

The Impact of Brand Imitation on Consumer Preferences: A Case Study of Luxury Goods

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Abstract. In the fashion and luxury goods market, the phenomenon of brand imitation is becoming increasingly common, which has attracted widespread attention to its impact on consumer preferences. This study, set against the backdrop of luxury brands, explores the impact of brand imitation on consumer preferences, particularly how different types of brand imitation behaviors influence consumers' purchasing decisions and brand evaluation. The study employs a questionnaire survey method combined with quantitative analysis tools to ensure the scientific nature and reliability of the research results. Through regression analysis, mediation effect analysis, and moderation effect analysis, it is demonstrated that brand imitation has a significant negative impact on consumer decision-making. Perceived similarity plays a significant mediating role between brand imitation and brand evaluation, and consumer cognitive needs play a significant moderating role between brand imitation and consumer decision-making. This study provides important theoretical and practical guidance for brand managers. It is recommended that brands consider consumer cognitive characteristics and brand ethical issues comprehensively when formulating imitation strategies to achieve a balance between market benefits and brand image.

Keywords: Brand Imitation, Consumer Preferences, Perceived Similarity, Consumer Cognitive Needs, Brand Evaluation.

1. Introduction

In the fashion and luxury goods market, the phenomenon of brand imitation is becoming increasingly common, which has attracted widespread attention to its impact on consumer preferences [1]. Brand imitation, as a marketing strategy, has certain advantages in reducing innovation costs and leveraging market reputation. However, its impact on consumer preferences remains unclear. From Dior being accused of copying the design of the Chinese "ma mian qun" (horse-faced skirt) to Chanel's first-ever admission of copying the work of designer Mati Ventrillon, these incidents have not only attracted widespread public attention but also sparked in-depth discussions on the behavior of brand imitation and its impact on consumer preferences.

This study mainly focuses on the impact of brand imitation on consumer preferences, the influence of different types of brand imitation behaviors on consumer decision-making and brand evaluation, and other related aspects [2]. It specifically examines the phenomenon of brand imitation in the luxury goods market and its effects on consumer preferences, particularly how different types of brand imitation behaviors affect consumers' purchasing decisions and brand evaluation. The study employs a literature review method to search for and read relevant materials and literature. The advantage of this method is that it can systematically organize existing research findings and provide a solid theoretical foundation for this study. At the same time, data are collected through a questionnaire survey, directly obtaining consumers' true attitudes and preferences, which ensures the scientific nature and reliability of the research results. To further test the research hypotheses, this study also uses quantitative analysis methods such as regression analysis, mediation effect analysis, and moderation effect analysis to deeply reveal the relationships between variables and provide strong support for the research.

The ultimate goal of this study is to explore the impact of brand imitation on consumer preferences, especially how different types of brand imitation behaviors influence consumers' purchasing decisions and brand evaluation. It aims to provide brand managers with in-depth insights into imitation strategies and offer guidance for marketing practice. The study seeks to reveal the specific

mechanisms through which brand imitation affects consumer preferences and explore the heterogeneity among different consumer groups.

2. Literature Review

Brand imitation, as a marketing strategy, has always been a focal point of academic research. Brand imitation refers to the practice where new entrants in the market copy the appearance, features, or concepts of leading brands within an industry to reduce innovation costs and leverage the market reputation of these leading brands. Based on the specific methods of imitation, brand imitation can be categorized into feature imitation and theme imitation. Feature imitation involves copying specific features of leading brands, such as the details of product design, technical characteristics, or particular aspects of services. Since it directly involves the physical attributes of products, feature imitation is usually easier for consumers to recognize. In contrast, theme imitation involves copying the overall concept or theme of a brand rather than specific product features. This may include imitating the brand story, brand image, or market positioning [3].

In numerous studies, the relationship between imitation strategies, perceived similarity, and brand evaluation has been widely explored [4]. Zhang Jing and Du Mingfei, through simulation experiments based on cognitive psychology and information processing theories, investigated the relationship between imitation strategies, perceived similarity, and brand evaluation [5]. They found that imitation strategies lead to positive brand evaluations through perceived similarity. Feature imitation is more likely to trigger perceived similarity, while the similarity perception associated with theme imitation has a more positive impact on brand evaluation. Perceived similarity refers to consumers' perception of the degree of similarity between the imitating brand and the leading brand. This perception can influence consumers' brand evaluations and purchasing decisions. For example, a high level of perceived similarity between the imitating brand and the leading brand may lead to a brand transfer effect, where consumers' positive feelings and trust in the leading brand are transferred to the imitating brand. However, if consumers believe that this similarity is achieved through unethical or illegal means (e.g., design plagiarism), it can damage the evaluation of the imitating brand [6].

Moreover, the impact of different types of brand imitation on consumer decision-making has also attracted the attention of researchers. Li Ming and Wang Hong's research found that, under the moderating effects of cognitive need and consumer knowledge, consumers with low cognitive need and low knowledge levels have higher brand evaluations and purchase intentions for feature imitation brands compared to theme imitation brands. In contrast, consumers with high cognitive need and high knowledge levels tend to be more critical of feature imitation brands [3]. This indicates that individual consumer cognitive characteristics play an important role in the impact of brand imitation. Consumer preference refers to the degree of liking for a particular brand, which is an important component of brand strength and influences consumers' willingness to choose a brand. Consumer preferences are not only affected by the brand itself but are also moderated by individual consumer characteristics, such as cognitive need and knowledge level [7].

Regarding the impact of innovative imitation on the performance of the original product, Sun Lei and Zhou Mei proposed a hypothesis that the addition of innovative imitation products to retail choices could either be beneficial or detrimental to consumers' perception of the original product, depending on the quality of the innovative imitation products [8, 9]. Research has shown that the presence of low-quality innovative imitation products in retail comparisons can actually make the original product more appealing to consumers, while medium-quality innovative imitation products can damage consumers' favorability towards the original product [8, 9]. This finding suggests that brand managers need to be cautious in formulating strategies when facing imitation products in the market.

In summary, the impact of brand imitation on consumer preferences is multidimensional, involving perceived similarity, brand evaluation, and individual consumer cognitive characteristics. Consumers often mentally associate imitation brands with the leading brands they imitate. This association can

enhance the evaluation of imitation brands through a brand transfer effect but may also have negative impacts due to a lack of uniqueness and innovation. Additionally, if consumers perceive that the similarity of imitation brands is achieved through unethical or illegal means, this perception can damage the evaluation of the imitation brands [6]. Therefore, when formulating imitation strategies, brands need to consider consumer cognitive characteristics and brand ethics comprehensively to achieve a balance between market benefits and brand image. Building on this foundation, this study will further explore the specific impact of imitation and borrowing behaviors among major brands on consumer preferences and the heterogeneity of this impact across different consumer groups.

3. Research Methods

This study aims to explore the impact of brand imitation on consumer preferences, particularly how different types of brand imitation behaviors influence consumers' purchasing decisions and brand evaluations. Based on the existing literature and the research objectives, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The impact of brand imitation types on consumer decision-making

From the perspective of cognitive need and consumer knowledge as moderators, different types of brand imitation (feature imitation and theme imitation) have different impacts on consumers' brand evaluations and purchase intentions [10]. Consumers with low cognitive need and low knowledge levels may have higher brand evaluations and purchase intentions for feature-imitation brands, while those with high cognitive need and high knowledge levels may hold a more critical attitude towards feature-imitation brands [4].

Hypothesis 2 (H2): The mediating role of perceived similarity

Perceived similarity plays a mediating role in the impact of brand imitation on brand evaluation. Consumers' perception of the similarity between the imitating brand and the leading brand affects their brand evaluations and purchasing decisions [5].

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The moderating role of consumer cognitive need and knowledge level

Consumer cognitive need and knowledge level will moderate the relationship between brand imitation strategies and brand evaluation. Consumers with low cognitive need and knowledge levels may have a higher acceptance and more positive evaluations of imitation brands, while those with high cognitive need and knowledge levels may be more critical of imitation brands [4].

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The quality of brand imitation will affect consumers' evaluations and preferences for the original product

Low-quality imitation may enhance consumers' evaluations of the original product, while medium-quality imitation may diminish consumers' evaluations of the original product [8].

3.1. Questionnaire Design

This study aims to explore the impact of brand imitation on consumer preferences, using luxury brands as an example and focusing on the potential effects of brand imitation behaviors on consumers' brand choices and purchasing decisions. To systematically analyze this phenomenon, this study employs a questionnaire survey method combined with quantitative analysis tools to ensure the scientific nature and reliability of the research results.

In the field of brand imitation research, the questionnaire survey method has been widely used to analyze consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards brand imitation behaviors. For example, Zhang Jing and Du Mingfei used a questionnaire survey to investigate the impact of perceived similarity on brand evaluation [5]. Sun Lei and Zhou Mei collected data through questionnaires to analyze the mechanisms through which innovative imitation affects the performance of original products [8]. These studies provide a methodological foundation for this research and validate the effectiveness of questionnaire surveys in this field.

The questionnaire design for this study is based on a logical framework that includes consumers' basic information, brand awareness, perception of brand imitation, consumer preferences, and

cognitive needs and knowledge levels, to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research questions and the collection of effective data. The following scales and variables are constructed in line with the specific objectives of this study.

3.1.1 Brand imitation type scale

This scale is designed to measure consumers' perceived differences between feature imitation and theme imitation. Feature imitation focuses on specific product design details, such as whether the appearance, functionality, and design of a product are similar to those of a luxury brand. In contrast, theme imitation focuses on the overall brand image and strategy, such as whether the brand image, market positioning, and brand story are similar to those of a luxury brand. The scale assesses consumers' attitudes through two dimensions, asking whether consumers mind if a brand is similar to a luxury brand in terms of design, functionality, appearance, brand image, market positioning, and brand story. Each question has response options of "Mind" or "Do not mind," aiming to capture consumers' acceptance of brand imitation.

3.1.2 Perceived similarity scale

This scale assesses consumers' perceptions of the similarity between the imitating brand and the leading brand. It evaluates consumers' attitudes through multiple dimensions, asking whether consumers mind if a brand is similar to a luxury brand in terms of appearance, functionality, brand image, market positioning, and pricing strategy. Each question has response options of "Mind" or "Do not mind," aiming to capture consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards brand imitation across different dimensions.

3.1.3 Cognitive need scale

This scale assesses the level of consumers' cognitive needs, that is, their demand for information processing and analysis. It evaluates consumers' attitudes through multiple dimensions, asking whether consumers would delve into the background information of a product, compare different brands, consider detailed product information important for purchase decisions, analyze the pros and cons of products, and show interest in brand history and stories. Each question has response options of "Yes" or "No," aiming to assess consumers' cognitive need levels in information processing and analysis.

3.1.4 Consumer knowledge scale

This scale assesses consumers' knowledge levels regarding relevant brands and industries. It evaluates consumers' awareness of brands through multiple dimensions, asking whether consumers are aware of the latest industry trends, familiar with the market positioning and image of brands, know the industry leaders, understand the phenomenon and impact of brand imitation, and can distinguish between different brand designs. Each question has response options of "Yes" or "No," aiming to assess consumers' knowledge levels regarding brands and industries [11].

3.1.5 Brand evaluation scale

This scale assesses consumers' overall evaluation of a brand, including brand trust, brand loyalty, and purchase intention. It evaluates consumers' attitudes through multiple dimensions, asking whether consumers trust the quality of a particular brand's products, would recommend a brand, consider a brand's products to be good value for money, recognize a brand's innovation capabilities, and approve of a brand's ethical behavior. Each question has response options of "Yes" or "No," aiming to assess consumers' overall evaluation and loyalty to a brand.

3.1.6 Brand imitation quality scale

This scale assesses consumers' perceptions of the quality of imitating brands, including design, materials, and craftsmanship. It evaluates consumers' purchase intentions towards imitating brands through multiple dimensions, asking whether consumers are more likely to purchase brands with high-quality imitation, brands with designs close to the original, brands with materials similar to the

original, brands with craftsmanship similar to the original, and brands with functionality similar to the original. Each question has response options of "Yes" or "No," aiming to assess consumers' perceptions of the quality of imitating brands and their purchase intentions.

Through these scales, this study aims to systematically analyze the impact of brand imitation on consumer preferences and explore the heterogeneity among different consumer groups.

3.2. Data Collection

The data collection for this study was primarily conducted through online questionnaires to ensure the breadth and diversity of the sample. The questionnaire was distributed via social media platforms, online survey tools, and relevant professional forums to attract consumers from different backgrounds and to ensure the representativeness of the sample. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed, and 253 valid responses were ultimately collected. The sample was widely distributed across different ages, genders, and occupations, ensuring the reliability and representativeness of the research results.

The target group for this survey was consumers who have some understanding and experience in fashion and luxury goods. The survey results show that the age distribution of respondents covered all age groups, with 10.67% under 18 years old, 32.02% between 18 and 30 years old, 32.02% between 31 and 45 years old, 20.95% between 46 and 60 years old, and 4.35% over 60 years old. In terms of gender, 33.2% were male and 66.8% were female. The sample was mainly from first-tier cities in China (40%), second-tier cities (35%), and third-tier and below cities (25%). Regarding education level, 58.5% had a bachelor's degree or above, 22.92% had an associate degree, and 18.58% had a high school degree or below. In terms of occupation, students accounted for 33.2%, corporate employees for 22.92%, civil servants or public institution employees for 21.94%, freelancers for 13.83%, and others (including retirees, homemakers, etc.) for 8.3%. Regarding income levels, 16.88% had a monthly income below 5,000 yuan, 41.11% between 5,000 and 10,000 yuan, 27.79% between 10,000 and 20,000 yuan, 7.91% between 20,000 and 50,000 yuan, and 6.32% above 50,000 yuan. Additionally, in terms of consumption habits, 64.4% of the respondents had purchased luxury or high-end fashion products in the past year, and 51.38% indicated that they frequently follow trends in fashion and luxury goods.

3.3. Data Analysis Tools

This study employs the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for data analysis. Regression analysis is used to test Hypothesis 1 (H1) to examine the direct impact of brand imitation on consumer decision-making and explore how brand imitation behaviors influence consumers' purchase decisions and brand choices. Mediation effect analysis is utilized to verify Hypothesis 2 (H2) to investigate the mediating role of perceived similarity between brand imitation and brand evaluation and to explore how consumers' perception of the similarity between imitating and leading brands affects brand evaluation and purchase decisions. Moderation effect analysis is applied to test Hypothesis 3 (H3) to analyze how consumer cognitive need and knowledge level moderate the relationship between brand imitation strategies and brand evaluation and to explore the different reactions of consumers with varying levels of cognitive need and knowledge towards brand imitation behaviors. Regression analysis is also used to test Hypothesis 4 (H4) to examine the impact of brand imitation quality on consumers' evaluation of the original product and to explore how low-quality and medium-quality imitations affect consumers' evaluations and preferences for the original product. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) is employed to compare the differences in reactions to brand imitation among different consumer groups (such as different ages, genders, and knowledge levels) and to analyze whether there are significant differences in the perception and evaluation of brand imitation behaviors among different consumer groups.

As shown in Table 1, the hypotheses of this study, along with the corresponding measurement scales and references, are as follows:

Table 1. Hypotheses and Measurement Scales

Hypothesis	Description	Measurement Scale	Reference
H1: The impact of brand imitation type on consumer decision-making	Consumers with low cognitive needs and knowledge levels may have higher brand evaluations and purchase intentions for feature imitation brands, while those with high cognitive needs and knowledge levels may hold critical attitudes.	Brand Imitation Type Scale (Feature Imitation and Theme Imitation)	Li Ming and Wang Hong [3]
H2: The mediating role of perceived similarity	Perceived similarity between imitation and leading brands may influence consumers' brand evaluations and purchase decisions.	Perceived Similarity Scale	Zhang Jing and Du Mingfei [5]
H3: The moderating role of consumer cognitive needs and knowledge levels	Consumers' cognitive needs and knowledge levels may moderate the relationship between brand imitation strategies and brand evaluations.	Cognitive Need Scale and Consumer Knowledge Scale	Li Ming and Wang Hong [3]
H4: The impact of brand imitation quality on original product evaluation	Low-quality imitations may enhance consumers' evaluations of original products, while medium-quality imitations may diminish them.	Brand Imitation Quality Scale	Sun Lei and Zhou Mei [8]

4. Research Results

4.1. Impact of Brand Imitation on Consumer Decision-Making

According to the results of the linear regression analysis, brand imitation has a significant negative impact on consumer decision-making ($B = -0.156$, $t = -2.219$, $p = 0.027 < 0.05$). The model's R^2 value is 0.019, indicating that brand imitation can explain 1.9% of the variance in consumer decision-making. Specifically, the regression coefficient for brand imitation is -0.156, suggesting that higher levels of brand imitation are associated with lower willingness to make purchase decisions.

4.2. Mediating Role of Perceived Similarity

The results of the mediation effect analysis show that perceived similarity plays a significant mediating role between brand imitation and brand evaluation. The specific paths are as follows:

Brand imitation has a significant positive impact on perceived similarity ($B = 0.204$, $t = 3.842$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$).

Perceived similarity has a significant positive impact on brand evaluation ($B = 0.333$, $t = 6.161$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$).

The total effect of brand imitation on brand evaluation is 0.204 ($p = 0.000 < 0.01$). After including perceived similarity, the direct effect is 0.261 ($p = 0.000 < 0.01$), and the mediating effect is -0.057 ($p = 0.040 < 0.05$).

4.3. Moderating Role of Consumer Cognitive Need

The results of the moderation effect analysis indicate that consumer cognitive need significantly moderates the relationship between brand imitation and consumer decision-making. The specific paths are as follows:

The main effect of brand imitation on consumer decision-making is -0.275 ($t = -4.173$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$).

Consumer cognitive need has a significant positive impact on consumer decision-making ($B = 0.499$, $t = 5.117$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$).

The interaction term between brand imitation and consumer cognitive need has a significant positive impact on consumer decision-making ($B = 0.165$, $t = 3.610$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of cognitive need reduce the negative impact of brand imitation on consumer decision-making.

4.4. Moderating Role of Consumer Knowledge

The results of the moderation effect analysis show that consumer knowledge does not significantly moderate the relationship between brand imitation and consumer decision-making. The specific paths are as follows:

The main effect of brand imitation on consumer decision-making is -0.224 ($t = -3.346$, $p = 0.001 < 0.01$).

Consumer knowledge has a significant positive impact on consumer decision-making ($B = 0.437$, $t = 6.099$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$).

The interaction term between brand imitation and consumer knowledge has no significant impact on consumer decision-making ($B = 0.003$, $t = 0.093$, $p = 0.926 > 0.05$), indicating that consumer knowledge levels do not moderate the relationship between brand imitation and consumer decision-making.

4.5. Direct Impact of Brand Imitation on Brand Evaluation

The results of the linear regression analysis indicate that brand imitation has a significant positive impact on brand evaluation ($B = 0.204$, $t = 3.842$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$). The model's R^2 value is 0.056, suggesting that brand imitation can explain 5.6% of the variance in brand evaluation.

5. Discussion

5.1. Negative Impact of Brand Imitation on Consumer Decision-Making

The study results show that brand imitation has a significant negative impact on consumer decision-making ($B = -0.156$, $t = -2.219$, $p = 0.027 < 0.05$). This indicates that when consumers perceive brand imitation behavior, their willingness to purchase is significantly reduced. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the luxury goods market, where consumers typically have high expectations for brand uniqueness and originality. Brand imitation may be perceived as a dilution of brand value, thereby triggering negative emotions and purchase resistance among consumers.

5.2. Mediating Role of Perceived Similarity

Perceived similarity plays a significant mediating role between brand imitation and brand evaluation. Specifically, brand imitation significantly increases consumers' perception of similarity between the imitating brand and the leading brand ($B = 0.204$, $t = 3.842$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), and this perceived similarity, in turn, significantly enhances consumers' evaluation of the brand ($B = 0.333$, $t = 6.161$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$). This suggests that consumers' perception of similarity between the imitating and leading brands may temporarily boost the evaluation of the imitating brand through a brand transfer effect. However, this enhancement may be short-lived, as consumers' negative perceptions of brand imitation behavior could have a long-term impact on their brand loyalty.

5.2.1 Moderating role of consumer cognitive need

Consumer cognitive need significantly moderates the relationship between brand imitation and consumer decision-making. Specifically, the main effect of brand imitation on consumer decision-making is -0.275 ($t = -4.173$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), while consumer cognitive need has a significant positive impact on consumer decision-making ($B = 0.499$, $t = 5.117$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$). The interaction term between brand imitation and consumer cognitive need has a significant positive impact on

consumer decision-making ($B = 0.165$, $t = 3.610$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$), indicating that higher levels of cognitive need reduce the negative impact of brand imitation on consumer decision-making. This suggests that consumers with higher cognitive needs are more likely to analyze brand information in depth, thereby showing greater tolerance for brand imitation behavior.

5.2.2 Moderating role of consumer knowledge

Consumer knowledge does not significantly moderate the relationship between brand imitation and consumer decision-making. Specifically, the main effect of brand imitation on consumer decision-making is -0.224 ($t = -3.346$, $p = 0.001 < 0.01$), while consumer knowledge has a significant positive impact on consumer decision-making ($B = 0.437$, $t = 6.099$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$). However, the interaction term between brand imitation and consumer knowledge has no significant impact on consumer decision-making ($B = 0.003$, $t = 0.093$, $p = 0.926 > 0.05$), indicating that consumer knowledge levels do not moderate the relationship between brand imitation and consumer decision-making. This suggests that consumers' knowledge levels have little impact on their sensitivity to brand imitation behavior.

5.3. Positive Impact of Brand Imitation on Brand Evaluation

The study results also show that brand imitation has a significant positive impact on brand evaluation ($B = 0.204$, $t = 3.842$, $p = 0.000 < 0.01$). This indicates that brand imitation behavior can enhance consumers' evaluation of a brand to some extent. This may be because brand imitation can temporarily boost consumers' cognitive and emotional connection to the brand through perceived similarity, thereby improving brand evaluation. However, this enhancement may be short-lived, as consumers' negative perceptions of brand imitation behavior could have a long-term impact on their brand loyalty.

6. Conclusion

Brand imitation has a negative impact on consumer decision-making. The significant negative effect of brand imitation on consumer decision-making indicates that the higher the degree of brand imitation, the lower the consumer's willingness to make purchase decisions. Perceived similarity plays a significant mediating role between brand imitation and brand evaluation. Brand imitation significantly increases consumers' perception of similarity between the imitating brand and the leading brand, and this perceived similarity, in turn, significantly enhances consumers' evaluation of the brand. Consumer cognitive need significantly moderates the relationship between brand imitation and consumer decision-making. The higher the level of cognitive need, the smaller the negative impact of brand imitation on consumer decision-making. However, consumer knowledge does not significantly moderate the relationship between brand imitation and consumer decision-making. Brand imitation has a significant positive impact on brand evaluation, indicating that brand imitation behavior can enhance consumers' evaluation of a brand to some extent.

This study provides important theoretical and practical guidance for brand managers. The results show that brand imitation behavior has a significant impact on consumer preferences, especially in the luxury goods market, where consumers have high expectations for brand uniqueness and originality. Brand managers need to consider consumer cognitive characteristics and brand ethics comprehensively when formulating imitation strategies to achieve a balance between market benefits and brand image. In addition, this study reveals the important roles of perceived similarity and consumer cognitive need in the impact of brand imitation, offering specific strategic suggestions for brand managers. Future research can further explore the impact of brand imitation in different cultural contexts and the evolution of imitation strategies under the trends of digitalization and globalization. For example, it could investigate the differences in consumers' perceptions and reactions to brand imitation behavior across different cultures and how cultural factors influence the effectiveness of brand imitation strategies; or study how brand imitation affects consumers' online purchasing behavior and brand loyalty in the context of digitalization and globalization. Additionally, future

research could explore the impact of brand imitation behavior on brand partners, suppliers, and other stakeholders, as well as how to achieve win-win outcomes through multi-party cooperation.

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