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Community Engagement by Social Design: Research and Outreach Facing the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article presents a university–community engagement project established between the Social Design Integrated Center of the Design School (CIDS/UEMG) at Minas Gerais State University in Brazil and the Lagoinha Complex community. The day before we started the extension project, Como a Palma de Minha Mão (Like the Palm of My Hand), social distancing was decreed in our town due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Three months after the suspension of our actions, we had adapted to all changes imposed by the pandemic and resumed activities. The pandemic challenged us to be open to learning more about and with communities as we have close contact with them, and to question how can we promote this type of engagement remotely. This challenge especially applies to the elderly population that represents the leading risk group but lacks access to new communication technologies in Brazil.

Keywords: outreach, engagement, communication, social design, pandemic

The Minas Gerais State University (UEMG) is a state, tuition-free, and multicampus Brazilian university created in 1989. The project we will present in this article was approved and financed by the Extension Support Program of the University and is linked to the Web for Life Institutional Program, which was created by the Pro Rectory of Extension of the university in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This program aims to encompass, integrate, and support efforts to cope with the pandemic through extension projects that encourage health care, promote social distancing, articulate means of protection for citizens, and support all ways of dealing with the pandemic.

The project Como a Palma de Minha Mão: Memórias para Redesenhar a Cidade (Like the Palm of My Hand: Memories to Redesign the City) was proposed by researchers from the Social Design Integrated Center of the Design School (CIDS/UEMG) and is carried out within an "embroidery community" of elderly women in the Lagoinha Complex, a socially troubled urban area in Belo Horizonte, Brazil.

The CIDS/UEMG, in which we operate, has carried out a series of research and extension actions aimed at vulnerable communities. Social design is an area of design that is concerned with the designer's role and responsibility in society, that is, with the use of the design process to bring about positive social change. The social designer works by creating products, services, or business models, or conducting projects to promote positive social impact. When working with communities, participatory design can be an effective methodology for finding solutions to common problems. As the term "participatory design" implies, people are invited to participate actively in the entire design process, which leads the social designer to assume the role of mediator rather than coordinator of a project. In this context, dialoguing with the human and social sciences, the designer creates adequate space to identify problems and create

solutions to engage the community in their implementation and maintenance.

The Methodological Approach

The project Como a Palma de Minha Mão envisages gathering life stories from the elderly women inhabiting the Lagoinha Complex by concretizing them in embroideries made by these participants. These women have long been denied the necessary basic conditions to record their memories in written language as a consequence of social inequality. Nevertheless, they have broken through this written word restriction and cultural hegemony by illustrating their female narratives through their handicrafts. Using embroidery and other artisanal techniques, they have created alternative means of registering personal and social collective memories and subjectivities. This way of being, knowing, and doing seems to be an authentic, resilient attitude facing historical oppressions such as discrimination related to gender, ethnicity, instruction level, social class, and ageism. Consistent with Paulo Freire's educational emancipatory premises, this extension project aims to strengthen the processes of identity construction, stimulating protagonism and autonomy.

The participatory approach considers the importance of traditional community knowledge and intersubjective exchanges among faculty members and those involved in the project horizontally. Thus, the affirmation of the women involved as coresearchers is based on the idea of participation inherent in educational practices aimed at emancipation. When considering them as protagonists of the process, we seek to break a little with the historical distinction that separates researchers—representatives of the university—and community members. This aim, which brings the premises of Paulo Freire's (1978, 1979, 1983, 1987, 1989, 1992, 1993, 2011) critical pedagogy, invites the community to reflect and act in interaction with the university and not under its command.

Paulo Freire, as Giroux (2010) reminded us,

> occupies a hallowed position among the founders of "critical pedagogy"—the educational movement guided by both passion and principle to help people develop a consciousness of freedom, recognize authoritarian tendencies, connect knowledge to power and agency, and learn to read both the word and the world as part of a broader struggle for justice and democracy. (p. 335)

Thus, life trajectories, subjectivities, and traditional knowledge of the community dialogue with university researchers' life trajectories, subjectivities, and academic knowledge. As Holland and Gelmon (2003) claimed, it is necessary to understand the "potential for enhancing community relations, student learning, and overall scholarly performance of the institution through applied scholarship and various forms of community-based learning" (p. 105). This way of working with communities encourages developing a more critical and sensitive view of the reality that surrounds them, being able to arouse interest and promote engagement toward a common goal.

The methodological approach of participatory design, in turn, seeks to encourage the involvement of participants through design activities. This posture provides for creating a collaborative way within a project in which designers and nondesigners work together at all stages of the process (Manzini, 2015). This approach demands other abilities from the designer, such as communication, empathy, and acceptance of the subjectivities in a relational action aimed at building and sharing visions and scenarios in consonance with the ways of making design in contemporary times: shifting from building meaning *for* a community toward building meaning *with* the community, engaging in the process of cooperation among the various agents involved, along with the concept of codesign (Noronha et al., 2017, p. 222). Holland and Gelmon (2003) corroborated this perception by stating, "As academics, we are trained as experts. We tend to imagine community partnerships in which the institution identifies a need and offers an expert solution to the otherwise hapless (or helpless) community" (p. 105).

Design is a theoretical and practical area that shapes futures; it has the potential to create new scenarios and generate other possible, desirable futures—in short, to project the future. According to Escobar (2018, p. 15), design is at the center of the entire sociological crisis we are going through, being the vector of unsustainability and "defuturization." However, according to the same author, if design is used in another way, it

can be part of the solution. This view finds an echo in the aspect called "critical design" (Dunne & Raby, 2013), which problematizes the future by raising more inquiries than certainties. As Scharmer stated (2018),

> We have the gift to engage with two very different qualities and streams of time. One of them is a quality of the present moment that is basically an extension of the past. The present moment is shaped by what has been. The second is a quality of the present moment that functions as a gateway to a field of future possibilities. The present moment is shaped by what is wanting to emerge. That quality of time, if connected to, operates from presencing the highest future potential. The word presencing blends "sensing" with "presence." It means to sense and actualize one's highest future potential. Whenever we deal with disruption, it is this second stream of time that matters most. Because without that connection we tend to end up as victims rather than co-shapers of disruption. (Learning from the Future as It Emerges, para. 6)

Thus, as stated by Gonzatto et al. (2013, p. 44), since the future depends on people, to obviate the need to wait for the future to arrive, people can start making that future real right now, that is, transforming that future into a present, that dream into reality. This is the perspective of social design: mediating future creation processes in partnership with the community. In this sense, participatory methodologies such as participatory design bring something that we consider fundamental in extension and engagement actions: inviting those involved to become protagonists and coresponsible for the processes and results.

Adaptations Imposed by the Pandemic

Three months after the suspension of our actions and having adapted to all changes imposed by the pandemic, we decided to resume activities. One of the most significant obstacles we have encountered involved the maintenance of communication with the participants. The interaction that would occur in weekly face-to-face meetings with women had to be adapted and addressed to each individually. Most participating women have not mastered digital technology, do not have a mobile phone, or do not have access to the internet. In Brazil, the pandemic exacerbated the vast inequality in access to digital technologies, especially among the elderly and low-income citizens. Therefore, our most significant difficulty was the project participants' lack of familiarity with this universe and their anxiety when dealing with technology, which led to demotivation and consequent loss of interest. To overcome this challenge, we have sought support from their relatives, asking them to install video conferencing apps in the women's mobile phones and help them learn how to use them. These extension actions require continuous communication with the communities involved. This has been our biggest challenge during the pandemic, mainly due to the project participants' low level of schooling or illiteracy.

However, the impediments we encountered propelled us toward ideas that have given the project other qualities, listed below. We migrated from face-to-face group meetings to individual interviews through teleconference applications. During the latter, participants' life experience stories were triggered by the principal question: "Thinking about your life story, your trajectory, what places can you say you know like the palm of your hand?" The resulting conversation is based on life memory narratives linked to the places where events occurred, in which everyday scenes are remembered in rural and urban landscapes, including the Lagoinha Complex. They support the elaboration of the images that are being embroidered on the fabrics.

In Freire's book *A Importância de Ler: Em Três Artigos que se Completam* (1989; *The Importance of the Act of Reading: In Three Articles Which Complete Each Other*) the author described his earlier memories of learning how to read. He reported that even before being able to read the written word, he had the opportunity to perceive and *read the world* through his senses. The texts, words, and letters of that context were embodied in a series of things, objects, and signs.

Paulo Freire recalled landscapes, situations, houses, trees, birds, noise, and other perceptions that, like a text, were discovered and read in the daily life of his boyish world. He also told us about his literacy process, started by his parents in the backyard of his house, under a mango tree's shade, using

the floor as a blackboard and sticks as chalk. There, the reading of the word, according to Freire (1989), flowed naturally from the reading of the private world and later, at school, Freire reported that his teachers were also committed to reading the *palavramundo*, or *world-word*, a neologism he created to designate the link between reading the word and reading the world.

In the same way, we proposed remembrance to the women who participated in the project, the narration and the concretization of their immediate worlds. Performing this task requires an exercise in rereading of remarkable perceptions recorded throughout life, communication through orality and its expression in images. This communication comes about first by drawing or making digital collages that can give rise to the sketches of embroidery, and then by embroidering their drawings using needle and thread. As a result of isolation, these embroideries, which would have been produced at weekly meetings, are being made by women in their own homes, using material in kits provided by the project. In addition to the specific materials for embroidery—thread, needles, fabric—the kits include items that encourage taking time for self-care. The requirement to stay at home has led to an extra amount of female domestic service, especially in patriarchal societies such as ours in Brazil, which often are also marked by gender prejudice and violence. Considering the group's specificity, the maintenance of actions can also be understood as a way of coping with the social isolation imposed by the pandemic, a form of care. Among the various changes made, we highlight the adaptation of the approach, mediation, and language. As Holland indicated (2005),

> rhetoric is a strong influence on partnership understanding, for good or for bad, and each partner talks about their perspective in different terms, styles, and with different cultural values in mind. A common language may not be feasible, but we can explore pathways to better listening and comprehension . . . the essence of good communications. (pp. 15–16)

Considering the impossibility of meeting and the weakening of the experience that only face-to-face exchange provides, we developed printed material to accompany these kits. This material, a mediation notebook, presents a narrative mainly based on illustrations since some women in the group are illiterate.

The adult literacy method developed by Paulo Freire involved so-called culture circles, meetings in which those involved talked about their daily lives and the extreme situations experienced in the community. Themes and words coming from those men and women's universe that are generated from these meetings will be used in the literacy process. Paulo Freire and his colleagues realized that literacy was achieved more quickly and efficiently when the words and phrases chosen by educators were part of the community's knowledge and action universe. Similarly, the mediation notebook that we developed to integrate the embroidery and self-care kit contains illustrations that communicate the project proposal. These illustrations, which are shown in Figure 1, were specially created for this notebook by Vitor Siqueira Miranda, the visual arts undergraduate student who works in the project.

According to Paulo Freire (1989), the words with which to organize the literacy program must come from the vocabulary of popular groups, expressing their everyday language, their anxieties, concerns, needs, and dreams. For Freire, literacy involves the transcription of authentic oral expression, and the ones involved in this process are responsible for building, writing, and reading language in a context meaningful to this population.

Thus, to overcome these challenges, we intend that this material will play the role of social mediator, using thought-provoking words and images to reinforce the speech in the virtual meetings. If the written word can be frightening, the drawings promote an approximation of these women's universe by presenting shapes and objects that are familiar to them: hands, embroidery materials, household objects, and the features of an elderly woman's face. Thus, in our project, the memory becomes a word said, heard, transcribed, read, drawn, and embroidered to be reread, now as an image.

Pandemic Learnings—Empathy, Compassion, and Solidarity

We are all learning a lot from the COVID-19 pandemic. As Santos (2020, para. 16) stated, any quarantine is always discriminatory,

Figure 1. Mediation Notebook Illustrations Designed by Vitor Siqueira Miranda

more difficult for some social groups than for others. They are the groups that have a particular vulnerability in common that precedes the quarantine and worsens with it. Such groups make up what he calls "the South." "The South" does not refer to a geographical space. It signifies political, social, and cultural space-time. It is a metaphor for unjust human suffering caused by capitalist exploitation, racial and sexual discrimination. In his study, Santos analyzed the quarantine from the perspective of more vulnerable groups, among them women and the elderly. Santos highlighted how women are *the caregivers of the world* because they are the majority in the task of caring, both inside and outside the home and especially in the areas of health, nursing, and social assistance, making them even more vulnerable. In addition, confinement in tight spaces has triggered violence against women, as witnessed in several parts of the world during the pandemic.

Regarding especially the elderly, Santos (2020) pointed out that, for several reasons, many elderly people in the global North already live in isolation in nursing homes, which with the pandemic have become places with a high risk of infection. However, he also observed that in more impoverished regions—such as where we operate—the situation of the elderly is different, and most of them are at home, taking care of their families and, often, supporting them. In fact, in contact with some women and our Social Assistance Reference Center partner, cases of exploitation and violence against women were verified during the pandemic. A more common complaint among women was that they were unable to attend the activities they were used to, such as handicraft courses, elderly groups, and, above all, the embroidery groups that had been meeting weekly for 10 years and had to be interrupted due to the pandemic. In this context, the decision to continue the project even in the face of social distancing required us to make a series of adaptations in the project's scope. Still, it also led us to reflect on the need for this action to care for the women who were participating in the project and encourage them to take care of themselves.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been causing deep suffering for humanity, especially for the most vulnerable and impoverished people. The emergency presented the world with the challenge of coping with the disease, resulting in the search for medicines, vaccines, equipment, and procedures and

the imposition of distance and social isolation, among many other challenges. Many people (professionals or not) have been mobilized to find solutions quickly and efficiently to the most varied problems that arose with the pandemic, among them the designers.

In social design projects, listening to people is essential. Through participatory methodologies, such as the one we used, people are involved in all stages of the design process. In this context, it is essential to develop empathy and be sensitive to others' perspectives. Davenport (2015) referred to empathy as one of the leader's characteristics at the service of the community, but he pointed out the need to go beyond empathy:

> It lacks a clear next step for those who are willing to empathize with another. Because of this shortcoming, it may be necessary to look beyond empathy toward something deeper to provide us with answers to these questions. For that, I have chosen to turn to compassion as a way of addressing this shortcoming. (p. 303)

Davenport's arguments differentiate empathy from compassion, adding to compassion the quality of impelling us to action to alleviate the other's suffering.

The literature on higher education outreach and engagement and the servant-leadership concept reflect nuanced distinctions between the North American and Brazilian perspectives regarding university outreach. In Brazil, we use the word "extension" to designate educational, cultural, and scientific process that articulates teaching and research in an inseparable way and enables a transforming relationship between the university and society. Various factors serve as guidelines for university extension: impact and transformation; dialogical interaction; and interdisciplinarity and indissolubility among education-research-extension (Fórum de Pró-Reitores de Extensão, 2007, pp. 17–18).

We therefore agree with Davenport (2015) when he says that in addition to empathy, the development of compassion becomes essential in outreach projects, since "while both empathy and compassion call on us to enter into an understanding of the feelings and experiences of another, it is the inner motivation for action found in compassion that differentiates the two" (p. 304). For Davenport, compassion leads to an action that aims to alleviate the suffering of the other and, from our perspective, it is precisely in this kind of action that we find the virtue of compassion. In the book *Pequeno Tratado das Grandes Virtudes* (Small Treatise on the Great Virtues), André Comte-Sponville (1995) concluded that compassion is what allows us to move from the affective order to the ethical order, from what we feel to what we want, from what we are to what we owe. Comte-Sponville further proposed that love also carries out this movement; even if that love may not be within our reach, compassion is (pp. 128–129).

Our theoretical framework is based on the thought of Paulo Freire, who very much emphasized the importance of university extension, but who criticized the use of the word "extension," preferring instead the word "communication" in its coherence with the praxis of reflection-and-action. For Freire, the meaning represented by the expression "university extension" reflects an idea of cultural invasion, which would correspond to the act of extending an elaborated knowledge to those who still do not have it, thus killing in them the critical capacity to have it (Freire, 1983, O Equivoco Gnosiológico da Extensão, para. 23). On the other hand, according to Freire, education means interaction, therefore it is not simply transferring knowledge but making sense of what is meaningful to those involved in the process. This approach invites us to act with ethics, care, respect, and admiration toward communities.

Contributions of Extension to the Training of Students

Another significant dimension of community engagement projects is their contribution to the training of team members in direct contact with communities in real situations. Thus, we highlight the participation of a visual arts degree course student, 26-year-old Vitor Siqueira Miranda (2021), in the elaboration of the illustrations in the mediation notebook. His work was developed in concurrence with us, the project's coordinating professors, the research universe, and the perception of the project's context and communication demands in the face of the pandemic. We reproduce below his perspective on the project and the impacts on its formation:

Since my insertion in this project, I have been able to understand how much this experience would add to my personal and academic training. In addition to providing me with the experience of participating in a research and extension project, it allows me to experience art education in front of a target audience with which I had not yet had experience and [which] certainly would have a lot to teach me. This project is seen by me as an alternative to fill social gaps, rescuing cloistered stories in the lack of the opportunity to speak. The proposition provides ways to explore the city from its residents' subjective perspective, resuming memories and stories reconstructed by the artistic bias. In this way, community is valued and perceived in several layers, showing their active participation in the city's development, as the protagonists of this story. Another relevant aspect of this process is the democratization of art, addressing and developing a palpable conception of art-making and being an artist. These concepts are often misunderstood, distancing people from their artistic being.

Because of the pandemic situation, it was necessary to redesign an entire process that has been under development for some time, which requires a lot of creativity and resilience to make a coherent adaptation, minimizing the inevitable losses of the situation. Starting from my place of speech, a graduate student in visual arts, experiencing art education in several instances, I realize how much the current situation has impacted thinking/planning/practicing teaching and learning. The scenario formed in the face of the pandemic is substantially based on uncertainties, which undoubtedly complicates the proposal of actions and responses to the pandemic. Despite the countless difficulties that exist, I understand that it is necessary to resist and maintain projects like this, which have even more relevant social and cultural functions in this period. Faced with the pandemic, the group participating in the project is currently the most affected part of the population. They are deprived of their daily life as a whole, forced to avoid coexistence, religiosity, family, entertainment, etc. The project has great potential to enable social connections, creating communication links between thoughts and stories, these shared through stories and embroidered memories. The possibility of conceiving contact among people deprived of each other gives the action even more relevance. It is with great pride that I participate in the project *Like the Palm of my Hand: Memories to Redesign the City*, helping in the design of tools and methodologies that can enable these connections among people, city, and art.

Considering this account, we highlight the huge formative potential of extension actions and community engagement involving college students in community-based learning. As noted by Holland and Gelmon (2003), these actions are configured as "knowledge-based collaborations in which all partners have things to teach each other, things to learn from each other, and things they will learn together" (p. 107).

Monitoring and Evaluation

Regarding the monitoring and evaluation of the impact of actions, as pointed out by Holland (2005), it is important to develop "compelling ways to measure the quality and impact of partnership work, especially from the perspective of the community" (p. 16). In the current project, we deal with data involving subjectivities, life stories, and meanings attributed to the territory. Thus, we plan to measure the impacts by listening to the community's voices at different times in the development of the actions. This evaluation will be made based on the participants' impressions of the project so that the evaluation of the process will take into account their points of view as participants and as producers of knowledge. The data set to be analyzed in a participatory manner also encompasses the images produced: the drawings, digital collages, and embroidery.

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly impacted the execution of our work with the community and, consequently, the documentation strategies. As a possible solution, a website is under development. Like the Palm of

My Hand: Memories to Redesign the City (andreiadebernardi.com.br/projetos/lik-ethepalmofmyhand/) is a website that will house the daily research, the conversations, the most relevant themes raised in the online meetings, the drawings, the embroidery, other images, and relevant information. The page will be updated continuously throughout the project, functioning as a virtual field notebook containing the project's methodological path, with periodic posts that will record the course taken.

This website was a solution based on the constraints imposed by the pandemic. In a single virtual address, it hosts different forms of data itself—texts, photographs, videos, and podcasts—as well as treatment and analysis of that data. The website can be accessed by the general public, functioning as a way to document, monitor, evaluate, and disseminate the project's actions, which can be replicated in other contexts.

We believe that this will be a form of transparent monitoring and evaluation, which will show the successes, challenges, and failures of the project, to be pointed out by the community itself, representatives of the university, and partners, making them visible to society at large. As Holland (2005) wrote, "engagement programs and partnerships abound, but their stories are rarely captured and disseminated" (p. 16). Thus, we see the creation of this website as a positive consequence of the crisis that we are going through because it will significantly expand the scope of the project's actions—not only in Brazil but also abroad, opening another channel of communication, reflection, and debate at national and international levels.

The production of this website, which was not initially planned, required the mobilization of resources from the Web for Life Program. This program has subsidized several specific initiatives. Although the university offers some funding, it is not enough to cover all the financial needs of the project. Other opportunities for financial support, such as public subsidies and sponsorship from local companies, should be considered.

Partnerships

Interinstitutional partnerships were established in the neighborhood, the main ones being with the Municipal Secretary of Culture and the Municipal Secretary of Social Assistance, through the Social Assistance Reference Center, where weekly meetings would be held. However, the day before we started taking action, social distancing was decreed in our city due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is worth mentioning that in our projects, partnerships are often established directly with groups and people in the community, without necessarily involving a civil society organization or association. This direct relationship with the community can bring benefits, in that individuals and groups can highlight their own interests; however, it imposes challenges related to communication and the organization of the group throughout the project, aspects that with the COVID-19 pandemic have become more complex.

Expected Results and Some Reflections in Process

We envision that this project will strengthen the community's identity construction processes and stimulate the participants' self-esteem, autonomy, and protagonism. It is worth mentioning that the impact will expand to these women's family nuclei and relationship circles since they are also mothers, grandmothers, teachers, and community leaders. Such impacts will be measured by listening to the people involved in the project.

Regarding the university, we believe that this experience of facing the pandemic through the realization of extension projects can teach us a lot and reaffirm the necessary balance among the pillars that characterize the university: teaching, research, and extension. Although this harmonic triad is encouraged, we agree with Cox and Seifer's (2005) statement: "Faculty members' priorities are to teach and research, and students' priority is to learn. However, these two interests do not automatically translate into meeting the needs or matching the individual project interests of communities" (p. 28).

In our country, teaching and research have always been more present or have been considered as more important dimensions of higher education's mission. However, our university's efforts have been directed toward increasing extension through support programs with grants for teachers and students and specific financing programs

such as Web for Life, which was created as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and involved several extension projects. In this respect, the Minas Gerais State University can be considered an engaged campus. Holland (2001) corroborated this assessment, stating that the engaged institution

> is committed to direct interaction with external constituencies and communities through the mutually-beneficial exchange, exploration, and application of knowledge, expertise, resources, and information. These interactions enrich and expand the learning and discovery functions of the academic institution while also enhancing community capacity. The work of the engaged campus is responsive to (and respectful of) community-identified needs, opportunities, and goals in ways that are appropriate to the campus' mission and academic strengths. (p. 24)

Paulo Freire affirmed that educating is a political act and an act of love. In his adult literacy program, he envisioned promoting people's awareness through dialogue, leading them to observe their reality, become aware of it, and transform it. The reading of the world process, followed by the reading and writing of the word, was, therefore, a necessary instrument for the work of emancipating the oppressed: men and women who, from this awareness, could become agents of change in their condition.

We know the importance of carefully choosing the words we use. Even when studied from the etymological perspective, different meanings can be attributed to them depending on the cultural, political, ideological, and even linguistic context in which they are applied. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that Paulo Freire's invitation makes us consider replacing the word "compassion" with the word "solidarity" and the word "extension" with the word "communication."

Thus, we conducted this project to contribute to the realization of actions that can stimulate the emancipation of social groups less favored or made invisible by society. We intend to raise awareness and bring to light the potential of the transformative praxis in research and extension programs, in aspects that might be relevant to strengthening the social, political, and activist character of these interventions, hence encouraging communities to envisage and develop the necessary conditions for their well-being.

The pandemic calls us to an even greater opening to learning in direct contact with the community, but how to promote engagement at a distance? How, especially, can we do so for the elderly who are part of the main risk group and who, in Brazil, have little or no access to new communication technologies?

Answering this and other questions critically and reflectively through the documentation of the stages of the project Como a Palma de Minha Mão may open new avenues for the engagement of communities in the future.

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