influence a salesperson in a conflicting situation of competing identities, which is the case for this study of a salesperson who has to sell luxury from a non-luxury store.

***Training, Perceived Organizational Support and Assessment of Training***

There exists an extensive amount of literature on the benefits of training - manufacturers recognize that training enhances employees' knowledge, skills and behavior (Seyler, Holton III, Bates, Burnett and Carvalho 1998; Tan, Hall and Boyce 2003). Positive training experiences have positive consequences on employees' attitudes like organizational commitment and job motivation (Meyer and Allen 1997; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002). The better the training employees believe they receive, the stronger their affective brand associations and the higher their satisfaction with the organization (Roper and Davies 2010). Employees who had participated in more formal and informal training and development experiences than others reported higher levels of perceived organizational support (Wayne, Shore & Liden 1997). Perceived organization support leads to organizational identification (Edwards and Peccei 2010; Fuller et al. 2003; Gibney et al. 2011; Rhoades & Eisenberger 2002). In response to the positive discussions about the importance of training, companies do rely on and invest a significant amount of resources into it (Kraiger, McLinden and Casper 2004). For evaluation of training outcomes, there exists a stream of research based on the seminal work of Kirkpatrick. According to Kirkpatrick's (1959a, 1959b, 1960a, 1960b, 1967, 1996a) hierarchical model of training outcomes, training can be evaluated across the four levels – reaction (to the training, immediate), learning, behavior (measured as the extent to which the learning result in new behavior at work) and results (measured in terms of individual and organizational performance). While a lot of research has been done to evaluate the training outcomes across these four levels, global analysis of overall satisfaction derived from the training incentives as experienced by the trainees are few (Giangreco, Sebastiano & Peccei 2009; Giangreco et al. 2010). Evaluations from the trainee perspective are essential for our study, as the brand identification process is felt at an individual level, and we would like to capture the effect of training on this process and to do so, the idea of value derived from the training as captured by the informative (what they learned), relational (who they felt connected to), hedonic (how they felt) and reciprocative (how much effort was expended on them) components would be an interesting part of this study.

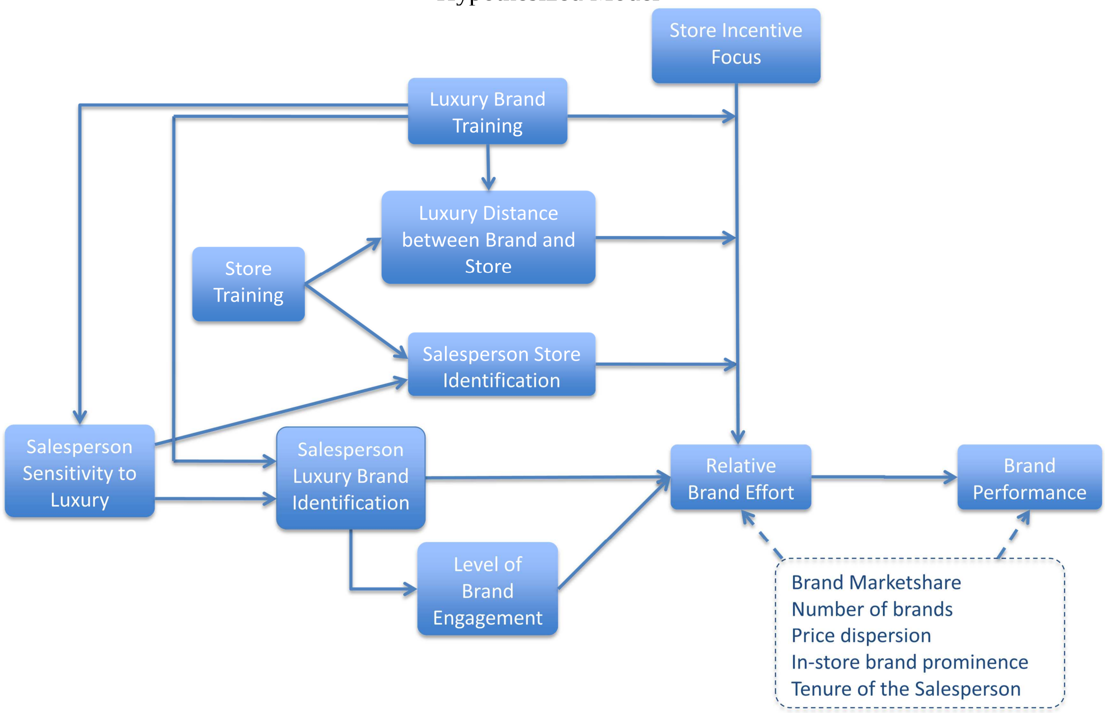
***Luxury and Sensitivity to Luxury***

**"**Luxury is particularly slippery to define. A strong element of human involvement, very limited supply and the recognition of value by others are key components" (Cornell 2002). There exists little agreement in the academic literature on the definition of a luxury brand. The very early attempts to define luxury put forth socio-economic environment as a key component towards understanding luxury (Veblen 1899). Various other conceptions of luxury and its dimensionalities have been studied (Alleres, Vickers and Renand 2003, Nueno and Quelch 1998, Dubois, Czellar and Laurent 2005, Vigneron and Johnson 2004), however one of the key aspects of a luxury brand with a great number of implications for its management is its position of superiority with respect to the client (Kapferer & Bastien 2008). This notion of superiority in the context of luxury can be observed in terms of how luxury is seen as socially distant (Miyazaki, Grewal, & Goldstein 2005, Nuemo & Quelch 1998; Silverstein & Fiske 2003), hypothetically distant (Dubois & Paternault 1995) and also psychologically distant (Hansen & Wanke 2011). It is also believed that the perception of luxury is subjective – what may be luxury for one person, may not be a true luxury for another person. Overall, in this subjective conceptualization of luxury, what remains constant as a marker of luxury is the perceived distance of the target brand from the 'others'. We define sensitivity towards luxury as the extent to which an individual realizes the luxuriousness of a brand, in comparison to the 'other brands' which is a subjective perceptual construct, measured at an individual level and can be shaped up with various brand-building strategies.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND HYPOTHESES

Building on Hughes and Ahearne (2010), we propose to investigate the impact of training on brand identification for selling luxury from a non-luxury store (see Figure 1). We expect luxury brand training to increase salesperson's sensitivity towards luxury, and consequently salesperson's luxury brand identification as well. Luxury brand training is also expected to impact the luxury distance between brand and store, and moderate the impact of store incentive focus on relative brand effort. We further suggest that store training impacts the extent of identification with the store and also the luxury distance between brand and store, which in turn moderates the impact of the store incentive focus on relative brand effort. In line with Hughes and Ahearne (2010)'s conception, we expect store incentive focus to have an impact on the relative brand effort. Further, we suggest the salesperson luxury brand identification leads to an increased level of brand engagement and eventually to greater relative brand effort. As we further elaborate on the constructs captured in the model, we also develop the relevant hypotheses as shown below.

FIGURE 1
Hypothesized Model




***Luxury Brand Training***

We propose to examine the perceived value of training with the help of four dimensions of value – cognitive, relational, hedonic and reciprocative. These training outcome variables build on the previously examined ones of perceived efficiency of training, perceived usefulness of training and perceived trainer performance (Giangreco, Sebastiano & Peccei 2009) as they attempt to capture the specific value-evaluation of the training by the salesperson.

The cognitive value conception is expected to have two components – the first is specific to the luxury brand information (the know-how of the brand, how it was created, what makes it special) and therefore is non-transferable; and the second is related to the selling strategies (how to treat the product of the brand, luxury specific selling ritual) with an impact not only on the immediate selling skills, but also on the long-term market value of the salesperson. This cognitive value perception decrypts the brand for the salesperson, and establishes the superiority of the brand via rational arguments based on quality, legacy etc., to create a favorable subjective assessment of the luxuriousness of the brand. Also, one of the assumptions of the social identity theory is that people strive for positive self-esteem, that self-esteem is in part derived from social group membership, and that a positive social identity is maintained or strengthened through in-group/out-group comparisons (Van Dick et al. 2004). Hence when the salesperson is exposed to the positively valenced luxury brand training, there should be a natural inclination for the salesperson to form a stronger relationship with the luxury brand, to reinforce his/her self-concept through the process on increased luxury brand identification.

The relational value conception of the luxury brand training captures the two components – internally whom they felt like (identity enhancement) and externally whom they felt connected to (membership). Relational self-concept is derived from relationships with significant others (Brewer and Gardner 1996) and identities are created in the interaction process between individuals (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1980; Scott, Corman and Cheney 1998). Therefore, when salespeople are exposed to luxury brand training, relational value gets enhanced. Using social identity theory again, luxury brand training with a high perceived relational value would lead the salespeople to incorporate the brand into their self-definition, leading to an enhanced self-esteem and a sense of belongingness to the world of the luxury brands.

The hedonic value conception of the luxury brand training captures the affective responses to the training (how they felt). Affective responses are a critical part of the attitude construct (Rosenberg 1956), which have been shown to lead to positive brand attitudes (Gardner 1985). As mentioned earlier, positive training experiences lead to greater organizational commitment (Meyer and Allen 1997; Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002), perceived organizational support (Wayne, Shore & Liden 1997) and also greater organizational identification (Rhoades & Eisenberger 2002). Positive brand attitudes added with greater organizational identification will in turn lead to greater luxury brand identification.

The reciprocative value conception of the luxury brand training captures the perception of the intensity of effort as expended by the luxury training company (how much effort was spent by the company on them, as assessed by them). This conception is crucial as it leads the salespeople towards the concept of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960). The reciprocity norm, once initiated, will lead to the following – the salesperson will feel more responsible for the training inputs to lead to better processing and absorption of the cognitive information and increased identification towards the luxury brand due to moral obligation towards the parent company. Thus:

*H1 (a) The higher the perceived value of the luxury brand manufacturer's training of its downstream channel member sales personnel, the higher the sales personnel sensitivity to luxury.*

*H1 (b) The higher the sales personnel sensitivity to luxury, the higher the sales personnel's luxury brand identification.*

Based on Hughes & Ahearne's research (2010) in a BtoB environment, we surmise control system alignment is a key aspect that captures the extent to which store's control systems (incentives, rewards etc.) coincide with the luxury brand's priorities. When the incentives of the store are focused on the target luxury brand, training should add to a stronger positive brand effort by the salesperson. When the incentives of the store are not focused on the target luxury brand, the training should have a positive effect, but not as strong as observed in the previous case. Thus:

*H1 (c) Higher levels of perceived value of the luxury brand manufacturer's training of its downstream channel member sales personnel strengthen brand effort when store control system alignment is high but weaken brand effort when store control system alignment is low.*

***Luxury Distance between Brand and Store***

The luxury proposition of a brand is created with the help of the right environment and service (Okonkwo 2007, Moore & Birtwistle 2005, Kent, Macdonald & Deex 2002). The salesperson at a non-luxury store, selling a luxury brand is subject to two kinds of identifications – brand identification with the luxury brand and organizational identification with the store. Due to the conflicting nature of luxury vs. non-luxury cues associated with these identifications, we predict that the salesperson will perceive this difference. To measure this difference, we define the luxury distance between brand and store as the degree to which the salesperson perceives the brand and store to be similar in terms of brand identities. In addition to the pre-existing competing form of identification that the salesperson will perceive, luxury brand training and/or store training will further enhance this luxury distance perception.

*H2 (a): The higher the perceived value of the luxury brand manufacturer's training of its downstream channel member sales personnel, the higher the sales personnel perceived luxury distance between brand and the store.*

*H2 (b): The higher the perceived value of the retailer's training its sales personnel, the higher the sales personnel's perceived luxury distance between brand and the store.*

The luxury distance between brand and store is a conflicting identification construct in the mind of the salesperson. As per this conflict, the salesperson perceives the store to be not as luxurious as the luxury brand. The environment variables in a store are also known to have an impact on the perceptions of employees (Bitner 1992). In line with attribution theory (Weiner & Kukla 1970), due to this negative situation of being in the 'wrong' kind of store, salespeople in general will have less desire to expend brand effort. When the incentives of the store are not focused on the target luxury brand, this luxury distance training will add to a greater reluctance to expend brand effort by the salesperson and when the incentives of the store are focused on the target luxury brand, the luxury distance will still have a negative effect due to attribution bias. Thus:

*H2 (c) Higher levels of luxury distance between brand and store weaken brand effort when store control system alignment is high.*

***Salesperson Store Identification***

Prior research has shown that training of salespeople at retail stores supports the image of the store (Miller, 2006). Retail sales training provided by the retailer at the store level has also been shown to build organizational commitment (Pettijohn, Pettijohn & Taylor 2009). The retailer training with its components of the perceived value of cognitive (specific selling skills), relational (interaction benefits with the peers and trainer) helps to incorporate the identity of the store into the salesperson's identity. In line with our discussion on the social identity theory, training thus would to greater identification with the store, enhanced by the effect of reciprocity. Increased sensitivity to luxury will make the luxury cues salient for the salesperson, thus reducing the identification with the non-luxury cues of store identification. When salesperson store identification is high, the attribution bias will lead to a weak brand effort even when the incentives of the store are focused on the target luxury brand. Thus:

*H3 (a) The higher the perceived value of store training, the higher the salesperson's store identification.*

*H3 (b) The higher the sales personnel sensitivity to luxury, the lower the sales personnel's store identification.*

*H3 (c) Higher levels of perceived value of store training weaken brand effort when store control system alignment is high.*

### *Relative Brand Effort and Level of Brand Engagement*

Critical to the whole discussion is the amount of effort expended by the salespeople on the target luxury brand as compared to the time spent on all other brands. We capture this in the construct of relative brand effort adapted to the luxury environment (Hughes and Ahearne 2010). The overall effect of relative brand effort, level of brand engagement on relative brand performance remain unchanged and fairly straight-forward to reason, hence we do not create separate hypotheses for testing these relations.

## PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

### *Sample*

We are currently discussing with a top luxury manufacturer. In case of a final approval on all the aspects of the project, data will be collected from the partner stores of this luxury brand. The channels selected for the study will be carrying the same brand portfolio. Externalities pertaining to company and geographic differences will be controlled for. In particular, we will control for store size, brand market share, number of brands, price dispersion, in-store brand prominence and tenure of the salesperson by including them as covariates in the analysis. Surveys will be administered to salespeople and store managers in each operation, and objective data will be obtained for outcome variables as described below.

### *Measures*

We rely on existing measures for measuring salesperson luxury brand identification, store identification and luxury distance between brand and store. Hence, we will use an 8-pt visual and verbal representation of the perceived overlap that was developed by Bergami and Bagozzi (2000). Store incentive focus and relative brand effort will be measured using the scales developed by Hughes & Ahearne (2010). Level of brand engagement measures will be adapted from the measures developed for capturing brand extra-role behaviors (Hughes & Ahearne 2010) and subject to the level of access given to us by the luxury brand company, we may or may not develop a more refined pool of items with exploratory research. Currently, we are looking through existing research to discover measures to accurately capture the constructs of store training, luxury brand training values and salesperson sensitivity to luxury; and exploratory research for scale development will be done if required.

### *Analytical Approach*

After we measure the model, we will use a multi-level analysis because some of the data will vary among salespeople within distributors as well as across distributors. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) will be the technique utilized since it takes into account the hierarchical structure of the data (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

## EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS

Answering Hughes and Ahearne’s (2010) call for exploring the notion of brand identification under competing forms and under different conditions, this study seeks to identify the mechanism explaining brand identification in such competing identity scenarios. Specifically, this study is designed to explore the contradicting identification process arising due to the task of selling luxury from a non-luxury store and to determine its consequences on the salesperson performance. To the best of our knowledge, this very relevant marketing issue has not been addressed in prior academic marketing literature.

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