Exploring the Role of Social Media in Chinese International Students' Mental Health: Based on In-Depth Interviews with 20 Chinese International Students in Melbourne

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ABSTRACT

Depression is a global public health concern. This study investigates the role of social media platforms in the mental health of Chinese international students studying in Melbourne, Australia. Using a qualitative approach, the research is based on in-depth interviews with 20 Chinese students who have experienced symptoms of depression during their time abroad. The participants were recruited through university counseling services and local community organizations. The interviews explored their daily social interactions, patterns of social media use, coping mechanisms, and the unique challenges they face as international students in a cross-cultural environment. Findings reveal that social media plays a dual role in the mental health experiences of these students. On the one hand, social media platforms provide vital channels for maintaining connections with family and friends in China, offering emotional support and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, excessive or passive use of social media can exacerbate feelings of isolation, anxiety, and homesickness, particularly when students compare their lives to the seemingly idealized lives of others online. The study also highlights the importance of online peer support groups and mental health communities, which can offer valuable resources and a safe space for sharing experiences. Overall, the research underscores the complex interplay between social media engagement and mental health among Chinese international students. The insights gained contribute to a deeper understanding of how digital communication tools can both support and challenge the well-being of students in a foreign cultural context. These findings have implications for universities, counselors, and policymakers seeking to enhance mental health support services for international students.

Keywords: Chinese international students, Social media platform, Mental health, Cultural context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Depression is recognized as one of the leading causes of disability globally, significantly contributing to the overall burden of disease. It is estimated that Chinese international students in Australia face a higher risk of depression, often caused by challenges such as cultural adjustment, language difficulties, and social isolation. Among vulnerable populations, international students are particularly at risk of developing mental health problems due to the unique challenges they face when adapting to new cultural and academic environments. Chinese international students represent one of the largest groups of international students worldwide, and their mental health status has become a growing concern in recent years. They experience significantly higher rates of depressive symptoms compared to their domestic peers. This alarming disparity underscores the heightened vulnerability of Chinese students studying abroad. In Australia, specifically in the city of Melbourne, the international student population is both large and diverse.

Research indicates that key factors contributing to mental health difficulties among Chinese international students include challenges related to

cultural adjustment, language barriers, academic pressure, and social isolation. Some research highlights that these stressors can significantly impact the psychological well-being of Chinese students studying abroad. In recent years, social media has become an integral part of international students' lives, serving as both a coping mechanism and a potential source of stress. While social media platforms can facilitate communication with family and friends in their home country and provide access to peer support, they may also intensify feelings of loneliness, homesickness, or inadequacy through social comparison. Given the increasing reliance on digital communication, it is crucial to investigate how social media use affects the mental health of Chinese international students in Melbourne. Understanding this relationship can provide valuable insights for universities, counselors, and policymakers to develop more effective support systems tailored to the needs of this vulnerable group. This study aims to explore the experiences of Chinese international students with depression in Melbourne, focusing on the role of social media in their interpersonal communication, coping strategies, and psychological well-being.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, focusing on in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. The research was conducted during the author's study abroad period in Melbourne, Australia. The target participants were 20 Chinese international students in Melbourne who had experienced symptoms of depression. These students were recruited through university counseling centers and community organizations that provide support for international students. The aim was to explore the interpersonal communication patterns and social media participation among Chinese international students dealing with depression. Before the interviews, participants were informed of the study's purpose and provided informed consent. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was conducted in a confidential setting, either face-to-face or online platforms, depending on the participants' preferences and circumstances.

The interview questions were designed to elicit detailed narratives about participants' daily interactions, use of social media, coping strategies, and challenges they faced in a cross-cultural environment. The interviews also sought to understand the role of peer support, family communication, and online communities in their mental health journeys. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of common patterns and unique experiences within the group. This methodological approach enabled a deep understanding of the complex interplay between interpersonal communication, social media engagement, and mental health among Chinese international students in Melbourne. The insights gained contribute to a wider understanding of how depression is experienced and managed in a cross-cultural academic context.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

3.1 Social Media and Mental Health

Acculturative stress refers to the psychological impact of adapting to a new culture, which can manifest as feelings of alienation, anxiety, and depression(Xiong,2025). Chinese students often face difficulties in adjusting to Western cultural norms, academic expectations, and communication styles. The process of cultural adaptation is further complicated by language barriers, discrimination, and a lack of social integration, all of which contribute to increased vulnerability to mental health problems (Fanari, 2025). The impact of social media on mental health is complex. On the positive side, social media can provide social support, enhance a sense of belonging, and reduce loneliness. For international students, maintaining online contact with home-country networks has been shown to buffer the negative effects of acculturative stress (Ye,2006).

However, excessive or maladaptive use of social media has been linked to negative mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and social comparison (Primack,2017). Social comparison theory suggests that individuals evaluate themselves about others(Zhou,2025), which can influence self-esteem and well-being. On social media, users are exposed to curated and idealized representations of others' lives, which can lead to feelings of inadequacy, envy, and repression (Chou,2012). For international students who may already feel isolated or under stress, such comparisons can exacerbate negative emotions and hinder adjustment.

3.2 Social Support, Coping, and Online Communities

Melbourne is a multicultural city with a significant population of Chinese international students. Studies have shown that while the city offers a diverse and inclusive environment, many Chinese students still experience challenges related to cultural adjustment, discrimination, and academic pressure (Forbes,2016). The use of social media among this group is pervasive, with platforms such as WeChat serving as primary tools for communication and support. Social support is a critical protective factor for mental health. For international students, support can come from family, friends, host communities, and online networks. Social support has remained a cornerstone in facilitating international students' adaptation and psychological well-being in recent years. Zhang(2021) found that both emotional and instrumental social support significantly contribute to reducing psychological distress and improving life satisfaction among Chinese students studying abroad.

Their study underscores the importance of accessible support networks, especially during the post-pandemic era when students face heightened uncertainties. Similarly, Reid (2024) identified that perceived social support from host-country peers and faculty not only alleviates acculturative stress but also enhances academic engagement and integration into the local community. Both studies highlight the evolving role of digital platforms in maintaining transnational support systems and fostering new connections in host societies. Collectively, contemporary research demonstrates that diverse and adaptive social support mechanisms are vital for international students' holistic development and successful cross-cultural transitions.

Social media has become an essential resource for international students to access both emotional and informational support, particularly when face-to-face interactions are constrained (Yue,2022). Online peer support groups and mental health communities offer safe environments for individuals to share experiences, seek advice, and receive empathy from those encountering similar challenges (Arenas,2021). For Chinese international students, engagement in culturally relevant online communities not only fosters a sense of belonging but also helps reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, social media platforms facilitate adaptive coping strategies by enabling students to gather information, express concerns and obtain encouragement from peers (Dwumah,2023). However, reliance on maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as avoidance or excessive online escapism, can exacerbate psychological distress and hinder effective adjustment. Recent studies highlight the dual impact of social media; while it can promote resilience and connectedness, it may also contribute to increased anxiety and social withdrawal if not used mindfully. Therefore, the role of social media in supporting international students' mental health is multifaceted, underscoring the need for balanced and intentional engagement.

3.3 Hypothesis and Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, it is evident that social media plays a dual role in the mental health of Chinese international students; it can be both a source of support and a potential stressor. The following hypotheses are developed for this study:

- Hypothesis 1 (H1): Social media use for maintaining connections with family and friends in China is negatively associated with depressive symptoms among Chinese international students in Melbourne.

- Hypothesis 2 (H2): Participation in online peer support groups and mental health communities is associated with higher perceived social support and lower levels of psychological distress.

- Hypothesis 3 (H3): Adaptive coping strategies facilitated by social media (e.g., seeking information, emotional expression) are associated with better mental health outcomes, whereas maladaptive coping (e.g., avoidance, escapism) is associated with poorer outcomes.

These hypotheses will be explored through in-depth interviews with Chinese international students in Melbourne, with the aim of providing a nuanced understanding of how social media influences their mental health in a cross-cultural context.

4. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

This study employed both participant observation and in-depth interviews to explore how social media influences the mental health of Chinese international students in Melbourne. Over the course of a semester, I actively engaged with Chinese student communities at a local university, attending various campus events, social gatherings

and academic activities. Through these experiences, I was able to observe firsthand the daily lives, challenges, and adaptation strategies of Chinese students in a cross-cultural environment. My role as a participant observer allowed me to build rapport and establish trust with students, which proved invaluable in facilitating open and honest conversations during subsequent interviews. A total of 20 in-depth interviews were conducted with Chinese international students from diverse academic backgrounds and years of study. Participants were recruited through classroom announcements, student organizations, and peer recommendations. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was conducted in either Mandarin or English, depending on the participants' preference. The interviews focused on students' experiences with social media, their perceptions of mental health, and the coping mechanisms they adopted to manage stress and emotional difficulties while studying abroad.

Throughout the fieldwork, it became apparent that international students commonly face a range of challenges, including cultural differences, language barriers and academic pressure. Notably, informal surveys and classroom interactions suggested that over 30% of the international students in my class experienced some form of mental health issue, such as anxiety, loneliness, or depression. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the everyday realities of Chinese international students and highlight the need to examine the specific role that social media plays in shaping their mental health and well-being.

4.1 Navigating Depression: International Students 'Experiences and the Limits of Traditional Solutions

4.1.1 The Prevalence of Depression and Barriers to Help-Seeking

Depression is an increasingly prevalent issue among Chinese international students studying in Melbourne, reflecting broader global trends in the mental health of international student populations (Forbes,2016). Empirical research demonstrates that international students face a significantly higher risk of depression and psychological distress compared to their domestic peers, owing to factors such as academic pressure, cultural adaptation, and social isolation.

The interviews conducted for this study confirm that depression is not only common but also often underreported among Chinese students. One participant shared, "I know about counseling at our university, but the sessions are too expensive after the first few free ones. Plus, I feel awkward talking to a stranger about my problems, especially in English. My parents would never understand if I told them I was seeing a psychologist." This sentiment echoes the findings of Lu (2014), who highlight that cultural stigma and privacy concerns significantly impede help-seeking behaviors among Chinese students abroad.

Financial constraints further exacerbate these challenges. While universities may offer limited free counseling sessions, the ongoing costs of mental health services can be prohibitive for many students. Moreover, language barriers and a lack of familiarity with the host country's mental health system also deter students from accessing available support. As another participant described: "Even when the university sent us emails about mental health support, I still felt hesitant. It's not easy for us to seek help in a different language and culture." These findings are consistent with recent scholarship, which emphasizes that both structural (e.g., cost, accessibility) and cultural (e.g., stigma, privacy) factors must be addressed to improve mental health outcomes for international students. Overall, despite increased awareness of mental health resources, significant barriers persist, underscoring the need for more culturally sensitive and accessible support systems for Chinese international students.

4.1.2 Institutional Support and the Need for Alternative Approaches

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the universities in Melbourne significantly increased mental health outreach to support their international student populations. Students frequently received emails from university leadership and professors, emphasizing the availability of counseling and academic support services. As one student recalled, "I remember during lockdown, we got so many emails about mental health. Our professors told us we could talk to them. It was nice, but I still felt alone most of the time." While these initiatives demonstrated institutional care, many students reported that digital communication and formal resources alone were insufficient to address the deep sense of isolation and disconnection experienced during lockdowns.

The pandemic intensified existing challenges, including loneliness, academic pressure, and uncertainty about the future, all of which heightened the need for effective mental health support (Lai,2020). However, barriers such as cultural differences and discomfort with clinical interventions limited willingness to access traditional services. As a result, scholars have called for more culturally sensitive and accessible support models that move beyond standard institutional outreach.

Recent literature highlights the value of creative and communal activities, such as baking, art, or group hobbies, as alternative self-help strategies for individuals with depression. These non-clinical activities offer low-pressure environments where students can express themselves, build friendships, and experience moments of relief from stress. One participant shared, "I joined a baking class with other international students. It wasn't about making perfect cakes, but just being together, laughing, and doing something with our hands. For a while, I forgot about my worries at that moment." Such experiences support the argument that creative engagement and peer-based activities can offer meaningful benefits, fostering well-being and a sense of community for those reluctant to seek formal help. Thus, universities should consider integrating alternative, culturally informed approaches with formal mental health services to better support international students.

4.1.3 Peer Networks and Informal Support: Everyday Coping Strategies

Beyond the formal structures of institutional support and the recognized barriers to help-seeking, participant observation reveals that peer networks and informal support systems play a crucial role in how Chinese international students navigate depressive symptoms. Throughout my engagement with student communities, it became evident that many students rely more heavily on their friends and peers than on professional mental health services. This tendency is shaped by a combination of cultural norms, language comfort, and the immediacy of shared experiences. During campus events, group study sessions and casual gatherings, students frequently discussed academic stress, homesickness and feelings of isolation in informal settings. These conversations often took place in Mandarin or regional dialects, creating a safe and familiar environment for emotional expression. For many Chinese international students, sharing personal struggles with peers who have similar backgrounds and challenges provides a sense of validation and solidarity that is sometimes lacking in interactions with institutional counselors or faculty. As one interviewee noted, "Talking to friends who understand my situation makes me feel less alone, and we can support each other in ways professionals sometimes cannot."

Scholarly literature supports these observations, emphasizing the significance of social support from co-nationals in the adjustment process of international students. Peer networks offer both emotional support and practical advice, such as strategies for managing coursework, navigating bureaucratic processes, or finding culturally appropriate resources. These networks can also serve as informal referral systems, where students recommend trustworthy counselors or community services based on their own positive experiences.

However, reliance on peer support is not without its limitations. While it can foster a sense of belonging and mutual aid, it may also perpetuate misinformation or discourage professional help-seeking if negative perceptions of mental health services are reinforced within the group. Some students reported feeling pressure to maintain a façade of resilience, fearing that admitting to depression might burden their friends or disrupt group harmony. These dynamics highlight the complex interplay between cultural values of collectivism and the individual need for psychological support. Participant observation thus illuminates the dual nature of peer networks: they are both a vital coping resource and a potential constraint on accessing broader mental health support. Integrating peer-based interventions with formal institutional programs could enhance the overall effectiveness of mental health care for Chinese international students. Encouraging peer leaders to receive mental health literacy training, for example, may help bridge the gap between informal support and professional services, ultimately fostering a more supportive and responsive campus environment.

4.2 The Dual Role of Social Media: Connection, Comparison, and Coping

4.2.1 Maintaining Connections and Seeking Support

For many Chinese international students in Melbourne, social media serves as the primary bridge to their families and friends back home,

offering vital emotional support and a sense of continuity amidst the challenges of studying abroad. As Jun shared, "Every night, I video chat with my parents on WeChat. Even though I'm far away, it makes me feel like I'm still part of the family. It helps me with homesickness." This reliance on digital communication resonates with recent research, which suggests that maintaining transnational online ties can significantly buffer the negative psychological effects of acculturative stress and homesickness. These connections provide not only reassurance and familiarity but also cultural grounding, which is essential for students navigating new environments.

Beyond family ties, social media platforms such as WeChat, WhatsApp, and online forums are indispensable tools for fostering peer support among students in Melbourne. Group chats and online communities offer safe spaces where students can exchange practical information, discuss academic concerns, and share emotional burdens. As Xiao described, "Our WeChat group is like a lifeline. If someone is feeling down or needs help with an assignment, we talk about it. Sometimes, just knowing others have the same struggles makes me feel better." Through these platforms, students find camaraderie and collective resilience, which can alleviate feelings of isolation and anxiety.

Recent studies further emphasize that online peer support not only enhances a sense of belonging and self-efficacy but also encourages help-seeking behaviors, especially when traditional support systems are less accessible. However, while digital connections offer substantial benefits, scholars also caution that overreliance on virtual communication may limit opportunities for local integration and face-to-face interaction. Thus, while social media is a powerful tool for maintaining support networks, it is most effective when balanced with efforts to build in-person relationships and engage with the host culture.

4.2.2 Social Comparison and Psychological Distress

While social media provides essential avenues for connection and support, its drawbacks are increasingly evident among Chinese international students in Melbourne, particularly to social comparison. Many students reported that regularly viewing curated, idealized images of peers, such as posts about travel, academic achievements, and vibrant social lives which led to feelings of

inadequacy and self-doubt. As Cheng expressed, "When I see my friends, traveling, partying, getting awards, I start to doubt myself. Why am I not as happy? Am I failing?" This experience is consistent with classic and contemporary research, which shows that social comparison on digital platforms amplifies negative emotions such as envy, loneliness, and depression, especially among individuals navigating significant life transitions.

The psychological impact of these comparisons is heightened for international students, who may already be vulnerable due to acculturative stress and the challenges of adapting to a new environment. Exposure to peers 'success stories can create unrealistic standards and foster a sense of falling behind, contributing to diminished self-esteem and increased psychological distress. Moreover, the pandemic intensified these effects, as students spent more time online, they were also inundated with distressing news from both China and Australia. One participant shared, "During Covid, my WeChat was full of bad news. It made me more worried, and sometimes I couldn't sleep." Continuous exposure to negative information, combined with upward social comparison, can trigger anxiety, sleep disturbances, and even depressive symptoms.

Recent studies underscore the need for digital literacy and mental health education, helping students critically engage with social media content and recognize its potential harms(Chen,2022). Universities and support services should address these risks by promoting healthy online habits and providing resources for managing social comparison and information overload. Balancing the benefits and pitfalls of social media is crucial for supporting international students' psychological well-being in an increasingly digital world.

4.2.3 Coping Strategies: Adaptive and Maladaptive Use

Chinese international students in Melbourne employ a range of coping strategies when engaging with social media, each with distinct implications for psychological well-being. Adaptive coping involves using social media platforms to actively seek information about mental health, connect with online support groups and participate in creative or interest-based communities. For example, students who join online forums or WeChat groups dedicated to mental wellness or hobbies often report feeling understood and supported and benefit from sharing their concerns and receiving

encouragement. This form of active engagement fosters a sense of agency and belonging, helping students manage stress and navigate the challenges of studying abroad.

Conversely, maladaptive coping is characterized by passive scrolling, avoidance, or digital escapism, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and psychological distress. As Li admitted, "I sometimes spend hours just scrolling through TikTok. It's a distraction, but afterwards, I feel worse, like I wasted my time." Recent research reinforces that passive social media consumption is linked to increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, as it may reinforce negative social comparisons and reduce opportunities for meaningful interaction. During periods of heightened stress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, students are especially vulnerable to falling into maladaptive patterns, using social media as a temporary escape rather than a tool for connection or problem-solving.

The distinction between adaptive and maladaptive use is therefore critical. Adaptive strategies, such as seeking information, expressing emotions, and building a supportive network, can buffer acculturative stress and promote resilience. In contrast, maladaptive behaviors like excessive passive use, avoidance, or doomscrolling may worsen psychological symptoms and hinder adjustment. Universities and mental health professionals should guide students toward mindful, purposeful use of social media, encouraging active engagement and discouraging harmful patterns.

4.3 Toward Community and Self-Help: Creative Activities, Social Enterprise, and New Pathways

4.3.1 The Value of Creative, Shared Spaces

Participation in non-clinical, creative group activities such as baking, painting, and music emerges as a significant protective factor for the mental health of international students. Unlike formal mental health interventions, these shared spaces offer a low-pressure environment where individuals can engage in self-expression, collaborative creation, and informal socialization.

As Hui described, "I joined a weekend baking group for international students. We didn't talk much about depression, but just the act of creating something together made me feel less alone." The

academic literature underscores the psychological benefits of creative engagement, noting that such activities not only provide distraction from stressors but also foster a sense of agency, self-esteem, and peer empathy. Creative group work allows participants to experience tangible achievements, reinforcing a sense of control and accomplishment, which is particularly critical for those feeling powerless in the face of external pressures, according to Mei's reflection, "When I make something with my hands, I feel like I can control at least one thing in my life", which highlights this restorative aspect.

Furthermore, these creative spaces enable the formation of organic support networks, where empathy and solidarity arise naturally from shared experiences. Such environments can be especially valuable for students reluctant to engage with clinical services due to stigma or cultural barriers, as they provide a non-threatening context for connection and emotional relief. Ultimately, creative, shared spaces serve not only as outlets for individual expression but also as incubators for peer support and collective resilience.

4.3.2 Social Enterprise and Peer Mutual Aid

Some students participated in peer-run support groups or social enterprise initiatives targeting mental health. These spaces, often less formal than clinical therapy, emphasized mutual help and cultural understanding. Based on the current study, social enterprises can fill gaps left by traditional systems, providing outreach, education, and self-management support.

The rise of social enterprises and peer-run support initiatives reflects an important shift in mental health support for international students, moving from top-down, professionalized models toward grassroots, culturally attuned systems of care. Peer mutual aid groups and student-led social enterprises offer a flexible, culturally sensitive alternative to formal clinical interventions. Such initiatives are uniquely positioned to address the needs of marginalized or underserved populations by providing accessible outreach, psychoeducation, and opportunities for self-management. Jony said, "I volunteered at a student-run support group. We shared our stories and gave each other advice. It was easier to open to people who understood my background, "which illustrates the power of shared cultural and experiential understanding in fostering trust and openness. Importantly, these community-

based models address key barriers such as stigma and privacy concerns, which often deter students from seeking help through institutional channels.

By embedding mental health support within everyday social activities and peer networks, social enterprises reduce the psychological distance between those in need and those able to help. Additionally, they empower students as both recipients and providers of care, cultivating leadership, empathy, and a sense of collective responsibility. It would help peer mutual aid and social enterprise models complement traditional mental health services, filling critical gaps and enhancing the overall ecosystem of support for international student populations.

4.3.3 Rethinking Solutions: from Individual to Collective Wellbeing

Recent scholarship on international student mental health has increasingly emphasized the limitations of individual-focused, clinical interventions, particularly for culturally diverse populations. Traditional approaches often prioritize personal responsibility and one-on-one therapy, which may not adequately address the social and cultural dimensions of well-being. International students frequently encounter barriers such as stigma, language difficulties, and unfamiliarity with local mental health systems, rendering individualized interventions less accessible or effective. As a result, there is a growing recognition that sustainable solutions must engage with the broader social context in which students live, study, and interact.

A collective approach to wellbeing centers on the creation of supportive communities and peer networks, both online and offline. Research demonstrates that group-based activities, mutual aid, and shared cultural practices can significantly enhance resilience and reduce feelings of isolation among international students. Collective strategies leverage existing social capital, fostering a sense of belonging and shared identity. Moreover, peer-led initiatives and community-based programs often succeed in reaching students who are reluctant to seek formal help, providing culturally relevant support that reduces mental health challenges. Such approaches recognize that well-being is not solely an individual pursuit, but a relational process shaped by group dynamics and mutual support.

Integrating collective models into institutional policies requires a shift in both mindset and practice. Universities and support services should prioritize the development of inclusive environments that encourage student participation, agency, and leadership in mental health initiatives. Collaborative efforts between institutions, student organizations, and community partners can facilitate the design and implementation of culturally sensitive programs that address the specific needs of diverse student populations. By moving beyond individual-level interventions and embracing collective wellbeing frameworks, institutions can better promote holistic mental health, empower students, and foster resilient academic communities in an increasingly globalized world.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the intricate role of social media in the mental health landscape of Chinese international students in Melbourne. The findings highlight that social media has two sides. It offers valuable opportunities for connection, support, and cultural continuity. But it simultaneously presents challenges such as social comparison, information overload, and heightened psychological vulnerability. The complexity of these experiences underscores the importance of adopting a balanced perspective when assessing the impact of digital platforms on student well-being. Future research would delve deeper into the mechanisms by which social media influences psychological adjustment, considering factors such as platform-specific features, individual coping styles, and the interplay between online and offline support networks. Comparative studies across different cultural and institutional settings could further enrich our understanding of these dynamics. Additionally, there is a critical need to design and evaluate culturally responsive interventions that leverage the strengths of social media while minimizing its risks. By integrating these insights into practice and policy, universities and support services can more effectively foster the holistic well-being and academic success of international student populations in an increasingly interconnected world.

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