Corporate Social Responsibilities Washing in The Textile Industry: A Review of Causes, Consequences, and Remedy.

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Abstract

The textile industry is facing a growing issue of Corporate Social Responsibilities washing or CSR-washing, which are misleading social claims made by companies to appeal to customers' social consciousness. This review examines the causes and consequences of this practice, focusing on the holistic impact on consumers, corporations, stakeholders, and society. The analysis used various sources, including review papers, case studies, book chapters, and websites, to identify relevant publications. The study explores the concept of CSR-washing in fast fashion and its impact on society. To combat this issue, it suggests promoting transparency, accountability, and independent certification in the textile industry. The lack of research on this practice in the industry makes it difficult to understand its effects. The study emphasises the need for optimal measures to control this practice, aiming to create a sustainable and responsible fashion sector.

Keywords: CSR-washing, ethical, transparency, fast fashion, sustainability.

1. Introduction

The term Sustainability was first coined by a German forester in the 18th century, but it became popular with the birth of the contemporary environment movement in the late 1960s and 1970s (Wiersum, 1995). Sustainability refers to the optimal utilisation rate of non-renewable resources without risking the ability of future generations to fulfil their needs (Hotelling, 1931; Kuhlman & Farrington, 2010). The demand in the industrial sectors to safeguard the environment and practice social responsibility has intensified due to the policies and strategies created in the previous decade to promote sustainable development (Joung et al., 2013). In order to effectively meet sustainability standards, it is crucial to evaluate the sustainability performance of the industrial sectors (Bi, 2011). As consumers' growing awareness of such devastating impacts, the textile industry has shifted its focus on sustainability more in recent years. Among the three pillars, social sustainability is an ideal state of well-being that might be expected to occur when social, economic, and environmental interactions foster intergenerational equality and longitudinal equilibrium (Grum & Kobal Grum, 2020). It is how businesses identify and manage their impacts on people, both positive and negative. Businesses need to have good relationships and engagement with their stakeholders, such as employees, workers in the supply chain, customers, and local communities. Businesses need to proactively manage their social impacts because they can significantly impact their ability to operate. For example, if a business does not treat its employees fairly or respect human rights, it may lose its social license, which is the public's trust and acceptance. Social sustainability is also important for business growth. Businesses that are socially responsible are more likely to attract and retain customers and business partners. They are also more likely to be innovative and productive (Runhaar & Lafferty, 2009). Social sustainability is a broad concept that encompasses many different aspects of society, including social value, liability, well-being, group improvement, social capital, social support, human rights, work rights, place-making, social obligation, social equity, social skills, group diversity, and human adjustment. It is about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is based on the understanding that social, economic, and environmental issues are interconnected. Social obligation is a related concept that focuses on the specific issues that businesses and governments are responsible for addressing to achieve social sustainability. These issues include asset utilisation, pollution, consumer well-being, human rights, health and safety, product fairness, and quality. Social obligation is a conscious effort to maintain and improve human well-being and prosperity while being environmentally responsible (Grace Annapoorani, 2017).

In recent years, public concern towards the protection of social well-being has grown, which has been recognised by the pioneer brands of textile industry and focused on sustainable approaches and transparency to social issues, resulting in a noticeable growth in the ethical fashion market (Eurobarometer, 2017; Younus et al., 2024). As the textile industry is required to adopt sustainable practices, Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) initiatives aim to address the textile industry's sophisticated social challenges, ensuring an ethical outcome. CSR provides a common ground and principles for several sustainability frameworks, such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and ISO 26000, which are generally practised in the textile industry. Brandsfrom textile industry is seizing the marketing opportunity by using the consumers' sentiment on social distress by claiming their products are socially sustainable without implementing CSR initiatives for sustainable frameworks (Beyer & Arnold, 2021; Easterling et al., 1996; Schmidt & Donsbach, 2012;

Wonneberger & Matthes, 2016). This often leads to brands exploiting exaggerated, fabricated, and illusive claims of social well-being of products in order to improve brand value (Berliner & Prakash, 2015; Kangun et al., 1991; Matthes & Wonneberger, 2014). These actions are considered CSR-washing, which dilutes sustainability's true meaning and uses it as a marketable catchphrase, has not only affected consumer behaviour but also penetrated the textile sector (Apaolaza et al., 2023; Testa et al., 2021). This distortion has exacerbated the problems already present in the ecological footprint of the fashion and textile industry by contributing to the compounding problems of overproduction and overconsumption. Unintentionally, this creates a confusing environment where deceptive marketing tactics cast a shadow on genuine sustainability (Badhwar et al., 2024).

Although the phenomenon of misleading consumers about a company's ethical practice by misrepresenting CSR initiatives has been discussed in several studies, there is a research gap on its holistic impact on the textile industry alongside its challenge to distinguish because of a lack of agreed-upon nomenclature and hazy limits. Some writers, for instance, employ different terms, including "corporate hypocrisy" or "bluewashing," which encompasses not just greenwashing and bluewashing but also pinkwashing (referring to breast cancer awareness) (Lubitow & Davis, 2011; Pope & Wæraas, 2016; Wagner et al., 2009). To distinguish the issue from environmental issues, other scholars favour the term "socialwashing" (Rizzi et al., 2020). Furthermore, a number of researchers view bluewashing as a component of the broader phrase "greenwashing" rather than as a distinct tactic (Seele & Gatti, 2017).

The objective of this review is to comprehend theoretical concepts of CSR-washing in the context of the textile sector by addressing research stages, conducting a systematic review of the literature, and identifying relevant papers. To fulfil the review objective, the following research stages were addressed:
A) Identify the prevalence of research regarding CSR-washing or relevant terms as part of the study.
B) Evaluate common keywords in reviewing the literature.
C) Conduct a content analysis of the literature to analyse the practice of CSR-washing in the textile industry and its types, causes, and consequences.
D) Propose possible solutions to mitigate CSR-washing.
This study examines how theory fits with real-world actions in the textile sector, taking into account shifting laws. This review expands on existing studies and literature on CSR-washing in the textile sector, providing a more subtle perspective on current difficulties and remedies.

2. Research Methodology
2.1 Identify Research
This study used a process to conduct a systematic review of the literature and identify relevant papers by gathering the context of the literature (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). This method is effective in identifying trends, gaining knowledge and developing a review process (Köksal et al., 2017; Seuring & Gold, 2012). To narrow down the sample and confirm the relevance of selected articles, both abstract reviewing and full-body reviewing were involved. At first, abstracts of peer-reviewed articles were reviewed to identify their relevance to CSR-washing. Then, full body content was reviewed to identify its relevance to the textile industry.

2.2 Common Keywords and Methodology used
The research used a search approach to minimise the number of relevant publications. Resources used for searches include Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Scopus. The keywords used to search the relevant

publications were "greenwashing", "bluewashing", "CSR", "textile", and "fast fashion". The study analyses articles, including review papers, case studies, book chapters, and websites, on CSR-washing, their relationship to fast fashion, and sustainability in the textile sector.

2.3 Content Analysis of Literature Sample

As part of the research process, a content analysis of the selected articles was conducted to provide an overview of the main topics covered by the literature samples. The analysis of literature samples showed the practice of misleading claims of environmental and social sustainability, which includes CSR-washing (Table 1).

Authors	Key Findings
Apaolaza et al. (2023)	Greenwashing is an obstacle to purchase of sustainable clothing.
Badhwar et al. (2024)	Transparency and honesty are needed in the fashion industry's green marketing strategies. Consumer education is also important to prevent misinterpretation of green-related terms and to promote sustainable consumption practices.
Berliner & Prakash (2015)	UNGC members fare worse than non-members on costly and fundamental performance dimensions, while showing improvements only in more superficial dimensions.
Macellari et al. (2021)	More than 80% of the significant negative events related to companies from UNGC LEAD Program were not reported or were only partially reported in their sustainability reports.
Pope & Wæraas (2016)	The rarity of CSR-washing is based on perspective rather than that of fact
Rizzi et al. (2020)	Awareness campaigns and third-party verifiable standards and certifications should be considered to mitigate risks regarding "social washing".
Sailer et al. (2022)	Sustainable Black Friday campaigns may attract economically and socially concerned customers while practising greenwashing and bluewashing
Seeli & Gatti (2017)	Speculatively greenwashing is constituted in the eye of the beholder, depending on an external accusation.

Table 1. Key findings summary of literature sample.

Based on the key findings it was observed that though Corporate Social Responsibilities was a major factor in both greenwashing and bluewashing, CSR-washing itself was not addressed as an individual challenge.

To address CSR-washing in the textile industry, a conceptual framework was constructed to analyse CSR-washing in the textile industry, the drivers of practising CSR-washing, its consequences, and possible remedies to mitigate CSR-washing in global and domestic textile industries.

3. Historical Background

Any deceptive claims on the social initiatives or effects of a company, good, or procedure are referred to as "bluewashing" (Sailers et al., 2022). The problem of bluewashing was first brought up by critics with respect to the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. They accused corporations of leveraging their UN collaboration to hide their lax enforcement of labour and human rights norms (Sailer et al., 2022). The assertions of UNGC members avoiding their social obligations are supported by related research. It was found that while members only make low-cost attempts to improve in relatively superficial aspects, they do worse than non-members in critical and expensive aspects (Berliner & Prakash, 2015).

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria have emerged in response to increased transparency and accountability demands (Bromley & Powell, 2012). CSR programs typically express a company's commitment to addressing environmental and social challenges (Macellari et al., 2021). CSR programs prioritise legitimacy over economic gains (Schaltegger & Hörisch, 2017). A study found that simply demonstrating commitment increases company legitimacy (Bansal & Clelland, 2004). CSR claims are often overstated, selective, or unrealistic (Pope & Wæraas, 2016). ESG policies, like CSR, address a company's environmental effects and social responsibility activities while also considering corporate governance (Bassen & Kovács, 2020). "CSR-washing" is the practice of businesses "paying lip service" to their CSR goals instead of implementing meaningful changes to enhance their CSR performance (Berliner & Prakash, 2015). A corporation that has been CSR-washed appears more socially conscious than it actually is. CSR-washers do the bare minimum to appease detractors, advocacy organisations, and social media platforms because they believe that corporate social responsibility is the domain of the public relations division (de Faro Adamson & Andrew, 2008).

Cause-related marketing (CRM) is a common way that social appeals are used in advertising. CRM is the practice of allocating a portion of product sales revenue to charity organisations (Christofi et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2012). The best outcomes from this approach are obtained when companies exhibit sustained dedication to nonprofits. Furthermore, brands run the danger of losing credibility if the donated amount is out of proportion to the purchase price (Sailer et al., 2022). However, although important aspects like labour and human rights are usually overlooked, CRM is commonly utilised to improve business social images. CRM is then utilised to aim at CSR-washing.

The Social Life Cycle Assessment (S-LCA) is an important tool for evaluating and improving a company's social and environmental effects, but it may also be used to encourage CSR-washing (Herrera Almanza & Corona, 2020). Companies may selectively disclose only the positive social impacts discovered by S-LCA, while ignoring negative results. This presents an inaccurate image of their total social performance. Companies may overestimate the significance of tiny social benefits found by S-LCA and use them to make unsupported claims about their social responsibility. Companies may also undertake S-LCAs without disclosing the complete methodology, data, and outcomes to the public. This lack of transparency makes it impossible to determine the authenticity and trustworthiness of their statements. Finally,

companies may prioritise small social issues highlighted by S-LCA while ignoring more major social and environmental implications across their value chain.

4. Conceptual Framework to identify CSR-washing

A framework can be constructed based on the key elements of CSR-washing, including corporate actions, communication and marketing, and stakeholder perception, to identify CSR-washing. Corporate Actions encompass analysing a company's true environmental and societal impact, such as its carbon footprint, waste management, labour practices, and community involvement. Also, examine specific CSR initiatives. Communication and Marketing include analysing the company's communication strategies to comprehend how it presents its CSR activities to the public, as well as scrutinising the specific strategy to promote CSR initiatives for potential exaggerations, misleading statements, or selective information presentation. Stakeholder Perception examines a company's interactions with multiple stakeholders, such as employees, customers, investors, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), to better understand their perspectives on the company's corporate social responsibility performance.

There are numerous techniques available for analysing CSR-washing within this framework. Assessing the company's CSR activities against independent third-party audits and certifications to determine the legitimacy of its claims. Comparing the company's CSR performance and communication to industry standards and established standards to discover areas for development and the possibility of CSR-washing. Tracking social media interactions and online reviews to gain insight into the general consensus of the company's CSR programs and detect any issues or critiques. Interviews with important stakeholders, such as employees, customers, investors, and NGOs, are conducted to get feedback on the company's CSR activity and identify any issues or critiques (Figure 1).
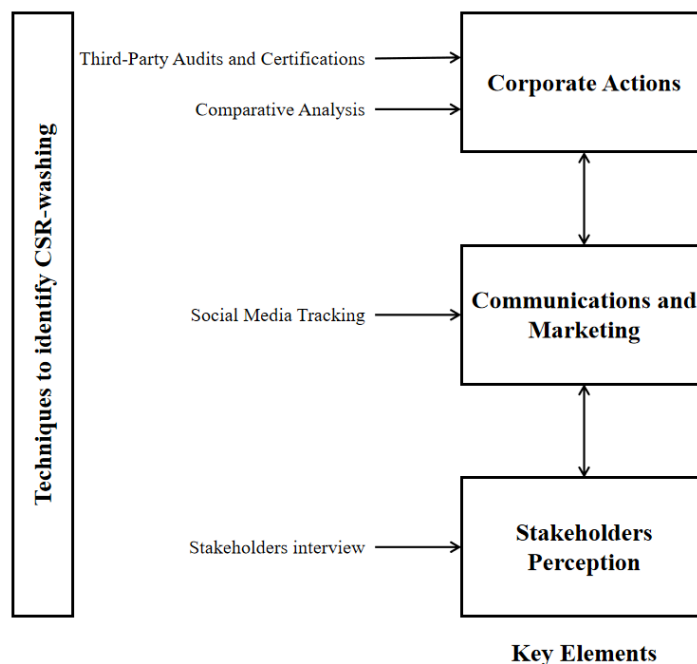

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework to identify CSR-washing

Source: Author's elaboration

4.1 Common Methods of CSR-washing

Many fashion brands exercise some common CSR-washing methods. Selective reporting leads textile industries to produce portrayals that may include a few positives that they intend to highlight while concealing bigger unethical actions. For example, they may claim to be donating a few pennies to charity while continuing to violate labour laws. A misleading collaboration with renowned social organisations can provide the impression that the company is ethical. Many firms use these organisations for public relations, although they do not always adhere to their criteria. It was stated that by affiliating with organisations such as the UN Global Compact (UNGC), many brands have attempted to create an ethical veneer while making no meaningful improvements to its negative effect. Vague claims lead to broad and ungenerous assertions regarding social responsibility, such as saying that the corporation is concerned about 'just treatment of workers' but fails to submit evidence of their social compliance criteria ("What is Bluewashing? (2024)," 2024).

5. Causes of CSR-washing

5.1 Government rules & regulations

In many countries, there are weak regulations and enforcement mechanisms to hold companies accountable for their sustainability claims. This allows companies to get away with misleading marketing practices (Mishra, 2023).

5.2 Consumer demand

Consumers are increasingly aware of environmental and social issues, leading to a growing demand for sustainable fashion. However, many consumers lack the knowledge and tools to critically evaluate sustainability claims and identify CSR-washing. This makes it easier for companies to deceive consumers and exploit it as an opportunity for CSR washing (Hartmann, 2018; Newman & Bartels, 2011).

5.3 Lack of transparency

The textile industry is notoriously opaque, with complex supply chains that make it difficult to track the origin of materials and the working conditions of labourers, suffering from low salaries, involuntary overtime, inconsistent hours, and poor safety conditions (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019; Wills & Hale, 2005). This lack of transparency allows companies to make misleading claims about their sustainability practices. Brands often use vague and misleading marketing claims to promote their products as sustainable without providing concrete evidence to support their claims. This can include using terms like "eco-friendly", "sustainable" or "ethical" without specific definitions or certifications.

5.4 Focusing on a single pillar of sustainability

Some companies may focus on one aspect of sustainability, such as using recycled materials or environmental impact, while neglecting other important factors like fair labour practices (Morelli, 2011). Implementing truly sustainable practices can be costly and complex, especially for smaller companies. This can create a barrier for some companies to adopt sustainable practices, leading them to resort to CSR-washing instead.

6. Consequence of CSR-washing in the textile industry

CSR-washing businesses trick consumers who desire to make an ethical choice by purchasing sustainable products that are not. This manipulation of consumers' goodwill is not only dishonest to customers, but it is also harmful to societal progress toward a better future. Many fast-fashion manufacturers promote the utilisation of 'sustainable' fabrics and production practices, but they continue to use processes that are harmful to the environment and workers. As a result, CSR-washing undermines the credibility of companies and brands. When consumers discover that a company is engaging in mere hype or outright lying about its sustainability, they lose faith in even genuine environmentally friendly businesses ("What is Bluewashing? (2024)," 2024).

CSR-washing has led the textile sector to invest in items that violated alleged public pledges to human rights. CSR-washing also involves intentional or irresponsible misrepresentation, illegal business activities, and deceptive advertising regarding working conditions in various pioneer textile industries where it is claimed that child labour is exploited (Vladeck, 2003). Auchan, a French retail corporation, engaged in misleading marketing methods despite publicly stating that it respects workers' rights, but a clothing label marketed by the company was discovered in the ruins of the Rana Plaza building collapse, which killed over 1,100 textile workers (Turnbull et al., 2023).

Overall, falsely claiming a product or process in the textile sector socially conscious or socially sustainable results in hindrances in achieving sustainability and disrupting the social pillar of sustainability, which disrupts the other pillars of sustainability as well. Eventually, CSR-washing can undermine the efforts of companies that are genuinely committed to sustainability, as it can create confusion and scepticism among consumers ("What is Bluewashing? (2024)," 2024).

6.1 Practice of CSR-washing by fashion giants

In 2021KnowTheChain benchmark evaluated the efforts of the 37 largest global apparel and footwear companies and discovered that luxury brands such as Kering and LVMH, as well as budget retailers Amazon and Walmart, are among the worst performers when it comes to addressing human rights exploitation in supply chains—clearly, a higher price tag does not guarantee better transparency and respect for workers' rights. Almost all companies (97%) declare a supplier code of conduct that forbids forced labour and a supplier monitoring system. However, they are ineffective in combating forced labour or providing worker remedies (*2021 KnowTheChain Apparel & Footwear Benchmark*, 2021). H&M, Calvin Klein, Gap, Nike, Adidas, Shien, and Tommy Hilfiger have all been accused of links to Uighur slave labour, either at the source or in factories. China is the world's greatest cotton grower, with about 84% of its cotton coming from the Xinjiang area, home to the Uighur people. Xinjiang is a major supplier of cotton for global fashion firms. According to a consortium of over 180 human rights organisations, one in every five cotton products sold around the world contains charges of forced labour (Mishra, 2023).

7. How to tackle CSR-washing

7.1 Regulatory frameworks and standards

The fast fashion industry requires stronger rules and enforcement measures in the fast fashion business to address CSR-washing. In fact, governments and authorities in many countries are beginning to make a greater impact by enacting laws to improve the transparency of corporate social responsibility claims.

7.2 Third-party verification

To combat CSR-washing in the fast fashion business, it's crucial to develop independent certification methods tailored to the sector. Certification systems must meet rigorous standards and be endorsed by reputable third-party organisations with experience in sustainability and ethical practices. Certification programs in the fast fashion sector help prevent CSR-washing by requiring companies to achieve sustainability requirements and prove their impact. Independent credentials help customers make educated decisions and support businesses committed to openness and ethics. They urge fashion firms to improve sustainability and lessen their environmental impact. Certifications encourage responsible behaviour and promote positive change in the sector. Implementing extensive certification schemes builds trust and encourages customers to support brands that correspond with their beliefs.

7.3 Transparent supply chain

Transparency in the supply chain refers to disclosing and making visible the entire manufacturing process, from raw material sourcing to distribution and retail. This transparency enables customers and stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the environmental and social implications of each stage in the supply chain. Brands should prioritise revealing supply chain information, such as factory locations, labour standards, and environmental practices. Implementing independent audits and certifications, such as those offered by the Fair Wear Foundation or the Sustainable Apparel Coalition, can improve openness and accountability to mitigate CSR-washing.

7.4 Consumer empowering

From the customer's perspective, prevention should begin with an understanding of what it is. Empowering consumers with knowledge enables them to make informed judgments and evaluate the larger ramifications of their fashion choices (Cheeseman, 2016). Furthermore, educating consumers about the environmental and social consequences of their shopping habits allows them to recognise and CSR-washing, and promote truly sustainable firms. This may cause a shift in consumer behaviour, with a growing desire for ecological and ethical fashion. As demand grows, brands are driven to modify their operations and provide more sustainable solutions, resulting in positive industry transformation (Cheeseman, 2016). Governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and industry groups can conduct public awareness campaigns to educate consumers about CSR-washing techniques and provide guidance on how to recognise and avoid them. These campaigns can use a variety of platforms, including social media, commercials, and events, to reach a diverse audience and promote sustainable consumption. Brands should take proactive steps to increase transparency and educate customers about their sustainable initiatives. This may involve disclosing thorough information about their supplier chain, sourcing procedures, environmental certifications, and social responsibility activities. Furthermore, organising events, workshops, and seminars about sustainable fashion can assist increase consumer awareness. These events may include conversations about the environmental impact of rapid fashion, ethical production methods, and sustainable alternatives to identify and CSR-washing.

Online platforms can provide real-time information on a product's sustainability credentials, allowing shoppers to make more educated purchasing decisions. Furthermore, social media and online forums can encourage information exchange and awareness campaigns, allowing consumers to participate in debates and advocate for sustainable practices. Social media serves as the major medium for obtaining information and provides a great potential for companies and individuals to harness their influence in creating

awareness and achieving recognition of CSR-washing practices, especially given the significant flood of internet users (Bennetta & Oeppen Hill, 2022).

8. Challenges in addressing CSR-washing

One major obstacle in conducting this study was the lack of research regarding practice of CSR-washing in the textile industry as many scholars considered CSR-washing as a form of greenwashing or bluewashing rather than addressing it as an individual issue. The study individualised CSR-washing as an act of lip servicing rather than taking initiatives to enhance company's CSR performance. While greenwashing indicates the practice of misleading claims of environmental sustainability, this practice may not include CSR despite the interconnectivity of environmental and social sustainability. Similarly, the practice of bluewashing accounts for the misrepresentation of social sustainability claims which is a broader category than CSR. As there are several social sustainability framework practices besides Corporate Social Responsibilities. Hence, the practice of CSR-washing also indicates bluewashing, but the practice of bluewashing may not always indicate CSR-washing. So it is important to warrant CSR-washing in a distinct category of analysis.

9. Conclusion

The study addresses CSR-washing in the textile industry as a distinct practice by disclosing the gaps in literature reviews, as CSR-washing is often shadowed by practices like greenwashing and bluewashing. It demonstrates how CSR-washing is a deceptive strategy that obstructs achieving sustainability and can have serious effects on organisations, consumers, and society. The study concludes that increasing consumer demands, immature legislative frameworks such as reluctance to implement labour laws and environmental regulation, lack of transparency and accountability, regulatory gaps in host nations, and ignoring the holistic concept of sustainability can lead to the practice of CSR-washing in the textile industry. It involves corporations claiming to respect fair labour rules while exploiting workers through low wages, long hours, and hazardous working conditions. The textile industries may focus on environmental sustainability while ignoring labour rights violations, exaggerating performance, engaging in harmful activities, and employing deceptive marketing strategies. The study proposes that consumers may boycott fashion brands that practice CSR-washing, resulting in financial losses and brand damage. It also suggests developing a regulatory framework to identify CSR-washing and implement transparency in their policies. While purposeful CSR-washing may damage the social pillars of sustainability, it can also raise consumer awareness and lead to more sustainable fashion solutions. This study did not provide a further comprehensive analysis of other types of social washing and recommended policies for governments or the textile industry organisations to take actions against the practice of CSR-washing. Further research is required on the mentioned fields.

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