

Research Paper

## Am I Worthy of What I Achieve? Imposter Syndrome and its Relationship with Self-Esteem in Indian Adolescents

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### ABSTRACT

With the advent of extreme social media usage, it is observed how adolescents encounter difficulties in forming their identities. This is the stage where they are developing their self-concept and finding answers to questions such as- Who am I? While they are involved in several activities of their interests including academics, it has been observed that they often question their capabilities, compare themselves with others and develop doubts about their achievements. The present study has focused on a very well-defined concept of Imposter syndrome and how it is related to the self-esteem of adolescents. Clance IP Scale and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale has been used to assess the imposter syndrome and self-esteem of 105 Indian adolescents. The sample belonged to Delhi NCR, India. Participants in the present study were contacted through a snowball sampling technique and data was collected using Google forms. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used as an analytical strategy to examine the relationship between the two variables. Results did not reveal a significant relationship between imposter syndrome and self-esteem. However, it is observed that the relationship moves towards a positive direction, contradicting previous literature suggesting a negative relationship.

**Keywords:** *Imposter Syndrome, Self-Esteem, Indian adolescents, Clance IP scale*

Adolescence is a significant phase of one's life. During the transition from childhood to adolescence, there are major changes that an individual experiences which not only include the physical development, but the psycho-social aspects of development holding eminent importance. As stated by Erik Erikson, this is the stage when a psycho-social conflict of identity vs role confusion takes place. This is the time when adolescents explore about their identities and develop a concept of self. In the contemporary world, social media has become the primary source of socialization. This is heavily impacting the psycho-social development of adolescents as well (de Freitas et al., 2021). This is ultimately leading to poor development of self-concept (Sponcil et al., 2013). Individuals who are not able to find an identity for themselves while being confused about their self-concept develop extreme level of self-doubt and low self-esteem. Therefore, there is an urgent need to study this population on various related factors. The present study focuses on imposter syndrome and self-esteem amongst adolescents in the India setting.

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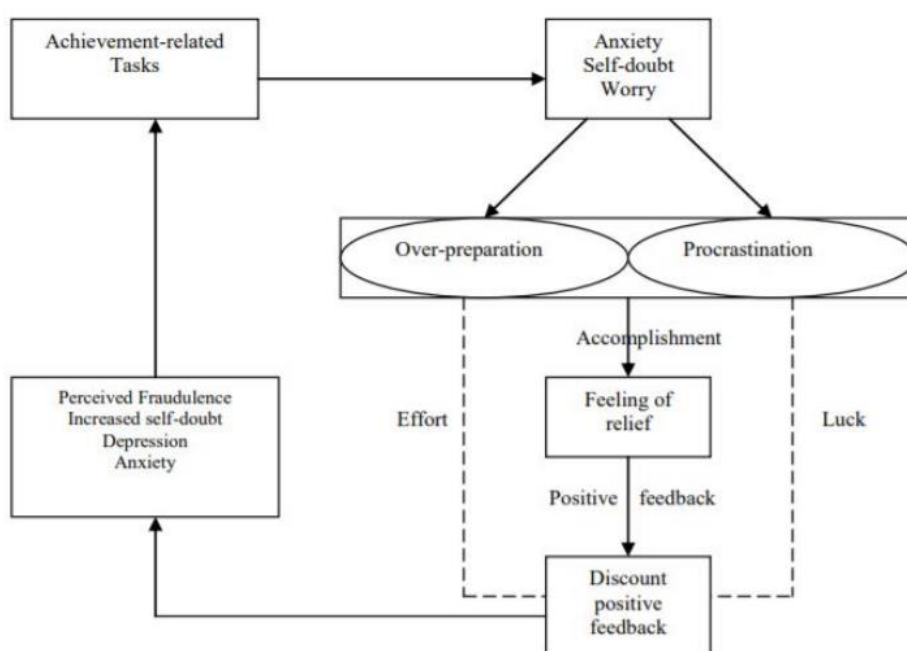
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The psychological literature has looked into impostor syndrome in great detail. The phrase is equivalent to fraud syndrome or the impostor phenomenon. According to Clance (1985), there appears to be a psychological pattern in which people have self-doubt about their achievements and a recurring, internalized fear of being revealed as "frauds." Two clinical psychologists, Clance PR and Imes SA, are credited with coining the phrase "*imposter syndrome*" originally. According to one's professional or academic achievements and credentials, they are objectively regarded as capable and competent, but they still feel inadequacy and lack confidence in their own abilities; this phenomenon is known as *intraindividual* (Clance and Imes, 1978). Additionally, they believe they have deceived their surroundings about their abilities, so they fear being exposed as a fraud or impostor, once their environment has the chance to recognize their alleged incompetence (e.g., Harvey, 1981; Langford and Clance, 1993; Leary et al., 2000). Usually, they attribute success to external factors like hard work, timing, or luck (Harvey, 1981; Clance and O'Toole, 1987).

They reject praise or recognition and downplay the significance of positive evaluations or of their achievements, since they view them as undeserving. Consequently, factors like appreciation, power, and status, which are associated with success do not increase confidence in their own capabilities, but rather serve to engender fears of failure (Harvey, 1981; Clance and O'Toole, 1987). These feelings differ from general concerns about how they present themselves. The International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) does not mention impostor syndrome as a diagnosis, nor does it appear in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (APA 7). Beyond scholarly discourse, impostor syndrome has gained widespread attention, particularly in relation to professional success.

Salkulku and Alexander (2011) developed an explanatory model of impostor syndrome through their research. They named it "The Clance Imposter Cycle". The pictorial representation below explains how this cycle works.



Source: *The Clance (1985) Imposter Cycle* (Salkulku & Alexander, 2011) *International Socio-economics Library*

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When an achievement-related task is first given to them, impostors experience anxiety, self-doubt, and/or worry. They may overplan or put off finishing the task. After finishing it, they experience a brief wave of relief, but they also discount any positive feedback and attribute their success to chance or hard work. Eventually, this relief wears off, and impostors start to feel like frauds, doubt who they are, and may even experience anxiety or depression. The cycle repeats.

Impostor syndrome is said to be a reaction that many people have to circumstances that make them feel inadequate or deceitful. Evidence does not support impostor syndrome as a unique personality feature, but certain individuals may be more prone to these feelings and experience them more intensely (Imes, 1978; Gediman, 1985; Harvey, 1981; Harvey & Katz, 1985). Despite their apparent achievements, many high achievers may secretly feel like imposters or frauds, as suggested by research (American Psychological Association).

People who fail to internalize their successes are said to have a subjective perception of intellectual phoniness, which is known as perceived fraudulence. Clance and Imes (1978) proposed that this phenomenon is partly caused by incorrect attribution processes. While individuals experiencing perceived fraudulence do not fit into a single diagnostic category or represent a singular psychological syndrome, common clinical symptoms include generalized anxiety, lack of self-confidence, depression, and frustration stemming from self-imposed standards or expectations (Clance & Imes, 1978)

Several studies have been conducted worldwide to study the concept. Research in the field revealed correlation of imposter syndrome with a wide range of factors. Out of many variables, self-esteem has been found to be one of the most significant factors to explain imposter syndrome. The term is essentially the opinion or judgment individuals hold about themselves. It is a person's level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with oneself and the extent to which one perceives themselves to be a capable and worthy human being (Coopersmith, 1967). Self-esteem is the subjective evaluation of a person's overall sense of self-worth such as one's emotions, beliefs, competencies, appearance and behavior. The idea that imposters typically have low self-esteem would seem to fit with many of their defining beliefs and actions, for instance, their tendency to make negative comments about themselves and to dread and avoid criticism.

Landford and Clance (1993) have suggested that the "imposter phenomenon is a result of seeking self-esteem by trying to live up to an idealized image to compensate for feelings of insecurity and self-doubt". As evidenced by a number of correlational findings, a clear link between the imposter phenomenon and low-self-esteem exists (e.g. Chrisman et al., 1995; Cozarelli & Major, 1990; Topping & Kimmel, 1985; Ross & Krukowski, 2003; Sonnack & Towell, 2001).

In the Indian setting, there are a few studies that made an attempt to explore the phenomenon. Mascarenhas, D'Souza, and Bicholkar (2018) investigated the prevalence of imposter syndrome and its relationship to self-esteem in their study work titled Prevalence of impostor phenomena and its association with self-esteem among medical interns in Goa, India. It was a cross-sectional study employing the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale and the Clance IP scale, carried out on 150 medical interns in Goa. A noteworthy proportion of interns in medicine were discovered to have low self-esteem and high imposter phenomenon levels. Sleep was discovered to be strongly connected with imposter traits, suggesting a

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relationship between deviant sleep habits and emotions of dishonesty. People with higher IP traits had decreased confidence and self-worth, and vice versa, according to a strong inverse relationship between imposter phenomenon and self-esteem. Minimal Characteristics of the imposter phenomenon and a strong feeling of one's own value are advantageous to efficient clinical procedures.

Conversely, too, one may argue that the imposter's intense desire to succeed is not a sign of a person who lacks self-worth in general. Considering how driven imposters appear to be, it makes sense to assume that they at least partially believe in their own skills. The question of whether imposters typically hold themselves in high or low regard—that is, whether they have high or low self-esteem—has been the exclusive focus of research on the imposter phenomenon to date.

Imposter syndrome has been extensively studied, and the results show that it is strongly connected with a number of variables.

Recent literature suggests that imposters are more likely to experience anxiety, depression and low self-esteem (e.g., Rohrmann et al., 2016; Schubert & Bowker, 2019; Wang et al., 2019). Global contingent self-worth was found to be connected with the Psychopathology Questionnaire's anxiety and depression scores in another study involving teenagers (Bos, Huijding, Muris, Vogel & Biesheuvel, 2010). Given that every action or activity has a direct and substantial impact on one's self-esteem, it makes sense that contingent self-worth would result in increased daily pressure. It would undoubtedly become exhausting over time for self-validating aims to be so prevalent in behavioural repertoire.

It has also been shown that the impostor phenomenon has a stressful effect. There are several studies that have linked imposter phenomenon to stress, anxiety and depression across a range of populations. University students might be particularly susceptible to experiencing IP, given the focus on academic performance and the competitive nature of higher education, and researchers have therefore suggested that student mental health could be improved by IP interventions (Wang et al., 2019). Women have been predicted to be more likely than men to experience IP (Clance & Imes, 1978), given the evidence for gender differences in related measures, such as self-esteem (e.g., Zuckerman et al., 2016). A study by Cokley et al. (2015) reported that those individuals who are most aware of gender stereotypes are most likely to experience IP, which is consistent with the idea that stereotype threat can elicit IP. More generally, the experience of being in any minority group may increase the likelihood of experiencing IP (Bernard & Neblett, 2018). Studies on minority groups such as African-, Asian-, and Latino/a-American college students frequently report imposter feelings, which are significantly associated with poor psychological well-being, depression, and anxiety.

Imposter Syndrome has been explored in university students by examining its relationship with perfectionism, self-efficacy, belonging, perceived competition and happiness. (Jöstl et al., 2012 Rohrmann et al., 2016.). Legassi, Zibrowski, and Goldszmidt (2008) found a strong correlation between the imposter phenomenon and burnout among medical students undergoing residency. This suggests that individuals experiencing the imposter phenomenon may impose or perceive a higher level of stress in their pursuit of achievement. Stress levels among imposters are clearly higher than average, and there is a good chance that this is because imposters are constantly worried about how their actions or performances will be

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perceived as indicators of their ability and will affect their self-esteem. Given the facts, one may reasonably suspect that the imposters' ego-driven goal-pursuits and outcome reactivity could be explained by contingent self-worth. According to research, there is a significant inclination to seek goals to affirm one's most valued talents while dealing with the impostor phenomenon and contingent self-worth. However, doing so over time seems to lead to emotional and cognitive tiredness. This idea is further supported by King and Cooley's (1995) study on the family history of imposters, which revealed that imposters typically originate from households that place a high value on achievement. This implies that imposters might have been socialised to derive their sense of self-worth from certain qualities that their families emphasised from an early age. There is a good chance that there is a connection between the impostor phenomenon and contingent self-worth.

According to another research by Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2016), poor self-esteem, fear of success, and fear of failure are preconditions that encourage the occurrence of impostor sentiments. Impostor phenomenon was substantially correlated with omnipotent guilt, survivor guilt, and self-hatred, as would be expected. It has also been established that various types of guilt and the impostor phenomenon may cause anxiety and despair. According to this study, individuals who suffer from impostor syndrome battle with maladaptive guilt feelings associated with harmful ideas about themselves and their relationships, which tends to favour sadness and anxiety.

Imposter syndrome is thought to be more likely to strike someone with perfectionism as a personality feature (Wang et al., 2019). Three interrelated dimensions of perfectionism were examined by Hewitt and Flett (1990): socially prescribed perfectionism (perception that others have placed high and unrealistic expectations on oneself), self-oriented perfectionism (placing high standards on oneself), and other-oriented perfectionism (placing high standards on others). While perfectionism may not always result in bad things happening to a person, some components of it may be more detrimental to mental health than others (J. J. Klibert et al., 2005). "Normal" perfectionists find that aiming for perfection makes them happy, which boosts their sense of value and self-worth and makes them more capable of handling the rigors of schoolwork and extracurricular activities and eventually receive better marks in college/ school (Newman et al., 2019). Conversely, "neurotic" perfectionists are more prone to suffer from anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem, as well as eating disorders and non-suicidal self-harm (J. J. Klibert et al., 2005; Newman et al., 2019). They also feel that they never do anything well enough.

The relationship between trait perfectionism and explicit and implicit self-esteem was examined by Ziegler and Terry (2007). The researchers proposed that people with high implicit but low explicit self-esteem should engage in overt compensatory behaviours in order to develop a more consistently positive self-view. They also conjectured that higher self-reported perfectionism would be associated with poor implicit self-esteem. According to expectations, the results demonstrated that people with low discrepant self-esteem did, in fact, tend to rate themselves higher on a composite measure of maladaptive perfectionism, which included the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale's Concern over Mistakes, Parental Expectations, Parental Criticism, and Doubts about Actions subscales (Frost, Marten, Lahart & Rosenblade, 1990). Many perfectionist inclinations are also involved in the impostor phenomenon (Clance and Imes, 1978). Positive associations between them have been observed at the trait level the Perfectionistic Self Presentation Scale and the Perfectionistic Cognitions Inventory, as well as the impostor phenomenon (Ferrari and Thompson, 2006).

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Furthermore, Thompson, Foreman, and Martin (2000) discovered that those who were imposters were more likely to express worry about errors they made while completing an experiment. In fact, one of the main theories for the imposter phenomenon is perfectionism. The concept is rooted in low-discrepant self-esteem, which may also be the cause of the imposter phenomenon. Due to their similar relationships with other constructs, low-discrepant self-esteem and the imposter phenomenon have been strongly linked. Therefore, it is postulated that the impostor phenomenon will be favourably predicted by low-discrepant self-esteem (high implicit, low explicit). In other words, it is anticipated that there will be a substantial interplay between implicit and explicit self-esteem, with implicit self-esteem most favourably predicting the imposter phenomenon among individuals with low explicit self-esteem.

### *Rationale*

In the current scenario, with the advent of social media and extreme level of exposure adolescents are exposed to, there is a need to understand how are they formulating their identities. Imposter phenomenon has been extensively explored in the western culture but there lies a gap with respect to Indian population. Moreover, since there are contradictory researchers about the relationship between imposter syndrome and self-esteem, there is a need to bring clarity about how they are related in the Indian setting.

### *Objectives*

- To assess the level of self-esteem in Indian Adolescents
- To assess the level of Imposter Phenomenon in Indian adolescents
- To assess any gender differences in the scores of self-esteem and imposter phenomenon
- To examine the relationship between imposter phenomenon and self-esteem

### *Hypothesis*

1. There is a significant relationship between imposter syndrome and self esteem
2. There is a significant difference between males and females in the scores of self-esteem and imposter phenomenon.

## **METHOD**

### *Research Design*

The present is based on a correlational research design aimed at finding out a significant relationship between imposter syndrome and self-esteem.

### *Sample*

In the study using snowball sampling, 105 participants were selected through a process where initial participants were identified and asked to refer to others who met the study's criteria. The process continued, forming a chain that gradually expanded the participant pool. The sample size of 105 participants was achieved as more individuals consented to participate and were included based on recommendations from those already involved in the study.

### *Tools*

- **Clance Imposter Phenomenon Scale (IPS):** The Impostor Test was developed to help individuals determine whether or not they have IP characteristics and, if so, to

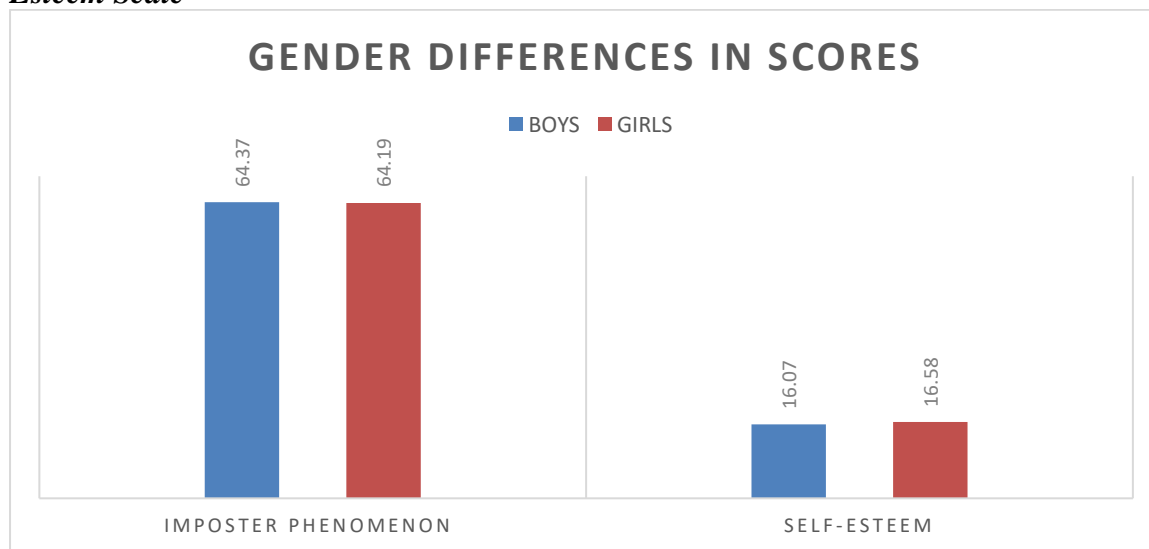
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what extent they are suffering. After taking the Impostor Test, add together the numbers of the responses to each statement. If the total score is 40 or less, the respondent has few Impostor characteristics; if the score is between 41 and 60, the respondent has moderate IP experiences; a score between 61 and 80 means the respondent frequently has Impostor feelings; and a score higher than 80 means the respondent often has intense IP experiences. The higher the score, the more frequently and seriously the Impostor Phenomenon interferes in a person's life.

- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE):** The purpose of the 10 item RSE scale is to measure self-esteem. Originally the measure was designed to measure the self-esteem of high school students. However, since its development, the scale has been used with a variety of groups including adults, with norms available for many of those groups. Scoring: As the RSE is a Guttman scale, scoring can be a little complicated. Scoring involves a method of combined ratings. Low self-esteem responses are “disagree” or “strongly disagree” on items 1, 3, 4, 7, 10, and “strongly agree” or “agree” on items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9. Two or three out of three correct responses to items 3, 7, and 9 are scored as one item. One or two out of two correct responses for items 4 and 5 are considered as a single item; items 1,8, and 10 are scored as individual items; and combined correct responses (one or two out of two) to items 2 and 6 are considered to be a single item.

### RESULTS

**Graph 1: Gender differences in the mean scores of Imposter Phenomenon Scale and Self-Esteem Scale**



The above graph represents a very clear picture of the observed difference in mean scores of Imposter Phenomenon and Self-Esteem between boys and girls. It is clearly observable that there are no major differences between boys and girls and the mean scores are approximately equal.

**Table 1: Pearson's product-moment correlation between imposter syndrome and self-esteem**

Variables	N	Mean	SD	Pearson's r
IP	105	64.28	13.33	0.129
SE	105	16.32	3.72	

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Table 1 clearly indicates that the results are not significant. Though, it can be inferred from the statistics that there is a positive correlation between Imposter syndrome and self-esteem. This result highlights that with the increase in the scores of Imposter syndrome there is also an increase in their self-esteem.

### DISCUSSION

The objectives of the study were to assess the self-esteem and imposter phenomenon in Indian adolescents, find a relationship between the two variables as well as investigate any gender differences. The hypotheses formulated by the researchers were rejected. The findings of this study reveal a nuanced relationship between imposter syndrome and self-esteem that diverges from traditional perspectives, suggesting a negative relationship. The present study revealed a positive correlation, however not significant, therefore rejecting our hypothesis. While it is commonly understood that imposter syndrome is often associated with lower self-esteem, our results indicate a positive yet weak correlation between the two constructs. This unexpected relationship suggests that individuals experiencing imposter feelings may still possess some degree of self-worth, albeit fragile.

One explanation for this phenomenon could be that people experiencing imposter syndrome are simultaneously aware of their strengths and accomplishments, which causes them to make complicated judgments about themselves. For instance, individuals may acknowledge their achievements while also feeling undeserving of them, thinking they don't deserve it or any situational factor helped them achieve that creates tension that complicates their self-esteem. This duality could explain why some participants reported higher self-esteem despite their imposter feelings.

Additionally, the weak nature of this relationship invites further exploration. It may indicate that factors such as resilience, social support, or external validation play critical roles in shaping how imposter syndrome is reflected in individuals. For some, a supportive environment could boost self-esteem, even in the face of persistent self-doubt, highlighting the importance of context in understanding these psychological constructs.

Several studies support this positive yet weak relationship. For example, Schubert and Bowker (2019) found that while imposter syndrome is generally associated with lower self-esteem, the strength of this association can vary significantly. Their research indicated that individuals with unstable self-esteem might experience imposter feelings more intensely, but those with some level of self-worth could still maintain a positive self-view despite these feelings. Similarly, Neureiter and Traut-Mattausch (2022) suggested that imposter feelings are influenced by both the fear of failure and the fear of success, which can coexist with a fragile sense of self-esteem.

All things considered, these results call into question the strict oppositionality between imposter syndrome and self-esteem. Rather, they point to a more complex interaction that needs more research. Future research should aim to identify specific factors that contribute to this positive yet weak relationship, which could provide deeper insights into how individuals understand their self-perceptions in the face of imposter feelings. Understanding this complexity could ultimately lead to more effective solutions and support strategies for those affected by imposter syndrome. Moreover, it can be said that the question of 'Am I worthy of what I achieve' can still persist in adolescents with high self-esteem since they tend to feel the sense of achievement but might also develop doubts about their authenticity.



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### *Limitations and Future suggestions*

The sample size in the study was limited and therefore we cannot generalize the results to a larger population. Since the data has been collected using google forms and the researcher did not meet the participants in person, there are higher chances of response biases in the collected data. Nevertheless, the present study provides insight into the positive relationship imposter phenomenon and self-esteem sustains, which can be used to further conduct in-depth qualitative interviews of adolescents. Moreover, school administrations can initiate interventions with the help of mental health professionals to enhance the self-esteem of adolescents as well as work towards the imposter phenomenon.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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