

Exploring the Cultural Significance of Mexican Food: A Personal and Global Perspective



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Senior Capstone

Communication Studies

Research Essay

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Dedication

I dedicate my Senior Capstone to my Mom, Dad, and two Sisters for their continuous support and love that they have shared throughout my college career. I am forever grateful for the work ethic and ambition they have instilled in me in order to achieve the milestone of becoming a college graduate. Thank you for the love and care you have shown me throughout this journey!

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Project Proposal

Name and Concentration: Robert Treto, concentration in Humanities & Communication Studies

- I. **Essay title:** Exploring the Cultural Significance of Mexican Food: A Personal and Global Perspective

- II. **Topic:** The specific topic that I would like to discuss is the multi-faceted meaning and value that Mexican food possesses and its influence on Mexican culture along with its influence in my own life. I would like to discuss the different ways that Mexican food influences its culture and how Mexican culture is shared through its food. Mexican food and its culture has the ability to inspire and grow and I will explore the multitude of ways that this is done in the world and within my own life.

Research questions:

What does Mexican food and its culture mean to me? What role does it play in my everyday life?

What is the general public's perception of Mexican food?

How has Mexican food been able to influence and create community even among those who aren't of Mexican heritage?

How has my experience with Mexican food influenced the way I view foods from different cultures?

What has Mexican food done for Mexican culture on a global scale?

Food heals, does Mexican food possess the ability to solve problems for those who aren't Mexican?

Does Mexican food hold the same value for all Mexicans, or do some view Mexican food as unimportant to their lives?

What ethnicity of people (other than Mexican) enjoy Mexican food the most?

Does Mexican food change non-Hispanic people's views on Mexican culture and race as a whole?

What does Mexican food have to do with the role that women play in society in Mexican culture?

- III. **Theme:** The theme of our class is food for thought. I believe that my topic, the multi-faceted meaning and value that Mexican food possesses and its influence on Mexican culture along with its influence in my own life will allow me to really see the prevalence the Mexican culture and its food have in the US and across the globe. I plan on going into depth about my culture and its correlation to the importance of food and culture in this country. I will discuss the positives and the negatives about this cultural food and provide information and feedback from people who have opinions on this culture.
- IV. **Next steps:** I plan on finding and implementing as much information as I can to help support my topic. I will attempt to find situations where Mexican culture has been celebrated and enjoyed, but also situations where it has also been unappreciated and undervalued. I believe that with my appreciation for my culture and its food, I will be able to explain what Mexican culture means for a lot of people in the US and how prevalent it is in the lives of many people regardless of their race or ethnicity. Food and culture have the ability to unite and bring people together and I feel as if Mexican culture has proven this idea to be true with its rich history in the US.
- V. **Timeline:**
Feb 26- April 1: I will be conducting and utilizing research
March 13: I will begin writing half of Capstone project
March 28: I will continue with completing the second half of Capstone project
March 30- April 9: I will add and finalize any last pieces of information for Capstone project
April 10: I will submit a draft of Capstone project
May 15: I will touch up, finalize and submit a final Capstone project

Exploring the Cultural Significance of Mexican Food: A Personal and Global Perspective

The importance of food in culture tends to be overlooked and treated as something that is irrelevant and futile by a majority of the United States. This importance regarding food in the U.S. and internationally lies within its ability to unite and reinforce a sense of community in a world that consists of a large amount of divide and polarization. Considering the diverse landscape of the U.S., food serves as a tangible link to cultural traditions that are passed down through generations. Although the idea of food and its significance in culture is such a polarizing topic in the U.S. The polarization in the U.S. is lessened through the social cohesion that food provides and acts as a catalyst for bringing people together. I will dive into why it plays such an important role within my own Mexican culture. I will explore the multi-faceted meaning and value of Mexican food in shaping Mexican culture and its influence on my life, alongside its global impact.

Mexican heritage has impacted the way food is integrated with culture and how this is perceived throughout the world. Ultimately, “The globalization of food has brought new culinary influences to countries around the world” (The Medium). This has led to the creation of a more diverse culinary platform, paving the way for the growth and integration of Mexican food and culture into mainstream society in the States. If we can comprehend the impact of globalization on Mexican food, we can sustain and grow its identity and presence throughout the U.S. and internationally. Maintaining tradition within cultures on a global scale, specifically Mexican food and culture, is a challenge and this is where the correlation between culture and food tends to get

lost through the hundreds of variations. The reward of sustaining the food and culture in America and beyond is visible through the community that it builds of people who partake in the culture.

My connection with Mexican food and culture runs deep through my family roots being that my parents were born and raised in Mexico. From as early as the age of five, I vividly remember the fresh, heartwarming smell of my mom's homemade tamales. Even though I was an extremely picky eater, I began to realize the love and care that my mom put into making those tamales. Years would go by and she never failed to demonstrate the love she had for her family through traditional Mexican dishes that she would make. These dishes include sopas, Chile verde, mole, chiles rellenos, posole, and one of my all-time favorites, gorditas. Now that I am old enough to truly understand what cooking these traditional dishes for the family meant for my mom, I have developed a deep appreciation and respect for her cooking along with the Mexican culture and its shared love, which can be experienced through its food and its people.

Fully partaking in the Mexican culture and eating its food daily has helped me become appreciative of the smaller things in life, constantly being reminded of the love and care my mom put into making her food is something that has translated into my everyday life being away from home. Mexican food and culture have influenced the way that I interact with others, particularly with those who are of different cultures and backgrounds. It has pushed me to be open to trying new things whether it be food or engaging in conversation about my culture with others that may not know the value or meaning that my culture holds in my life. I believe that my Mexican culture motivates me to explore the love and care that other cultures implement through their food and other shared traditions in my life. It pushes me to engage in the lifestyle that pertains to Mexican culture, inspiring others to catch a glimpse of my Mexican identity.

Taking into consideration the meaning that Mexican food and culture have on my life, I begin to wonder what the general public's view is on the food and culture and what it means to them. According to an article published by *USA Today*, in the U.S. "Mexican food is one of the most popular cuisines, with 1 in 10 restaurants serving the cuisine." Mexican food and culture have proven to be appreciated in the states, "85% of counties in the U.S. have at least one Mexican restaurant" (Chernikoff). It is reassuring to read about the growing popularity and consumption of Mexican food and culture in the States. This growing popularity elicits a sense of hope that there is more that is being preserved than just the food of my culture, but the meaning and influence it has on those who take part in and enjoy it.

To provide a brief historical background of the liberation of Mexico, when the country of Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, "Texas was still part of their territory. It seceded from Mexico in 1836" (De La Calle). Those who were of Mexican blood living in the U.S. during this time were referred to as Tejanos and integrated "new foods into traditional Mexican dishes. This new variation of Mexican food gained popularity and was coined Tex-Mex cuisine" (De La Calle). If I were to bring up the term "Tex-Mex" cuisine in a conversation with someone who isn't of Mexican descent, they would most likely have an idea of what I am talking about because Mexican food has been referred to as Tex-Mex here in the States since its introduction. The influence of the Mayans, Incas, and Spanish tends to be forgotten. The origin of Mexican food highlights its value and importance in many generations of civilizations that practiced and partook in the creation of this food and culture becoming what it is today.

Perceptions regarding Mexican food and culture in the US are frequently tied to the idea of immigration, which in my belief, should not be directly tied together because they both fall under their respective category of conversation. Ultimately, there is a challenge for Mexican

immigrants who are attempting to assimilate into U.S. culture, which is “the adoption of U.S. cultural forms and practices, even if blended with Mexican cultural forms and practice, indicate that Mexican immigrants are being incorporated into U.S. society” (Rivera). If the adoption of these forms and practices can be achieved, then Mexican-Americans would put themselves in a position to enjoy and share their culture, not necessarily worrying about fitting in and going with the current. Although Mexican food and culture are appreciated throughout the country, Mexican Americans are still tasked with adapting to what is now available to them, which is American culture.

At an institutional level, Mexican food and culture have impacted the United States, becoming essential components in the country’s culinary landscape and social identity. Mexican food has become a staple in American food culture, with tacos and burritos being easily available now across the entire country. Beyond its influence in the kitchen, Mexican culture has left a mark on multiple aspects of American society such as art and music. Paying attention to what whites and blacks are listening to in terms of their music options, there is a good amount of Hispanic music in the mix throughout the cities that I have been able to live in. I have come to notice that schools are frequently recognizing Mexican heritage, whether it be through the implementation of bi-lingual programs or even celebrating Cesar Chavez day. This ultimately leads to promoting diversity and cultural understanding within the U.S. Due to the increasing number of the Mexican population throughout the States, advocates have shown promise in demonstrating greater representation of Mexican life and culture. Mexican food and culture have demonstrated the revamped political climate in the U.S. promoting inclusion within our country’s political system through food as opposed to fostering an exclusive political environment, meant only for the privileged to thrive and grow.

Mexican street food has grown to be well praised by Americans because of the fact that it is fast, delicious and cheap! The simplicity of this style of Mexican food is explained, “Street food, traditionally less refined but bursting with flavor, has been a significant ambassador of Latin American food culture to the United States. These foods were born out of necessity, innovation and creativity, and often represent the heart and soul of Latin American cuisine” (Turnue). With the idea of Mexican street food being less refined, but still maintaining a level of flavor and appeal to many Americans demonstrates the value behind this style of Mexican food. Not only does Mexican street food consist of rich flavor, it possesses the ability to be available on almost every street corner in states like California and Texas. This ultimately demonstrates the popularity, appreciation and importance it has in American society. I personally love Mexican street food considering that it's on my to-do list each time I visit Mexico, but also in my hometown in the San Fernando valley where everyone loves Mexican street food.

As America’s demographic continues to evolve, I have come to realize that there is a growing desire to connect with and celebrate diverse cultural traditions. The U.S. is a diversely populated country, with many of its citizens originating from different parts of the world, which has created a divide within the country. The idea of cultural diversity calls for interconnection among the various cultures present here in the U.S., “it celebrates the richness that arises from our unique perspectives and experiences, fostering a global community that thrives on mutual respect and understanding” (Kaplan, *The Medium*). With the differing opinions and traditions of the various cultures here in the States, we are presented with the opportunity to embrace this fact and ultimately integrate our perspectives, cultures and beliefs with one another in order to facilitate a more inclusive society. Mexican food serves as a bridge that connects people of different ethnic backgrounds to share and engage with each other through the art of food and the

idea that Mexican culture creates community. The challenge here is pushing ourselves to have an open mind to ideas, traditions and beliefs that we may not have even thought about and bringing ourselves to embrace those new beliefs and traditions for the reason that they can provide happiness and enjoyment for us. I am proud to belong to a culture that advocates for the integration of community across any cultural boundary.

One of the biggest tasks aside from promoting cultural diversity through Mexican food & culture is preserving the culture and its tradition of making rich food with the goal of bringing people together as a result. Considering that I have lived in California my entire life, I have been able to witness the urgency in preserving and sharing the culture with others to expand their perceptions of it. California as mentioned previously is a hotbed for Mexican culture and “is home to several Mexican heritage sites, including the iconic historic missions along El Camino Real. These missions serve as a testament to the enduring Mexican influence in the region and stand as a symbol of the cultural exchange between Mexico and California” (Newton). With Mexican heritage being present through the existence of missions, there is a strong resemblance of culture that everyone with an open mind can experience as a result. The conception of missions in California resembles the integration of Hispanic culture into America and the role that this has played in the overall acceptance of the culture in the U.S.

A significant factor contributing to the appreciation of Mexican food among various ethnicities in the United States is its accessibility and affordability. As food writer, Gustavo Arellano notes in his book “Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America,” “Tacos, burritos, and enchiladas are the fast food of choice for millions of Americans” (Arellano). The ease that comes with preparing meals like tacos, burritos, and enchiladas adds a level of appeal to the food leading to the expansion of food. The increase in Mexican fast food chains has made

Mexican inspired meals easily accessible to people of all backgrounds. As chef Rick Bayless observes in his cookbook “Authentic Mexican: Cooking from the Heart of Mexico,” “Mexican cuisine is more than just food; it’s a way of life that brings people together”(Bayless). Mexican immigrants have implemented a platform of flavors and recipes, which have been integrated into the culinary spectrum of the United States. This process has helped continue to enrich the U.S. with diversity and its adaptation to new cultures and their traditions.

Moreover, the popularity of Mexican food festivals and cooking classes have contributed to the growing appreciation of Mexican food among Americans citizens of all backgrounds. These events offer hands-on experiences that allow participants to learn about the history and ingredients that make their favorite Mexican dishes. This ultimately provides a deeper understanding and appreciation of Mexican food for those who are curious! The widespread appreciation of Mexican food among various ethnicities in the United States is a testament to its strong appeal and ability to go beyond cultural boundaries. Through its accessibility and immigrant influence, Mexican food and culture continue to act as an example of the depth and diversity that make up the world of food in America. Pertaining to a culture that is heavily regarded as rich and authentic in its food reinvigorates my love for it and the value of partaking in it and sharing it everyday!

Taking into consideration the prevalence of Mexican restaurants in the United States, there is a pair of states that own the recognition for containing the most Mexican restaurants in the country. According to an article published by the *Latin American Post*, “the prevalence of Mexican restaurants is particularly notable in California and Texas, states with the largest Mexican-American populations” (Latin American Post). In addition, “22% of all Mexican restaurants in the US are located in California, while Texas hosts 17% of them”. It is encouraging

to witness the prominence that Mexican food and culture possess here in the U.S. and how many people from different walks of life can enjoy its unique flavors and richness in tradition. There is a sense of motivation that is passed on to me to share and promote my culture as well as its gift of food to others who may not be aware of the meaning and value that it consists of.

One of the most common mistakes that many people make is failing to differentiate between Mexican and South American culture. These two cultures share several similarities rooted in their indigenous heritage and traditions. Both regions possess a rich foundation of delicious food, with one of the most common being beans. Additionally, the importance of family, community, and religion is ingrained in the social framing of both Mexican and South American societies. As sociologist, Manuel Aguilar-Moreno asserts in his book “Handbook to Life in the Aztec World,” “Indigenous traditions continue to shape the cultural identity of Mexico and South America, fostering a strong sense of connection to the land and to ancestral customs” (Aguilar-Moreno). The shared respect for heritage and tradition highlights the relationship between Mexico and South America, looking past geographical boundaries to unite them in a shared cultural heritage. There is a level of radiance that lies within the unity between Mexican and South American culture. This relationship continues to inspire and bring together Latinos across the globe, sharing and partaking in the radiance that each of their cultures have to offer.

While Mexican and South American dishes share some similarities, they also demonstrate distinct differences rooted in their cultural influences. I believe that exploring these differences expresses the value of their traditions and cultural identities that distinguish these two regions from one another. Mexican food possesses unique flavors and diversity of ingredients, which highlight its authenticity. Ultimately, “Mexican cuisine tells a story of creativity and

tradition, showing off a wide array of flavors that change from one region to another. It's more than just food — it's a celebration of Mexico's natural diversity and its people's ability to create delicious dishes from local ingredients" (Monroy). Mexican food and culture are extremely rewarding in the sense that they advocate for diversity through the sharing and community driven appeal that it has to offer for all. Essential to Mexican food is the ingredient of masa, which according to Berlitz, "serves as the base for tortillas, tamales, and pozole" all of which are some of my favorites! As mentioned before, Mexican food culture places a strong emphasis on the community, with dinners bringing families and communities together to share, highlighting the value of the culture. Mexican culture's natural diversity is lived out through me in how I engage in sharing my culture with those around me.

In contrast, South American food highlights a diverse range of culinary traditions shaped by indigenous cultures, European colonization, and African influences. According to Clark Olson's, "The Cuisine of South America", "common themes consist of essentials like potatoes, corn, and quinoa, as well as a rich tradition of grilling meats and seafood" (Olson). South American food utilizes a wide variety of ingredients, which tend to slightly differ from the regularly used ingredients in Mexican food, but to some extent share similarities in taste. For example, "While the country most associated with ceviche is Peru, it and dishes like it are made all along the Pacific coast and beyond. In Peru, it's served with everything from sweet potato to toasted corn, and even rice in some pockets of the north; in Ecuador it features tomato and occasionally peanuts" (Seal). Growing up eating ceviche, I never thought twice about its origin or its versatility. I always believed it was a Mexican dish until I realized that almost every Latin American country has their own version of it. Interestingly enough, South American food culture

places a strong emphasis on family as well as the community, which ultimately ties itself to Mexican food culture with similar shared values and tastes.

One idea that I have been curious about since the conception of this project is the perception of Mexican food and culture in Great Britain. In Britain, Mexican food and culture have undergone a transformation in recent years, evolving from relatively unknown dishes to surprisingly mainstream favorites. While initially perceived as exotic, “Another reason for the change in heart is the sheer adaptability of Mexican cuisine. With varied food options and spice levels, this cuisine can shift to suit most food preferences, including both meat and non meat eaters” (Aceville). This surge in popularity is attributed to a growing appreciation for the flavor and value of communal sharing that define Mexican food culture. The influence of social media and news media has pushed forward the idea of Mexican food to the UK leading it to become now one of their favorite foreign foods. As a result, “Mexican food is now celebrated in Great Britain, with dishes like tacos, burritos, and guacamole becoming household staples and Mexican restaurants earning critical acclaim and loyal followings” (Olbrich). I believe that with the influence of social media and television, Mexican food and culture have spread and influenced many in Europe, which is remarkable! It is without a doubt fascinating to see that the values of Mexican food and culture are being practiced and shared throughout the globe, demonstrating that there are no borders that food and culture are unable to cross, despite originating from one country.

While Mexican food and culture have garnered popularity throughout the country, it has also been subject to hate speech and cultural appropriation. These situations highlight deeper issues surrounding cultural identity as well as power dynamics. Paying attention to these situations provides us with a better idea on the need for respectful engagement with diverse

culinary traditions. Unfortunately, those who are hateful towards the culture reinforce cultural stereotypes, making it more difficult for Mexican culture to assimilate into everyday life in the States. Mexican food and culture are frequently targeted by hate speech, which are fueled by cultural stereotypes. Derogatory terms and discriminatory language not only preserve harmful stereotypes but also contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of Mexican communities in society. I have come to learn that whether it's comments made about "cheap labor" associated with Mexican food production or mocking Mexican accents, hate speech against Mexican food and culture ultimately alienates as opposed to uniting, leading to this idea of a social position of inferiority in society. I have experienced forms of discrimination and inferiority because of my ethnicity and when it occurs it puts things into perspective on how our society views my culture and its people.

Moreover, social media platforms have essentially established themselves as outlets for hate speech directed at Mexican culture, with individuals and groups spreading misinformation and stereotypes daily. This online hostility not only creates negative perceptions of Mexican culture but also promotes a hostile environment for a majority of marginalized communities. Addressing hate speech requires implementing dialogue and education to challenge all stereotypes and promote inclusivity between the majority and the marginalized. Dialogue needs to be introduced in areas and situations where it is most absent due to its effectiveness, serving as a tool for building, community and equality as opposed to stirring up hate and hostility. Taking action against hate speech means calling upon everyone to confront stereotypes and ultimately facilitate inclusive spaces that celebrate cultural diversity. Disregarding the color of our skin may be a challenge for some, but taking action on the desire to establish peace in a divided country and world is necessary in order to see real change.

In addition to hate speech, Mexican food and culture have also faced situations of cultural appropriation, where elements of Mexican food and traditions are abused and exploited for profit without respect for the cultural significance. The continuous issue here is "Cultural appropriation is a symptom of the ongoing theft, and structures and systems like racism and capitalism support it" (Nomad Cook). Powerful profit driven corporations tend to exploit Mexican food and culture through its attributes and inspirations with intentions of receiving financial gain from their actions. An example of capitalism in relation to Mexican food is the fast food chain Taco Bell, establishing itself as the Americanized version of Mexican fast food and setting the precedent for Americanized Mexican food that is far from authentic. Instances of cultural appropriation tend to erase the cultural origins of Mexican food and traditions, but also conserve power imbalances and diminish cultural integrity throughout the U.S.

The challenge of combating cultural appropriation involves recognizing the cultural origins and significance of Mexican food and traditions as well as enhancing the voices of Mexican communities. Another perception of cultural appropriation is colonial theft, which "is an act that is supported by the intersection of capitalism and cultural misappropriation, it is the act of not necessarily oppressing a marginalized society but having the power to sell and exploit an item or art of that culture for the sake of a dollar" (Monje). The exploitation of Mexican food and culture has left Mexicans helpless due to the prevalence of capitalism here in the U.S., which has taken away from the meaning and value by oppressing Mexican culture. As a result of Capitalism, chains such as Chipotle and Taco Bell(as mentioned before) have run with the idea of Mexican food and have essentially Americanized it for the sake of their profits. I believe that if these large scale fast food chains can acknowledge the integration of Mexican food and culture into their business ventures, the issue of cultural appropriation of Mexican culture can be

improved. The goal is to build a more equitable cultural landscape here in the U.S. and that starts with the deserved recognition of a culture for what they have to offer to society.

Women have shown to contribute heavily to the history and tradition of Mexican food and culture. While Mexican society is governed by patriarchy, women demonstrate their resilience through the role they play in pushing their families beyond the limitations of gender roles. While women have proven to be an influential facet of Mexican food and culture, their roles often cross paths with and challenge traditional gender norms, emphasizing the limitations and opportunities for empowerment through food and culture. Witnessing my mother establish her role in our home as the head of the kitchen, it is clear to see that throughout Mexican households and communities, women hold a central role in preserving cooking traditions, and passing down recipes to the next generation. For most women in Mexican culture, “Being in the kitchen meant either being of service to men or feeling inadequate because my skills did not yet match those of my elders” (Finney). Although there is a large negative connotation to the idea of women in the kitchen and the reason why that role is assumed, Mexican women have effectively influenced this role in a positive manner through what they have been able to share and accomplish through cooking. It almost seems as if women in Mexican culture are forced to take up the “responsibility” of cooking for their families every night for the reason that there will be no one else to do it.

Moreover, women assuming the role as the head of the kitchen offsets reality in today’s society. Cooking in a family is a collective effort that consists of everyone participating to prepare a meal. Despite the difficulty in advocating for change regarding the issue, women in Mexican families have established their presence in keeping a family intact almost entirely. The feel and ability that my mom possesses in preparing dishes that consist of unique and intricate

flavors that exemplify the love, care and effort that she has for us is unmatched and is something that is a joy to experience on a daily basis. Women have ultimately served as instruments in pushing innovation in the kitchen, fusing Mexican cuisine with a range of diverse flavors and influences from other cultures. The creativity and resourcefulness that women in the culture possess has given rise to dishes that celebrate Mexico's cultural heritage entirely.

Despite their crucial contributions to Mexican food and culture, women still live within the confines of a patriarchal society where gender roles dictate domestic responsibilities and decision making power. Women have essentially had the kitchen forced upon them for years, practically belittling them to caretaking roles and limiting their access to economic opportunities. This gender dynamic reinforces societal norms that confine women to domestic spaces. The rise of female chefs and culinary entrepreneurs is reshaping Mexico's culinary landscape, challenging stereotypes and paving the way for greater gender equality in the industry. Women's roles in Mexican food and culture are multifaceted, embodying resistance to traditional gender norms. While women have long been the backbone of Mexican culinary traditions, their contributions go beyond the kitchen, shaping the cultural landscape of Mexican society. By recognizing and celebrating women's contributions to Mexican food and culture, we honor their resilience and creativity, working towards a more equitable and inclusive culinary landscape across the globe.

In conclusion to this Capstone project, I described the meaning and value that Mexican culture holds in my life and exactly what led me to establish this idea in my mind. I reiterated what it has meant to me, having a wonderful mother figure within the confines of my home and how that has influenced my perception of food and culture. I was able to explore the popularity and prevalence of Mexican food and culture throughout the U.S., but also beyond in European countries. Writing about the issues of cultural appropriation and hate speech targeted towards

Mexican culture was informative, but also difficult in the sense that it is an ongoing problem that has plagued the Mexican community since its arrival to the U.S. The role that women have played within the culture is extremely limited due to a patriarchal society in Mexico, but it has been remarkable to see how women in the culture have overcome and have become empowered as a result of all the disregard and unfair treatment they have experienced over the years. This Capstone project sheds light on the list of triumphs, but also the issues that have plagued the Mexican community for years in the U.S. I greatly enjoyed going into depth about my culture for this project, and I hope to continue to motivate myself and others who may share a desire to learn about the significance of Mexican food and culture in the U.S.

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