

# **CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY COMMUNICATION ON FIRM WEBSITES: A DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Many corporations portray themselves as good corporate citizens on their websites. They published how they dug deep into their corporate vault to make the lives of their stakeholders better. They do so by building schools, clinics, places of convenience, and scholarships for locals. Some even have corporate social responsibility foundations dedicated to their social interventions. This study looked at how companies used their corporate websites to engage their stakeholders. The study also determined whether these websites comply with the dialogic communication theory. Using content analysis as a research methodology, the study found that all the top 10 Ghana club 100 companies did not offer their stakeholders the opportunity to have a say in determining their corporate social responsibility interventions. However, the study saw that most of the top 10 Ghana club 100 companies interact with their publics according to the dialogic communication theory.*

**Keywords:** CSR, Dialogic Communication, Stakeholders, Ghana Club 100 Companies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The dialogic theory affords firms a framework to guide in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications (see for example, Abitbol & Lee, 2017; Park & Kang, 2020). Scholars Kent and Taylor (1998), are the proponents of this theory (Abitbol & Lee, 2017). According to Abitbol and Lee (2017), the dialogic communication is a means by which a company and its stakeholders can communicate interactively. As such, the use of the dialogic theory becomes a natural fit for CSR communication. More so, CSR is influenced by how corporations align their values and behavior with stakeholder's expectations and needs. As CSR is described as a company's commitment to being accountable to its stakeholders (Ahmed & Isalm, 2012). The concept of CSR has scholarly be viewed in various ways: CSR reporting (Chambers et al., 2003; Fonseca et al., 2012; Hinson et al., 2010), CSR communications (Abugre & Nyuur, 2015); CSR as a concept Montiel (2008); CSR reporting standards Fombrun (2005); CSR as a strategy Williams et al. (2005), CSR and Islam (Williams & Zinkin, 2010; Farook et al., 2011; Rashid et al., 2013; Siwar & Hossain, 2009). Based on this, academic scrutiny appears thin regarding how corporations use their websites to create a meaningful interface in selecting a particular social intervention to be carried out by companies. Some previous studies have shown that organizations are not exploiting the full potential of their online platforms (Shin & Pang

2015), despite the awareness of the importance of online communication in dialogic engagement with stakeholders and a positive organizational image (Hinson et al., 2018; Pang et al. 2018).

The websites provide a controlled channel through which organizations can communicate with stakeholder publics and the media (Kent et al., 2003; Hinson et al., 2014). Websites as communication tools enable an organization to simultaneously tailor messages to address the concerns, interests and negotiate relationships with a diverse set of stakeholders (Hinson et al., 2014; Hinson et al., 2019). Consequently, the essence of stakeholder dialogue is the co-creation of shared understanding by company and stakeholder (Johnson-Cramer et al. 2003). Hence, there is a need to allow for stakeholder participation in determining CSR interventions by corporations. Therefore, the objective of this study is to explore how companies use their corporate websites as a means of creating a dialogue between stakeholders in the choice of CSR intervention to be undertaken by the companies.

The paper is organized as follows: the first part was an introduction of the study; section two looked at literature review; section three touched on the study's methodology; the paper is wrapped up with findings and recommendations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no doubt that CSR has had a strong footing in the developed world. However, the understanding of this concept in Ghana and many other sub-Saharan counties is still in its embryonic stage (Ramasamy & Hung, 2004). Furthermore, the multiplicity of related concepts, such as corporate citizenship, corporate accountability, sustainability, business ethics, triple bottom line, and philanthropy, have undoubtedly contributed to the convolution of CSR's true meaning (Garriga & Mele, 2004). It is in line with this that (Pedersen, 2006) posited that CSR means different things to different people, and new issues can easily be included in existing definitions. A review of CSR literature in the Ghanaian context suggests that CSR in Ghana is primarily understood to mean corporate philanthropic activities (see Abukari & Abdul-Hamid, 2018; Hinson et al., 2010; Abugre & Nyuur, 2015). It is common to see organizations in Ghana digging deep into their corporate vault to build schools, hospitals, provide scholarships for locals and sponsorship programs, just to mention a few, as part of their CSR initiatives. CSR is a growing term that still does not have a universally accepted definition or a fully recognized set of specific criteria (Ahmed et al., 2012). Nielsen and Thomsen (2007) argue that CSR is a contextual concept; therefore, in principle, there are no limits to CSR. CSR is concerned with treating the firm's stakeholders ethically or responsibly (Hopkins, 2003). *'Ethically or Socially responsible'* means treating stakeholders in a manner deemed acceptable in civilized societies. Social includes economic responsibility.

Stakeholders exist both within a firm and outside. The broader aim of social responsibility is to create higher and higher living standards while preserving the corporation's profitability for peoples both within and outside the corporation. Jones (1980) defined CSR as the notion that corporations have an obligation to constituent groups in society other than stockholders and beyond that prescribed by law or union contract. Socially responsible companies consider the full scope of their impact on communities and the environment when making decisions, balancing stakeholders' needs with their need to make a profit (Ethics in Action Awards, 2003). An avid review of the preceding definitions points to a consistent reference to stakeholders, thereby making them crucial partners as far as CSR matters are concerned.

A fundamental assumption underlying the enactment of CSR initiatives is not the same as consumer awareness of the CSR activity. It would even be more impactful if stakeholders have a stake in the CSR initiatives that businesses choose to roll on. This would create stakeholders' minds that a particular business entity is socially responsible, which comes with its competitiveness to that business. Greenwood (2007) opine that *“there is apparent soundness of logic in the assumption that the more an organization engages with its stakeholders, the more accountable and responsible that it is likely to be towards these stakeholders. This responsibility assumption presumes that the act of stakeholder engagement in and of itself delivers some benefit towards stakeholders and is, therefore, an act of responsibility towards stakeholders”*. *“Messages about corporate ethical and social responsibility initiatives are likely to evoke strong and often more positive reactions among stakeholders”* (Morsing & Schultz, 2006). They further argued that by involving external stakeholders incorporate CSR efforts, managers and employees are also engaged in a sense giving and sense-making processes. Sense making and sense giving merely are trying to make sense of what others want. They assign meaning to the same and reason-giving to influence how another party understands or makes sense, respectively (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). According to Johnson-Cramer et al. (2003), stakeholder dialogue's relevance is the co-creation of shared understanding between companies and stakeholders. Today, participation and dialoguing have become an integral element of corporate self-presentations. Greenwood (2007) notes that stakeholder engagement is understood as practices the organization embarks on involving stakeholders in organizational activities. Corporate responsibility is taken to mean the corporation's duty to act in legitimate organizational stakeholders' interests. Morsing & Schultz (2006) contend that stakeholder involvement is increasingly an important way of ensuring that a company stays in tune with concurrently changing stakeholder expectations. CSR is a moving target, making it increasingly necessary and vital to adapt and change according to shifting stakeholder expectations and influence those expectations.

### **CSR Communication on Websites**

The advent of the internet and its attendant consequences has made corporate communications on the website an integral part of effective CSR communication. Many customers see the website as the first port of call when looking for information about a particular entity and their services or products because it is instantaneous and does not require physical contact. Kent and Taylor (1998) opined that experts in public relations and academics had had an enormous interest in the web. Corporate websites and homepages serve such public relations functions as platforms for news releases, opportunities for research of the public, and providing organizational information. These websites also offer options for quick responses to organizational problems and crises. Some organizations discuss wide-ranging impacts of their social and environmental issues either on their Websites or in their annual reports (Montiel, 2008). *“The benefits of the internet for communicating or disclosing information to stakeholders are not in doubt. The internet can disseminate information less expensively and disclose information in a timely fashion”* (Hinson et al., 2010). The internet is a powerful medium for communicating and sharing information among people, friends and business partners. It has resulted in a substantial transformation in many aspects of human lives and is one of the most significant contributors to transforming the world into a global village. The use of the Internet has grown tremendously since its inception. With the increased availability of the Internet, consumers are feeling the need to be connected, have instant and constant access to information;

and to engage in self-service at any time and from any location in any part of the world (Strauss & Frost, 2012).

Websites as communication tools make it possible for many organizations to simultaneously tailor messages to address a diverse set of people (Hinson et al. 2013), whether customers or potential customers. The benefit of the internet for communicating or disclosing information to stakeholders is enormous. The internet is increasingly becoming one of the critical tools for CSR information disclosure, as it allows companies to publicize more information less expensively and faster than ever before. They further point out that the internet provides information to be permanently available on the web, allowing internet users to choose which subject they will want to access as often as they wish. Corporate websites provide an official perspective regarding CSR within the corporation for all its stakeholders (Wanderly et al., 2008). Research shows that instead of relying heavily on the traditional bricks-and-mortar approaches to generating brand development and equity, it is possible to do the same more cost-effectively and profitably on corporate websites (Hinson et al., 2012). In the traditional approach, the level of interactivity is low. It is also unidirectional to diffuse information and try to influence its image that the various publics have. With the internet, the degree of interactivity is high, making it possible for bidirectional communication, which engenders stronger relationships between the organization and its publics.

### **The Stakeholder Theory**

Stakeholder view of the firm' instrumentally defines a stakeholder as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives' and he suggests that there is a need for integrated approaches for dealing with multiple stakeholders on multiple issues'. In the view of Andriof and Waddock (2002), it attempts to develop a long-term mutual relationship rather than merely focusing on the immediate bottom line. This is not to suggest that profit and economic sustainability are not substantial. Still, the process holds the view that to profit and survive it incumbent on business entities to engage more regularly with various stakeholders upon whom dependence is vital. The emphasis is to move focus on stakeholders being managed by companies to a focus on the interaction that companies have with their stakeholders based on a relational and process-oriented view. The stakeholder view, therefore, negates the neo-classical proposition that perceives firms as more or less closed systems that took care of only the interests of only shareholders. The stakeholder theory's essence is to move away from the so-called profit-obsession, driven by stockholders, to embrace concerns driven by stakeholders, whose interests are also critical to the survival of businesses.

Given this, the stakeholder theory believes that businesses must be aware and respond to their constituents various demands, including employees, customers, investors, suppliers, and the local community. This is because businesses wouldn't deserve the right to be in business if they do not respond accordingly to the common norms, rules, and values that governed the society in which they operate (Post et al., 2002). The stakeholder relationship is assumed to consist of interactive, mutually engaged and responsive relationships that establish the very context of doing modern business and create the groundwork for transparency and accountability (Andriof et al., 2002). At the heart of the stakeholder theory is the notion of participation, dialogue, and involvement, with a clear inspiration (and aspiration) from democratic culture. While dialogue is the tool, agreement and consensus are most often regarded as the solution on which to base further decisions and action, and hence to continue the collaboration between stakeholders and

businesses (Morsing & Shultz, 2006). There is apparent soundness of logic to the assumption that the more an organization engages with its stakeholders, the more accountable and responsible it is to be towards these stakeholders. This responsibility assumption presumes that stakeholder engagement in and of itself delivers some benefit towards stakeholders and is, therefore, an act of responsibility towards stakeholders.

## Research Framework

This study adopted the dialogic framework by Kent and Taylor (1998). Table 1 provides details of the principles and measurements.

<b>Principles</b>	<b>Measurement</b>
The dialogic loop	An opportunity for feedback from the audience.
Usefulness of information	Background of the organization, historical information about itself. Valid contact addresses, telephone numbers, E-mail of organizational members. Ability to provide audience-specific information to the public. An opportunity to offer the public to sign-up for mailing lists. Mission Vision Tagline
The generation return visit (RV)	Ability to attract and sustained visitor's interest (e.g. updated issues, online question and answer sessions, and online experts to answer visitor's queries). Ability to address frequently asked questions (FAQ).
The intuitiveness or Ease of the interface	Easy to navigate Must be the focus (provide information of value to visitors). Dynamic to engender exploration.
The rule of conservation of visitors	Ability to direct visitors to essential links. Ability to value visitors to your sites (keep them on only on requested links).

## METHODOLOGY

Our study adopted a qualitative research design. Specifically, content analysis was used to collect data from the Ghana club 100. Specifically the top 10 companies comprising of: Newmont Golden Ridge Limited, Scancom Limited (MTN Ghana), Ghana Oil Company Limited, Gold Fields Ghana Limited, Vivo Energy Ghana Limited, Unibank Ghana Limited, Multipro Private Limited, Nordea Capital Limited, Justmoh Construction Limited, and Total Petroleum Ghana Limited ([www.gipcghana.com](http://www.gipcghana.com); accessed, 17<sup>th</sup> February 2018). The study employed the qualitative content analysis approach. According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) content analysis is a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. More so, content analysis is “*any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings*” (Patton, 2002).

The websites of the top 10 companies were visited using the Google search engine. To bring about rigour in the analysis, the websites were navigated at least five times to ensure that the cases under investigations were exhaustively analyzed. This was to allow analyzing archival records of the top 10 Ghana club companies' websites to check whether they are dialogic and

will enable stakeholders to participate in the process of selecting a particular social intervention to be executed by the companies with a click of a button in line with the research objective of the study. Table 2 summarizes the dialogic potentials of the top 10 Ghana club 100 companies based on the 16<sup>th</sup> edition of the awards.

<b>Top 10 Ghana Club 100 Companies 16<sup>th</sup> Edition</b>	<b>CSR Dialogic</b>	<b>Non-CSR dialogic</b>
1. Newmont Golden Ridge Limited (NGRL)	✓	•
2. Scancam Limited (MTN Ghana)	✓	•
3. Ghana Oil Company Limited (GOIL)	✓	•
4. Gold Fields Ghana Limited (GFGL)	✓	•
5. Vivo Energy Ghana Limited (VEGL)	✓	•
6. Unibank Ghana Limited (UB)	✓	•
7. Multipro Private Limited (MPL)	✓	•
8. Nordea Capital Limited (NCL)	✓	•
9. Justmoh Construction Limited (JCL)	✓	•
10. Total Petroleum Ghana Limited (TOTAL)	✓	•

✓ *CSR Dialogic*

• *Non-CSR dialogic*

The study also navigated the websites of the top 10 ranked companies, according to Ghana club 100 rankings and subjected them to Kent & Taylor (1998) guidelines. Table 3 summarizes how the various companies fared based on the guidelines.

<b>Dialogic principle</b>	<b>NGRL</b>	<b>MTN</b>	<b>GOIL</b>	<b>GFGL</b>	<b>VGL</b>	<b>UB</b>	<b>MPL</b>	<b>NCL</b>	<b>JCL</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Dialogic loop</b>										
1 An opportunity for feedback from the audience	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Sub-total</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
<b>Usefulness of information</b>										
1 Background of the organization	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2 Valid contact address, telephone numbers, E-mail of organizational members.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3 Ability to provide audience-specific information to the public.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4 An opportunity to offer public to sign-up for mailing lists	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	•	•	•	✓	•
5 Mission	✓	✓	✓	•	•	✓	•	✓	•	✓
6 Vision	•	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7 Tagline	•	✓	✓	•	•	•	✓	✓	•	•
<b>Sub-total</b>	5	7	7	5	5	5	5	6	5	5
<b>The generation return visit (RV)</b>										
1 Ability to attract and sustained visitor's interest (up datedness)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	•	✓	✓	✓
2 Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)	•	✓	•	•	•	•	•	✓	•	✓
<b>Sub-total</b>	1	2	1	1	2	1	0	2	1	2
<b>The intuitiveness or Ease of the interface</b>										

**Table 3**  
**THE DIALOGIC POTENTIAL OF THE TOP 10 GHANA CLUB 100 COMPANIES BASED KENT & TAYLOR (1998)**  
**COMMUNICATION THEORY**

1 Easy to navigate	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2 Must be the focus (provide information of value to visitors).	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3 Dynamic to engender exploration.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	•	✓	✓	✓
<b>Sub-total</b>	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	3	3
<b>The rule of conservation of visitors</b>										
1 Ability to direct visitors to essential links	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2 Ability to value visitors to your sites (keep them on only on requested links).	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<b>Sub-total</b>	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>13</b>

### CONTENT ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Our objective was to determine whether the top 10 Ghana club 100 companies websites afforded stakeholders the opportunity to dialogically engage these companies in deciding the kind of social interventions these companies intend to embark on. Following a pedantic review of these websites, it may be safe to conclude that the top 10 companies do not allow their stakeholders to input their views on the kind of social interventions they carry out. Table 1 summarizes the dialogic potential of the top 10 companies regarding their support for CSR.

This study also subjected the top 10 companies to Kent and Taylor (1998) framework. Generally speaking, the top 10 companies have primarily used the dialogic communication theory. In terms of the various construct, the rule of conservation of visitors and the dialogic loop were widely used by the top 10 companies. This was closely followed by the intuitiveness or ease of interface. These websites demonstrated the ease of navigation for those who want to surf these sites. The usefulness of information was also given adequate prominence by the top 10 companies. This was followed by the generation return visit. Table 2 above summarizes the dialogic communication theory.

MTN Ghana had an impressive performance in terms of the constructs espoused by the dialogic communication theory. For all constructs that the study sought to measure, the company scored all marks under consideration. It garnered all the marks under consideration. For the dialogic loop, the company garnered the sole mark for consideration. The usefulness of information had seven (7) marks under consideration, and the company again garnered all. This was followed by the generation of return visit made up of two (2) marks, the company captured all. Lastly, the intrusiveness or ease of interface, which consisted of 3 marks, the company characteristically, scored all. In all, the company garnered all 15 marks for all constructs under consideration. This was closely followed by Ghana Oil Company Limited (GOIL) and Nordea Capital limited. These two companies came joint-runner ups, garnering 14 marks for each. The two companies jointly scored one (1) mark each for the dialogic loop. In contrasts, Goil scored all marks under the usefulness of the information. Simultaneously, Nordea capital's website falls short of capturing an opportunity to offer the public to sign-up for mailing lists. For the generation of a return visit, Nordea capital scored all marks under this construct, while Goil falls short of dealing with frequently asked questions (FAQs). For the intuitiveness or ease of the interface, the two companies scored all marks under this construct.

Lastly, the rule of conservation of visitors, the two companies again scored all marks under consideration. Two companies are also joint third place winners in portraying their websites in line with the investigation's communication theory. Vivo Energy Ghana limited and Total Ghana limited. In terms of individual construct considerations, the two companies dealt with the dialogic loop factor, which only looked at an opportunity for feedback from the audience. For the usefulness of information construct, Vivo energy scored five (5) marks under consideration, minus mission statement and tag line. In comparison, Total Ghana limited scored five (5) marks, failing to observe sign up to mailing lists and tagline. For the generation return visit, Ghana Oil Company limited did not capture frequently asked a question (FAQ), while Total Ghana limited observe all issues under the generation return visit. For the generation of a return visit, Vivo energy Ghana limited reported on 1, falling short of observing frequently asked questions. Total Ghana limited observed all issues measuring the constructs under the generation of return visitors. Regarding the intuitiveness or ease of the use of the interface, the two companies observed everything. Three issues were under consideration, and Vivo energy Ghana limited and Total Ghana limited considered them in their website's design. Lastly, under the rule of conservation of visitors, the two companies garnered everything under the construct. For the fourth position, as far as the dialogic communication theory is concerned, four companies are sharing honours: Newmont Golden Ridge Limited, Gold Fields Ghana Limited, Unibank, and Justmoh construction Ghana limited.

Under the dialogic loop, they all observed the decision to offer the audience the opportunity to communicate with them. Under the usefulness of information constructs, they all scored 5 points. However, the difference does exist in what they failed to portray on their websites. Newmont Golden Ridge limited did not capture the vision and tagline under this construct. Unibank Ghana limited also did not capture an opportunity for a mailing list and tagline. Goldfields Ghana limited did not capture mission and tagline, while Justmoh construction did not capture mission and tagline. The four companies, however, captured the ability to attract and sustained visitor's interest (up datedness) under the generation return visit construct. Surprisingly, all four companies did not portray frequently asked questions on corporate websites. Under the intuitiveness or ease of use of the interface, all the four companies surprisingly captured all issues that measure the construct. None fail to catch any of the issues under consideration. Lastly, under the rule of conservation of visitors, all four companies reported every issue that measured the construct.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first research objective was to determine how dialogic the websites of the top 10 Ghana club 100 companies could be in allowing the public to provide input into the selection of social initiatives by these companies. By navigating through these companies' websites, it can be observed that none of these companies has an opportunity for stakeholders to participate in their social interventions by way of a click of a button. This is not to suggest that these companies do not have anything concerning CSR on their websites; they appear on their websites under different captions. These include "CSR", "Community", "Sustainability" one can only surmise that issues about what kind of social initiatives these companies intend to embark upon are not to be discussed on their corporate websites as clearly observed on the websites.

Secondly, the study also sought to view the websites of the top 10 Ghana club 100 companies in the light of the dialogic communication theory as espoused by (Kent & Taylor



1998). This study's findings reflect some kind of interactivity on the part of these companies dealing with their publics. A closer look at the results gives an impression of an appreciation of the dialogic communication theory that forms this study's framework. Evidence from the findings suggests that the top 10 Ghana club 100 companies want to get feedback from the audience, as captured under the dialogic loop, meaning the companies value responses from the public, which is very critical as far as the dialogic communication theory is concerned. It is also worth considering the ability of these websites to attract and maintain surfer's interest in what being published on these websites. Finally, another important dimension that ought to be looked at is the usefulness of an information construct, essentially portraying a salient aspect of the dimension. This means that an essential aspect of the construct, including a valid contact address, telephone numbers, E-mail of organizational members, mission and vision statements, captures the overall essence of the organization's existence. This inspires confidence in the public as they have the firm belief that the company indeed exist in the brick-and-mortar format as well as in the click environment. Doing business with such an entity does not in any way ring a suspicious alarm bell, especially at a time scammers have been left on the hook by courtesy of the internet. Additionally, another useful construct worth looking at this juncture is the rule of conservation of visitors, which is a measure of how users of the website can direct visitors to essential links of interest regarding the business entity that can make the user return in future. A closer look at table 2 reveals an impressive balance sheet as far as that construct is concerned. It shows a split portrayal as the issues under consideration is concerned.

### **Managerial Implication**

Corporate communication via websites has become crucial. Consequently, communicating CSR practices on a firm's website has become a strategic requirement. This is one-way corporate entities can make their existence on the web more meaningful and worthwhile. Having a website with dialogic potential is an essential path to building bridges between the public and the business entities, especially in the click environment. This is critical because websites have become a vital source of information for many people as far as corporate issues are concerned. This is because websites as communication tools make it possible for many organizations to simultaneously tailor messages to address a diverse set of people (Hinson et al., 2013). Therefore, corporate entities should not just communicate to the relevant public must endeavor to do so by employing dialogue that has the potential to engendering a long-lasting, valued-added relationship between businesses and the public. For corporate websites, maintaining a meaningful dialogue has been acknowledged as an effective and potent way of dealing with stakeholders (Waters and Tindall 2010). Because the study looked at only ten (10) companies out of a total of 100 companies of the top club 100 companies in Ghana, it would be difficult for this study's findings to be generalized.

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