

A CASE ON THE TRADITIONAL BANGLADESHI CUISINE BRAND - *HAJI BIRYANI*

Mubina Khondkar

Professor, Department of Marketing, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Critics often say that food shops and restaurants open and close in the blink of an eye – however, a familiar traditional Bangladeshi food brand, Haji Biryani, has been able to hold its appeal to the connoisseur of this country for a prolonged period since 1939. Haji Biryani is in no way the most monetarily profitable one and it definitely lost a large portion of its market share due to cut-throat competition and lack of organized expansion. Despite this, it is the first restaurant to introduce biryani to the consumers of the then East Bengal. In a way it seems to have always existed to the population of Bangladesh, thus, instilling itself into Bangladeshi culture and its tradition. This paper explores and presents the case of Haji Biryani as a brand. It is based on the findings of an empirical marketing research. This study uses descriptive research as it attempts to expand the boundaries of knowledge on consumers' attitude and preferences towards Haji Biryani. This paper is a case study on Haji Biryani as a local cuisine with ethnic label; and an attempt to trace its success path, as well as explains what motivates people to prefer it.

KEYWORDS: *Haji Biryani, Traditional Local Cuisine Brand, Bangladesh*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the marketing perspective of the local cuisine brand – *Haji Biryani*. This brand, in general, has received attention from academics, travel and leisure writers, and wider stakeholder groups (Mydans, 1987; Sakhawat, 2013; Siddiqua, 2014; Lonely Planet, 2018; and Trip Advisor, 2016). *Biryani* is a rice-based cuisine usually cooked with high quality rice, a wide range of spices, and meat or fish or vegetables. The method of cooking *Biryani* has changed over time and simplified. It has existed in our cuisine for a long time; however, its preference has not faded out. It is still given the highest priority while deciding the menu for a special occasion or ordering a meal in Bangladesh. It is known as a popular cuisine in other Asian countries as well - India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Middle East in particular. Asian immigrants have gradually popularized this cuisine even amongst many Europeans and Americans.

Competition in our country in all sectors is getting more severe each day and the food sector is not an exception, thus all who are in the food business are now facing cut-throat competition, as consumers have many alternatives to choose from. To successfully sustain a profitable business the marketers need to brand their products and services through an appropriate marketing strategy.

Food products, which are perceived to originate from the own region are preferred to products with an unknown Origin. Brands and labels indicating the regional origin of the product have a positive part worth. However: The regional origin of a product may be a decisive criterion in the buying process, only if the differences between

the product alternatives are low. Especially, if the competing products are strong brands, the preferences for products of the own region are expected to be less pronounced (Alvensleben, and Schrader, 1998:2).

The paper makes several contributions. The introduction section contains discussions on origin, background, purpose, and scope of the study. The second and third sections present objectives and methodology respectively. The fourth section contains the historical background of *biryani* and mostly concentrates on the *Haji Biryani* brand. The fifth section contains competition analysis. The sixth section discusses consumers' attitude and buying decision of *Haji Biryani*. The seventh section includes a brief conclusion along with a few suggested marketing strategies and opens the way to further research.

2. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are:

- To trace the history of *biryani* and identify the major types of *biryani*,
- To explore the characteristics of *Haji Biryani* for understanding the reasons why *Haji Biryani* has been able to hold consumer preference consistently since 1939 to date,
- To analyze the competition, assess the brand's current situation, its future prospects, and suggest marketing strategies.

3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is written based on the findings of a qualitative research. To understand consumers' attitude towards *Haji Biryani*, descriptive research was used to assess consumer awareness, knowledge, likings, and behavior towards this particular brand. Data was collected using the survey method. The research involved the collection and analysis of both primary and secondary data. In this study, primary data were collected from the respondents via face to face personal interview and the target population of this study was the consumers of *biryani* shops. The respondents were the consumers of *Haji Biryani* and other *biryani* shops. Data was mainly collected for the purpose of understanding consumer behavior towards a *biryani* shop. Data was also collected to be familiar with consumer's demographic and psychographic characteristics to correlate with their purchase behavior. To conduct a sample survey a questionnaire was developed and used, which included mainly closed-ended questions and a few open-ended ones. Simple random sampling method was used. The sample survey was conducted on 100 consumers of the different *biryani* shops in Dhaka and respondents included businessmen, service holders, students of different colleges and universities as they are the regular consumer of *biryani*. Secondary data were also explored, collected and reviewed to prepare the research design and to achieve the research objectives.

4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BIRYANI

This section presents a brief description of *biryani*, its history, popular types of *biryani* and then introduces the *Haji Biryani*.

4.1. Description of Biryani

Biryani is an exotic rice-based food item made with spices, rice, meat and/or vegetables. The spices and

condiments used in *biryani* may include but are not limited to ghee, onions, peas, beans, cumin, cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, bay leaves, coriander, mint leaves, chili or paprika, ginger, and garlic. Premium varieties of *biryani* use saffron and other specialty spices. In non-vegetarian *biryani*, main ingredient that accompanies rice, potato and spices is meat (mutton, beef, pork, chicken, lamb) or shrimp. Often it is served with *borhani*; *dahi chutney*, *alobukhara chutney* or *raita*; chicken or beef curry; a sour dish of eggplant or a boiled egg.

4.2. History of Biryani

The name *biryani* is derived from the Persian word 'Beryā(n)' or 'Birian' that means 'fried' or 'roasted'. Local variants of this dish are not only popular in South Asia but also in the Middle East. *Biryani* might have originated in Persia and/or Arabia and probably has taken couple of different routes to arrive in India. It was brought to Bangladesh by Muslim travelers and merchants. People came to this conclusion about the origin of *biryani* mainly based on its name and the cooking style (*Dum*). Its history became clearer during the 19th century. During the Mughal Empire, Lucknow was known as *Awadh*, giving rise to *Awadhi Biryani*. Calcutta *Biryani* originated in Calcutta during the period of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah in 1856. Aurangzeb installed Nizam-ul-mulk as the Asfa Jahi ruler of Hyderabad, as well as a Nawab of *Arcot* to oversee *Aaru Kaadu* region in south of Hyderabad. These moves gave rise to *Hyderabadi Biryani* and *Arcot Biryani*. *Biryani* was introduced in Mysore by Tipu Sultan of Carnatic. Originally it was a royal dish for Nawabs and Nizams. They hired vegetarian Hindus who eventually developed *Tahiri Biryani*, which became one of the most famous as well as delicious types of *biryani* in India. One legend about *biryani* is that Timur, the founder of the Timurid Empire, brought it from Kazakhstan via Afghanistan to Northern India. According to another legend, Mumtaz Mahal of Taj Mahal concocted this cuisine as a 'complete meal' to feed the army. However, it is also claimed that it actually originated in West Asia. One interesting myth is that the Nomads used to bury an earthen pot full of meat, rice and spices in a pit (a hole in the ground) and eventually that particular pot was dug up and whatever composition was found inside was called *biryani*.

4.3. Popular Types of Biryani

There are many types of *biryani* like chicken *biryani*, beef *biryani*, vegetable *biryani*, minced meat *biryani*, even fish and prawn *biryani*. It is normally rice cooked with spices and any one of the above mentioned ingredients. At first the onions are fried till they are golden brown. Then spices are added, which are these days amalgamated into one single spice called the *biryani masala*, which is normally available in shops. The other spices that are added along with the *biryani masala* are crushed ginger, crushed garlic and a bit of curry powder. Once the spices are cooked and are properly mixed together to form a paste, potatoes are added, which are cooked on low temperature. After that the meat is added along with yogurt to make it tender.

4.3.1. Lucknow (Awadhi) Biryani: Lucknow and *biryani* have an almost symbiotic relationship. The Lucknow (*Awadhi*) *Biryani* is the footprint that the Muslims of the Mughal Empire left on the eastern part of India. The *Awadhi Biryani* is also known as *Pukka Biryani* where the rice and meat are cooked separately and then layered.

4.3.2. Hyderabadi Biryani: Non-vegetarian *Hyderabadi Biryani* is savored in all parts of India and forms an integral part of Indian cuisine. The Nizam's Kitchen offers 49 kinds, which includes *biryani* made from fish, shrimp, deer and hare. The *Hyderabadi Biryani* is called the *Kaccha Biryani* where both the marinated meat and the rice are cooked together.

4.3.3. Calcutta (Kolkata) Biryani: When Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh was exiled in 1856 to Kolkata, the Calcutta (Kolkata) *Biryani* evolved from the *Lucknow* style. When the *biryani* was cooked in poorer homes in the city that could not afford meat, at least on a regular basis, the meat was replaced by potatoes. Now the use of potatoes has become a distinct feature of the Calcutta *Biryani* as an additional ingredient along with meat.

4.3.4. Iranian Biryani: In Iran, this dish is made in Isfahan with baked mutton that is stewed, then minced separately and then grilled in special small round shallow pans in the oven or over the fire.

4.3.5. Sindhi Biryani: Sindhi *Biryani* is very popular in Pakistan. It usually includes chicken and potatoes. There is also another meat free version prepared in the Punjab and northern parts of Pakistan. The dish uses usual local vegetables and offers a sour yogurt with it to cool off the stomach from the spices.

4.3.6. Kachchi Biryani: *Kachchi Biryani*, which is also known as *kachchi gosht ki biryani*, is a special preparation of *biryani* which is usually cooked with mutton and potatoes are sometimes added in. It has an elaborate process of cooking involving selection of fine spices and condiments, grinding some while keeping others intact and fresh. The term *kachchi* can be literally translated to raw as the dish is prepared from raw meat - as opposed to other forms of *biryani* where the meat is cooked separately. The meat is marinated with spices in yoghurt and put at the bottom of a cooking pot with a thick layer of fragrant long-grained basmati rice above and the ingredients covered with a lid sealed tightly with a layer of dough: a process of pressure-cooking known as *dum* (steaming over coals). The rice and the meat cook in their own steam and gradually absorb all the flavors. The rice and meat are mixed before serving. The whole affair poses a great challenge as it requires meticulous attention to time and temperature to avoid over or under-cooking the meat. Only the most seasoned cooks master this art of cooking *kachchi*. Often a boiled egg, mixed salad and *borhani* are served with this variety of *biryani*. In traditional *kachchi* preparation, saffron is an essential ingredient but often forsaken in most commercial preparations due to the exorbitant cost. This takes away much of the characteristic flavor provided by the saffron, but the coloring is often substituted using edible colors.

4.4. Haji Biryani

Haji Biryani can be categorized as a family owned business, originally initiated by Haji Mohammed Hossain, then continued by his son Haji Golam Hossain, and now run by his grandson Haji Mohammed Shahed (Mydans, 1987 and Siddiqua, 2014). The restaurant serves only one dish, the *biryani*, which is served with a yogurt drink. They usually cater to weddings and on other special occasions, but their product is also purchased in singular units by customers on a regular basis.

The popular Lonely Planet (2018) familiarizes *Haji Biryani* as follows:

An Old Dhaka institution, *Haji* only does one dish – mutton *biryani* – but does it exceedingly well. This place is tiny, so you'll almost certainly have to share a table: squeeze in, sit down and just wait for your *biryani* to arrive. Do as the locals do and drip some lime juice over it before you tuck in, then chomp on a fresh chilly in between mouthfuls.

Reviews of consumers about *Haji Biryani* are available in website of the widely accessed TripAdvisor. Martin from Malaysia, who visited *Haji Biryani* in October 2015, gave the following review:

Exquisite *biryani* that melts in your mouth. I've never tasted *biryani* as fragrant and tender as this. If you are a fan

of *biryani*, this is certainly one that you must try.

To answer a frequently asked question “What sets *Haji Biryani* apart from all other *biryanis*?” Siddiqua (2014) described *Haji Biryani* as follows:

While we have figured out that the taste, the owners' inclination to stick to the traditional recipe and the preparation, altogether make it different from any other *biryanis*, the owner and the manager say that it's the mercy of the Almighty that makes their food so delicious. The *biryani* is cooked slowly with small grains of *kataribhogh* rice mixed with small cubes of mutton; fist pressed mustard oil and their secret spices do the rest of the magic. While you wait for your food to arrive, the aroma coming from the large cooking pot will increase your appetite to the fullest. The way they serve it on a natural self-invented plate made of dried jackfruit leaves with some fresh green chilies adds an earthly essence to the dish. If you feel uncomfortable about having your meal on a leaf, ask for a plate and you will get one. There are two prerequisites to having this heavenly dish: it needs to be eaten steaming hot. And you need to munch on the chili after every two bites to spice it up a little more. Let us tell you the secret behind the amazing flavour - the whole cooking process takes place in a steaming pot, covered with *gamchha* that allows the flavor to be trapped inside.

Despite all the upsides one customer described *biryani* as "the favorite of the rich and the dream of the poor (Mydans, 1987)." Therefore, the price can be a downside of *biryani*, although *Haji Biryani* enjoys a competitive advantage on the issue of price as they offer their product at a very competitive price.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In the following two subsections, a discussion on the competition in the market with regard to *Haji Biryani* and consumers' respective attitude and buying decisions are presented.

5.1. Competition Analysis

In Bangladesh, the business environment and market for local cuisine are dynamic; the pace of change has never been faster than this. The number of competitors is increasing at an alarming rate. Due to intense competition as well as constant change in consumers' tastes and preferences, the *biryani* industry is having a hard time surviving. Amongst the clutter there are some *biryani* shops who have successfully established their brand image in the minds of the target customers. Major market shares are now captured by competitors of the brand. In Old Dhaka, the main competitors of *Haji Biryani* are *Haji Nanna Mia*, *Mamun Biryani House*, *Royal Biryani*, *Amania Biryani*, *Molla Biryani*, *Baba Sayed Biryani*, and *Dhaka Biryani*. One major competitor of *Haji Biryani* is *Nanna Mia* at Becharum Deuri of Old Dhaka. *Kachchi Biryani* and *morog polao* are their popular items. Their food is delicious and prices are also low. As both of them target the same market, they face both the direct brand and form competition. From the very beginning of its business operation till now *Haji Biryani* is offering Mutton *Kachchi* to its customers. As it is concentrating on one variety, to take the advantage, most of its competitors are offering numerous varieties like, beef *kachchi*, chicken *biryani*, beef *biryani*, beef curry etc. Now *Haji Biryani* is facing challenges in terms of varieties, number of shops, and brand image in the mind of its target customers.

There are varieties of *biryani* shops in Bangladesh, ranging from open-air road-side temporary shops to well furnished large established restaurants. Some shops can be classified as road-side shops and constitute around 65% of the

biryani sector. These small road-side *biryani* shops are visible throughout the country. Floor space of these shops ranges between 30 to 100 sq. feet; but mostly these are small. Additional food items such as *borhani*, *lassi*, soft drinks, etc. are not usually available in these shops except mineral water. These shops target and serve mainly the lower income working class segment; but sometimes they even serve the middle income segment, while they travel for official, business, or other purposes. There are some *biryani* restaurants that are mostly located in urban areas and usually target well-to-do upper class and middle class segments. There are private brands which are already renowned due to the taste of food items that they offer; as well as through their selling and advertising activities. *Haji Biryani* and its competitors fall into this category.

Two other competitors of *Haji Biryani* are Fakruddin and Subrat Ali. *Fakruddin Biryani* is one of the most renowned *biryani* shops in Dhaka city. It has expanded its business operation beyond the geographical boundaries of Bangladesh. In addition to *biryani* it has a variety of other products. Their product mix includes *Kachchi Biryani*, chicken *tandori*, *borhani*, and *alobokhara chutney*. Apart from wider product mix, they also maintain high quality of their products; charge reasonably; place conveniently with their numerous outlets; and invests in promotional activities. Due to these strengths in their marketing mix, in the *biryani* industry Fakruddin is the market leader. *Haji Biryani* also faces competition from Subrat Ali as personified orders of selected items can be placed to him, but such customization is not possible at *Haji Biryani*. Subrat Ali has no outlets; but caters to events exclusively. He receives order to cook and serve *Kachchi Biryani* and other items.

Haji Biryani also faces competition from Hotel Al-Razzaque, Kosturi, Hotel Mustakim, Dhaka Roti House, and Star Hotel and Kebab. The popular items of Hotel Mustakim include *mogoj bhaja*, *khiri kebab*, *boti kebab*, and *chaap* with *luchi* and these fresh cooked reasonably priced tasty foods are very hard to compete with. Kosturi has been providing high quality food for more than 30 years and following a style we are used to at home. They have created a unique positioning and exemplify Bangladeshi local cuisine. Their day's menu is put out depending on what is available and in season. Menu usually includes *shada bhaat*, *chingri bharta*, *ilish bharta*, *mishano shobji*, *ruhi maach dopiajee*, *chingri malaikari*, *bhetki* fish, and *paturi*. Hotel Al-Razzaque is famous for its *vuna khichuri*, *morog polao*, some varieties of *biryani*, *firni*, and *borhani*.

5.2. Consumers' Attitude and the Buying Decision

Haji Biryani is somewhat widely sparked feeding passion in Dhaka city. Those who experienced still can remember that familiar smell and the well-positioned great taste. In the following Box 1, some comments of consumers about *Haji Biryani* are given which indicates the factors that influence customer buying behavior for *Haji Biryani*.

- “The most exciting thing which you discover when you turn around a dead leaf, is *Haji Biryani*!!”
- “*Haji Biryani*, may be the second best *biryani* of our country. The way they serve with jack fruit leaf is incredible. Their tastes are good. But for last thing to add the best *biryani* is made in my home by my mother”.
- “I think *Haji Biryani* is cheap aristocratic dinner or lunch for poor people. It is one kind of ready to eat heavy meal for everyone”.
- “I ate *Haji Biryani* several times. Its taste was great. Now-a-days the taste degraded. The most interesting part is their packet. The packet is made of dried jackfruit leaves”.
- “I ate *Haji Biryani* several times; but I am confused which one was the real one! Because I got different taste different time. So, *Haji Biryani* is nothing special for me”
- “*Haji Biryani* is one of the popular *biryani* in Dhaka”.
- “It was really good many years ago. But with the changes of time, it has reduced its quality. Moreover, it has many outlets where the cook doesn’t follow the correct recipe”.
- “I have always heard about *Haji Biryani* as one of the best *biryani* in Dhaka but when I tried it recently felt that it is just like any other *biryani* in town”.
- “I think it is popular for its name rather than the taste of *biryani* and the quality of their services. I think it is over-rated and it should improve their product quality and service”.
- *Haji Biryani* is good but as we love to eat spicy food and we seek for different taste my opinion is that *Haji Biryani* has a good scope to add some ingredient to add a different taste and make it spicier”.
- “*Haji Biryani* has a traditional brand name in the field of *biryani*. I and my family consumed it for several years. But now-a-days we do not get the taste and quality as before. There are some fake shops which sell *biryani* using the name *Haji Biryani*. And we get confused about it. We want the older taste back”.
- Once it was a great dish. But over the time it became over-rated compared to other *biryani* houses in Dhaka. However, the trend of consuming *Haji Biryani* still continues and considered as one great dish”.
- “It is famous for its taste. Mainly I like it because it gives sufficient quantity of beef with rice and it uses less spice. Its taste is familiar with *biryani* prepared at home”.
- “Though I have never tasted it, but my friends from old Dhaka always push me to go to their place and enjoy *Haji Biryani*. From the tone of their voice it is clear to me that they enjoy it and buy repeatedly”.
- “I have heard about the brand *Haji Biryani*, but never had it”.
- “I am always satisfied with the taste of *Haji Biryani*”.
- “It is the most elegant traditional and popular *biryani* of our country which is now getting international recognition too”.
- “*Haji Biryani* is very renowned in Dhaka as well as in whole Bangladesh. It tastes awesome”.
- “Their service and taste give me satisfaction”.
- “The quantity of meat can be increased. And though the taste is good, it can be better”.
- “I have not tasted it. But heard about it from my friends. They describe it as a tasty one. So, I want to taste it soon”.
- “*Haji Biryani* lost its charm due to excessive dealership or branches (some of these even might be fake). Different shops mention the same name but sell different product”.
- “It is difficult to forget it’s amazing taste, if anyone taste this”.
- “*Haji Biryani* is wonderful, full of meat, cooked properly, and use less spices”.
- “I consumed *Haji Biryani* when I was a student and a bachelor. They have only one type of *biryani*, that is beef *biryani*. It is very delicious. It is comparatively nicely priced”.
- “It’s specialty is jackfruit leaf packaging. It is a historical shop. However, their quality is degrading, rice is often not properly cooked and price is also high”.
- “It is a popular dish. It is good but excessive spices often makes it heavy to digest”.

Figure 1: Consumers’ Views about Haji Biryani (Continuation)

A comprehensive study using the Trycomponent Attitude Model (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2015) shows that some segments of consumers still possess a favorable attitude towards *Haji Biryani*; and therefore they prefer to experience this brand whenever they want to enjoy *biryani*. Major parts of their attitude are formed based on the knowledge and perceptions that are acquired by them through a combination of direct experience and information they get through word of mouth communication. Consumer’s emotions or feelings about *Haji Biryani* constitute the affective component of an attitude and all these affective, cognitive, and conation aspects together explains why the consumers’ buying behavior is consistent over time since 1939. It successfully holds the consumer’s interest as well as its distinctive business image in the mind of the target consumers. The main reason for its survival is the fact that consumers have unique fascination towards

this brand and there prevails a certain notion that everyone has to try their product at least once.

However, over time, although the market size expanded tremendously, but *Haji Biryani* has failed to hold their proportionate market share as some segments of consumers started to prefer the competing *biryani* brands. Moreover, along with brand competition, winds of changes due to globalization, food habit changes, health consciousness, the popularity of fast foods, and overall changes in people's lifestyle also changed consumer's attitudes and preferences.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The contemporary Bangladeshi food system is characterized by both an unprecedented focus on home-made cuisines as well as a remarkable emerging trend of cut-throat competition among different traditional local cuisines along with the modern local and global food chain brands. Therefore, these two opposing trends are equally dominant in Bangladeshi food system. Although *Haji Biryani* is recognized and accepted as one of the heritages of old Dhaka but until now no research has been conducted on it. This research-based paper tries to shade some light on their secrets of success in business operations and to offer guidance for ensuring a better future through facing competition efficiently.

Basically the main reason for their downfall is their competitors' organized expansion and their aggressive product diversification. They have simply failed to adapt to the market changes. Therefore, to efficiently cope with the cutthroat competition, *Haji Biryani* needs to expand its business operations beyond Dhaka and also beyond the geographical boundary of the country. As this brand is now at the maturity stage of the product life cycle, it needs to effectively use marketing strategies. It is a good idea for *Haji Biryani* to maintain their original traditional menu and the leaf packaging to uphold their authenticity and originality. Thus, as a marketing strategy *Haji Biryani* should maintain the product and keep the packaging unchanged as their major unique selling proposition (USP). Major changes should be undertaken in the promotional activities through incorporating and implementing integrated marketing communication (IMC). There should be significant emphasis on advertising, personal selling, direct marketing, sales promotion, publicity, and public relations activities with increased investment. They should redesign their website, make it more user friendly and interactive, and maintain it on a regular basis. In addition to this they may start online service and home delivery service. Considering the popularity of social networking activities amongst a significant section of the population they should open and maintain a Facebook page. These sorts of web presence will provide them with the scope of the wider range of word of mouth communication. *Haji Biryani* maintain liaison with hotels, airlines, and/or various other institutions and come under agreements so that they serve it as their menu. They can exploit the emotional value that they have in people's minds and utilize it as a positioning strategy.

Haji Biryani has been a cherished delicacy for a significantly prolonged period, indicating that it must possess certain strengths as a brand. Branding Bangladesh might be possible through imaging Bangladesh as a country that can be branded through its brands and the concept of Geographical Indication (GI) can profoundly facilitate this process. (Khondkar, 2014). Along with "*Muslin*", "*Jamdani*", "*Nakshi Kantha*", *Haji Biryani* can be branded properly through acquiring and reaping the benefits of GI. Further research avenues can be to assess the appropriateness of the suggested marketing strategies and to identify possibilities of instilling the GI concept in promoting *Haji Biryani* as a local cuisine brand both locally and globally. *Haji Biryani* needs to create a space for consumers' passion towards their brand through innovative marketing strategies.

They have to push farther their already existing strong, recognizable brand name with advertising and other promotional tools; and with distinct taste alternatives.

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