Exploring the Role of Supervisors in the Psychological Well-Being of Low-Income Working Mothers

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This study explored the experience of supervisor support and identified essential supervisor support from the perspective of Malaysian low-income working mothers. A semi-structured in-depth interview following the interpretive research design was utilized. A total of 9 participants were recruited through purposive sampling and were interviewed online or by a mobile phone. The raw audio was then meticulously transcribed by the researcher using intelligent verbatim. The data was analysed using framework analysis. Participants experienced a mix of supervisor support experiences, including negative experiences such as workplace incivility, harassment, and relational conflict with supervisors, as well as positive experiences including psychological reassurance and work optimization and management. In line with the experience, participants requested support that is tangible and psychological and favours a transformational leadership style. The findings of this study will help outline training for supervisors on responsibilities, workplace issues, and employee well-being, guide in the revision and implementation of workplace policies and provide opportunities to empower working mothers as well as other employees' well-being through supervisor support within the context of the workplace.

Keywords: framework analysis, psychological well-being, qualitative study, supervisor support, working mother

Malaysia has observed an increase in incidents of 'forgotten baby syndrome' in 2023. This is evident by multiple headlines and news stories of little toddlers being left alone inside vehicles for long hours after being mistakenly thought by the working mother to have been dropped off at a daycare provider (Nawawi, 2023; Suresh, 2023). The frequent happenings of these incidents require immediate exploration of current challenges that working mothers are facing in the workplace to prevent unwanted events from continuing to happen. Recent studies have shown that working mothers are experiencing low self-esteem, and perceiving poor support from the organisation and social circle (Sharma & Dhir, 2022). Such tragedies are avoidable with proper support and care for the psychological well-being of working mothers.

Moreover, studies have reported that psychological well-being is higher in female employees from higher income status than lower-income status (Kim, 2022; Kim et al., 2022). Psychological well-being is a multifaceted construct that seeks to understand a holistic view of psychological functioning and human experience (Tang et al., 2019). Psychological well-being reflects virtue,

excellence, and the growth of an individual's full potential (Huta & Waterman, 2014). Working mothers encounter distinct obstacles and struggle to prioritise. Mothers adeptly navigate the interplay between cultural norms and workplace demands while simultaneously juggling familial and professional obligations. The evolving position of women in the workforce presents these mothers with a range of challenges, such as maintaining a healthy work-life balance, work stress, being a victim of workplace bullying, and work-life conflicts (Arabi et al., 2022; Mazumdar et al., 2022; Reid et al., 2020; Rosander et al., 2020).

Supervisor support has emerged as a significant aspect in alleviating the difficulties that working mothers encounter. Positive employee outcomes, such as increased job satisfaction and enhanced psychological well-being, have been associated with supervisors' provision of support (Larson et al., 2005; Liang et al., 2021; Moen et al., 2016; O'Driscoll et al., 2004). Thus, supervisors' roles in establishing the work environment are critical in fostering the psychological well-being of working mothers. Specifically, when comparing supervisor and co-worker support, supervisor support reported significant effects for emotional and instrumental support, while co-worker support is only significant for emotional support, highlighting the profound effects of supervisor support on female employees (Uddin et al., 2021). The feeling of being supported by their supervisor makes employees feel recognised, appreciated, and confident and allows the employee to experience positive feelings and have a favourable impression of the organisation (Eisenberger et al., 2020). Providing emotional support, understanding the obstacles that working mothers experience, and setting up flexible work arrangements are all important aspects of a supervisor's role in preserving and improving the psychological well-being of their employees who are also mothers.

Supervisors contribute greatly to the overall well-being of working mothers in the workplace by acknowledging and fulfilling these responsibilities.

Though studies reported significant relationships between these variables, research on psychological well-being among low-income working mothers in Malaysia is currently understudied (Malek & Yusof, 2022). Furthermore, these findings explained the significant relationships between supervisor support and psychological well-being on the surface by reporting quantitative significance, yet, the how and why supervisor support influences psychological well-being remain under-explored. Notably, the influence of supervisor support is immediate and direct on employees' day-to-day work experiences. A positive work environment can be achieved through an accommodating supervisor, who inspires a sense of belonging and motivation. The exploration of supervisor support's effect on the psychological well-being of Malaysian working mothers has significant practical consequences for organisations. Understanding the interplay between supervisor support and psychological well-being is critical for organisations to build inclusive and supportive work environments. Organisations have the potential to improve employee satisfaction, productivity, and overall well-being through the implementation of policies and practices that prioritise supervisor support.

Recognizing the importance of supervisor support, this study addresses a critical problem statement concerning the psychological well-being and supervisor support of working mothers. It aims to bridge the gap in the existing literature by exploring the experience of supervisor support among Malaysian working mothers. By doing so, this research seeks to contribute valuable insights that can inform organizational policies and practices aimed at improving the well-

being of this demographic. Accordingly, the objective of this study was to explore the experiences of low-income working mothers' supervisor support in relation to psychological well-being at the workplace. By achieving the objective, this research aspires to provide a better understanding of the dynamics between supervisor

Method

Participants

The research was conducted with institutional approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (Code: UPSI/PPPI /PYK/ETIKA(M)/014(643)). Participants were recruited by purposive sampling through online and offline methods. The inclusion criteria of the participants are as follows: (a) low-income working mother, (b) native Malaysian, (c) able to understand Malay, (d) currently living and working in Malaysia, and (e) has an immediate supervisor.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was established from past research on the perceptions of psychological well-being, experiences of supervisor support, barriers to receiving adequate support, and recommendations for improving support in the workplace (Cole, 2021; Engman, 2022; Huppert, 2009; Penning de Vries et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2019). Participants were asked questions regarding their current psychological well-being at the workplace, perceptions of supervisor support, and essential support needed at the workplace.

The qualitative analysis utilized the framework analysis, developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). From a total of five stages, the framework analysis was simplified into three stages (Mohd Arifin et al., 2019; Smith & Firth, 2011). The

support and psychological well-being in the workplace and offer practical recommendations for promoting a supportive work environment for Malaysian low-income working mothers, which can be replicated to identify the corresponding relationship in other samples.

First stage pertains to data management, whereby a careful selection of the transcripts to be reviewed was chosen from the interviews. In this stage, three out of nine transcripts were analysed to produce initial codes and themes, by extracting the codes that relate to the experience of supervisor support among Malaysian low-income working mothers. The transcripts were carefully chosen to ensure the diversity of the participants' multicultural backgrounds, as such, three transcripts, from Malay, Sabah, and Indian ethnicities were chosen.

Then, the second stage known as descriptive accounts summarizes and synthesises the initial codes to identify any linkage and similarity between the categories and themes. In this study, the initial codes and themes from all nine participants were compared to identify any linkages and similarities, and revisions were made accordingly. Lastly, in the explanatory accounts stage, the themes were finalised to ensure accurate and clear reflection of the participant's point of view and minimise the likelihood of misinterpretation, as well as to ensure the framework formed satisfies the research questions. The qualitative analysis and interview were conducted simultaneously until data saturation was reached, whereby no new information could be extracted from the interview, no new coding was feasible, and no new themes emerged from the analysis (Johnson et al., 2020).

Finally, the finalised quotes that were chosen to represent the themes were translated into the English language by the

researchers, back-translated into the Malay language to identify any linguistic errors, and validated by two independent qualitative researchers, native in the Malay language and having extensive English language background. All grammatical errors initially contained in the chosen excerpts were retained to ensure transparency of the participants' views and ensure that the excerpts were translated as accurately as possible.

Results

Participants

A total of nine working mothers participated in the one-to-one semi-structured interviews online. Majority of the working mothers are Malay (n = 6), two mothers from Sabah (n = 2), and a mother of Indian origin (n = 1). Unfortunately, the researcher has failed to obtain participants from the Chinese community after the repeated attempts to communicate online were not responded to. A total of only three working mothers from the Chinese community were interested in participating, and all 3 participants were unresponsive to communication attempts.

The mothers were between 33 to 54 years old (M = 40.67, SD = 6.63) and had between 5 to 26 years of working experience (M = 13.78, SD = 6.51). There is a large diversity of work fields for the participants, including early childhood education, customer service, quality control, sales, and science-related among others. Table 1 shows the demographic information for each working mother. In the table, each participant was assigned to an ID denoted by WM which indicates 'Working Mother'. For instance, WM1 indicates Working Mother 1, WM2 indicates Working Mother 2, and so on.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Working Mother

ID	Age (Year)	Race	Job Title	Working Experience (Year)
WM1	42	Malay	Medical Laboratory Technologist	16
WM2	36	Indian	Quality Control Inspector	13
WM3	54	Malay	School Clerk	26
WM4	39	Banjar	Administrative Assistant	13
WM5	33	Malay	Sales Coordinator	5
WM6	44	Dusun	Hospital Cleaning Service	8
WM7	40	Malay	Assistant Statistical Officer	15
WM8	33	Malay	Customer Support Assistant	8
WM9	45	Malay	Preschool Teacher	20

Main Theme 1: Supervisor Incivility

Based on the analysis, almost all participants admitted to experiencing several forms of supervisor incivility directly and indirectly from their supervisors. Incivility is defined as disruptive behaviour that is impolite and disrespectful with ambiguous intention to negatively impact an individual, violating acceptable workplace ethics (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Supervisor incivility was showcased through two aspects, which are intimidation, harassment, discriminatory behaviour and micromanagement.

In this study, these experiences included being intimidated, discriminated against, receiving unfair treatment, micromanaged, and harassed. Noteworthy, receiving unfair treatment as an indication of poor support constitutes the largest portion of this category. It comprises the perceived unfair treatment from supervisor to subordinate, indirect racial discrimination, work-related issues, and harassment that participants faced with their supervisors.

Five participants described the experience of being intimidated and threatened by their supervisors, directly and indirectly. Direct harassment occurred when one participant was denied completing her studies by her supervisor due to their disputes. As illustrated by the participant: *"...I experienced the biggest sabotage. He (supervisor) came to the university and told the university to expel me. That's what I feel I'm extremely disappointed about..."* (WM9)

Participants also claimed that their supervisor intimidated them during workplace conflicts. These include receiving threats such as receiving warning letters, withholding increments and promotions, and instilling fear, which hindered them from solving their difficulties. As mentioned by one participant:

"She (supervisor) is like more to control with threats, she's like instilling a feeling of fear hmm hmm so when we want to try a new way to solve our problems, we become like apprehensive and afraid because of threats." (WM5)

Nearly half of the participants reported that supervisors often misused the authority that they had on their subordinates. For instance, WM6 from the cleaning services has two supervisors, her first supervisor (from the cleaning company), and her second supervisor (from the hospital/client). She faced conflicts with her second supervisor and noted her second supervisor's unjust conduct such as interfering with her scheduled work by changing the arranged tasks last minute and prohibiting her from leaving the cleaning area after the allotted hour.

This action has caused a delay in cleaning other scheduled sections of the building, causing the employee to face complaints from other clients. Owing to this conflict, she had begun to start working earlier than usual, and sometimes, was unable to rest until the afternoon. After confronting her supervisor, she endured misconduct as her second supervisor escalated the issue to top management, perceiving her as rebellious, and not following instructions. As illustrated by the participant: *"... I didn't have a break. Early in the morning, we were supposed to start at 7. At 6 I started... So, it was extremely stressful, I became sick until I was anaemic."* (WM6)

Besides that, a total of three participants reported micromanagement from their supervisors. Micromanagement occurred in terms of the supervisor's excessive attention to work details and wanting all information to be reported. Participants began to be extra cautious regarding their quality of work, slowing down their work progress. Some reported feeling irritated and constrained due to the lack of freedom given by their supervisors regarding their approach to the task at hand, *"This new supervisor is too controlling, meaning she doesn't allow us to be independent, for example, solving problems must follow her way, but even her way is not right because she is new with no experience."* (WM5)

Furthermore, some participants started working as early as 6 in the morning and finished working late at night. As a result, these participants feel exhausted and stressed. Participants were additionally overworked due to workplace labour shortages and working long hours. In certain working fields such as sales, marketing, and customer service, every employee manages numerous customers, therefore they undertake all customer-related tasks. Customers' clarifications

must be addressed, and participants indicated their supervisors would contact them on sick leave or weekends:

"MC (medical certification) also has to be busy with work. There was a person who was sick that day, during that week, she cried because she was sick, she should have rest, right, but she was forced to work too (because nobody is handling her customers)." (WM8)

Main Theme 2: Supervisor-Employee Dispute

This category refers to conflicts surrounding the relationship between supervisors and participants in the workplace that may cause them to perceive their experience with supervisor support in a negative light. The dispute between supervisors and employees was primarily due to two aspects which are undesirable supervisor traits and the lack of trust and guidance.

To start, participants reported being uncomfortable with their work environment concerning their supervisors, as supervisors were perceived as rarely displaying any form of appreciative gestures to them and other subordinates. Participants described never receiving a "good job", "thank you" and "credit" for their hard work. One participant, a preschool teacher, expressed her disappointment when she was unable to resolve her conflict with her supervisor regarding the amount of preschool fees that are similar to other parents for her children, even though she has been working there for 10 years:

"Every staff's child has to pay as well. If they still have to pay, so I already feel it. I feel sad because I met them myself. I went to the headquarters, I discussed it because I work there too, and I have been working there for 10 years. What benefit do I get

when you should not be able to take at least half of the price?" (WM9)

The conflict between supervisors and working mothers is further represented by the perceptions of undesirable personalities shown by their supervisors. WM1 and WM5 noted that their supervisors have low empathy, and although WM5 once confronted her supervisor for being less empathetic, the issue was disregarded. This statement is supported by several participants who were stressed out by their supervisors' behaviours, including being demeaning, easily irritable, rumour-mongers, and frequently exaggerating issues to the upper management. One participant commented on the condescending personality of her new supervisor towards her, an older and long-term employee: *"So, like, he (supervisor) is a bit arrogant to me, like that. You are subordinate, I am an officer, I am your officer, everything you must listen to me."* (WM4)

Furthermore, the excerpts from the interviews reveal a clear lack of trust between the supervisor and the subordinate. The participants portrayed a sense of unease by citing instances when the supervisor expressed concern about their punctuality and sought validation from coworkers. The supervisor's concerns about their timeliness, as well as the underlying scepticism in encounters such as the late-night WhatsApp message, suggest an overarching feeling of uncertainty. This lack of trust not only undermines the foundation of a healthy working relationship but also has the ability to impede productivity and collaboration within the team: *"She (supervisor) is not really confident about me. Okay, maybe she is the one who is afraid to let go of the tasks, or she's the one who doesn't trust me, or she's the one who wants to make me quit? I don't know."* (WM8)

Lastly, several participants shared the lack of guidance received from their supervisor

and were left confused to figure out the work process. This confusion has resulted in many mistakes regarding the tasks, and they were then scolded for the mistakes. If guided at times, the supervisors would occasionally guide them with an undertone of anger, which made them uncomfortable and unable to learn the task efficiently, resulting in conflict with the supervisor. Participants prefer to have discussions regarding the tasks instead of being scolded.

"… because he (supervisor) is not good at emotions. So, if he's not good at emotions … I'm 38 years old, I've reached a point where we don't like when we get scolded, we don't deserve to get scolded anymore." (WM4)

Main Theme 3: Psychological Reassurance

Psychological reassurance is derived from the fulfilled support that working mothers experience from their supervisors. Participants mentioned several key phrases that point to a positive connotation of psychological reassurance as a form of supervisor support, such as "giving advice", "giving motivation", "being attentive", "listening to problems", "giving opportunity", and "giving encouragement" among others. The psychological reassurance that participants experienced was expressed through two aspects, which are employee-centric leadership, and expression of appreciation.

An employee-centric supervisor prioritises the psychological needs of their subordinates and establishes productive team structures with high-performance standards (Likert, 1979), which also corresponds to having a considerate supervisor (Ekvall & Arvonen, 1991). From the judgements of several participants, their supervisors are portrayed as someone who sincerely cares

about the employee's independence and overall well-being. Participants appreciated the approachability of the supervisor, as indicated by the opportunity given to voice concerns and share problems openly. This willingness to listen and address issues is exemplified in instances such as providing chances for employees who may face challenges, like being unable to attend work and allowing them to explain their situation. As shared by WM6 regarding her first supervisor:

"… so we have a supervisor (company supervisor) who is really concerned about our autonomy… He sees that if we are okay, or we have a problem, he is okay too, he will listen to the problem. That's right. He gave me the opportunity to let him know what the problem was, anything. Anything that is not enough is okay too… for example, we have cleaning. So if we can't make it today, immediately we see him, he can give us another chance." (WM6)

As a collaborative effort, the participants exhibited a reciprocal relationship with the supervisor, acknowledging that they, too, play an integral role in supporting the supervisor. They are prepared to compromise and work alongside others to reach mutually beneficial agreements, understanding that harmonious working relationships depend on teamwork.

"Anything I ask for, anything I negotiate with him (supervisor) will usually be a win-win situation. Hmmm. I can benefit from him, he can benefit from me. That's how it is. Although sometimes I admit it, we can't get everything we want. Like I said, I will negotiate. I mean, I'll talk about how to make it easier for me (and) to make it easier for him like that." (WM7)

Further interview excerpts revealed the supervisor's efforts to promote a pleasant work culture and acknowledge the employee's achievements. The provision of beverages as a favour for the entire office, rather than individual employees,

demonstrates a shared appreciation for the team's diligence in maintaining a productive work environment. This action shows that the supervisor values the contributions of the team and intends to contribute to their well-being.

"She (supervisor) has treated (us) for drinks, right, but not alone, one office she will treat for. Either because we clean the office, or we do work well and quickly. So, our work spirit is very, very good, very, very high." (WM3)

Finally, the insights gleaned from the participants indicate that the supervisor actively participates in constructive criticism, recognising and commending the team's effort. Compliments such as those given to WM3, *"It's good that you do it like this"* and *"Wow, you're good"* reflect a supervisory strategy that values and promotes high-quality work. This not only boosts the participant's confidence but also reinforces her to produce high-quality work.

Main Theme 3: Receiving Psychological Reassurance

This category pertains to how participants view their supervisor as supportive in maximising their work potential and alleviating obstacles to performing their jobs through effective work management. These optimisations of work were fulfilled by supervisors through giving guidance, reducing burden by managing or delegating tasks accordingly, and through the empowerment of the work condition that participants are in. The majority of the participants had at least one experience in this category.

The interviews showed the positive impact of supervisor support on subordinates, highlighting the guidance and assistance they received. The supervisor is commended for providing continuous support in terms of performance and work,

going beyond simply pointing out errors and instead providing constructive guidance to correct them. The subordinates expressed their appreciation for the supervisor's wealth of experience, emphasising how much they have learned from him.

"He (supervisor) supports us. In terms of our performance, work, even if we do something wrong, he shows us where we are wrong. Every part in the factory I learned from him because he has experience." (WM2)

The interviews highlight a supervisor who goes above and beyond to support subordinates in various aspects, creating a positive and empowering work environment. One poignant example demonstrates the supervisor's compassion and understanding during a challenging personal situation. When one subordinate's husband had a motorcycle accident, rendering him unable to fulfil his usual responsibilities of sending their children to school, the supervisor exhibited empathy and flexibility, showcasing a supervisor who recognizes the importance of emotional support and prioritizes work-life balance and the well-being of the team.

"One of the supports that I feel most touched. Hmm. When my husband had a motorcycle accident in more than a year ago… So I'm the one, all this time my husband has been the one sending the children to school, right? Hmmm, I have to take that job to send the boys to school first, so my trip is a little bit disturbed, I mean I want to get to work on time. Hmm. After that I have to take him in the afternoon and it is always my husband's job. So I show (my supervisor) to let him know about the accident, show the picture, show the hospital report, where he (husband) is injured, can't walk and so on after that, I hmm I was given leave to work at home. Ha, so I work from home, so every time I finish my work, I just submit it via e-mail or enter the key in the system and so on... If I want to submit it as a hard

copy, I can pass it to a friend me, he will take it to the supervisor later." (WM7)

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the experience of supervisor support in relation to psychological well-being among low-income working mothers. It is clear from the findings that low-income working mothers face numerous challenges with their supervisors that impact their psychological well-being. This can be seen through several difficulties they experienced from the supervisors, including incivility, harassment, unfair treatment, social conflict, and the working mothers' negative evaluations toward their supervisors. The experiences of workplace incivility and harassment that were instigated by supervisors in this study were supported by past studies sharing similar findings among low-income working women (Tindell and Padavic, 2022).

These findings supported the Organisational Support Theory by Eisenberger et al. (1986) which asserts that organisational support improves productivity in such a way that employees feel appreciated by the support received. Supervisor support is comparable to organisational support as a supervisor is considered a representative of the organisation, hence, supervisor support is essential for employees to feel supported by the entire organisation (Eisenberger et al., 1986). The theory was echoed in the participants' experience on how receiving different kinds of support such as tangible resources, a good quality supervisor, and psychological support have a deep positive impact on their psychological well-being, which in return improves their motivation and productivity at work.

In this study, the qualitative findings for supervisor support are perceived in the forms of incivility, dispute, psychological reassurance and work optimisation and management. Several types of support have been reported in the literature, including emotional, tangible, and informational support (Cutrona and Suhr, 1992).

This study also discovered the importance of work-life balance in providing psychological reassurance for working mothers and suggests that supervisors prioritise improvement in work-life balance challenges that are specific to working mothers. These findings are similar to other working mothers from previous studies who experienced challenges with work-life balance (Bertola et al., 2022). Moreover, this finding is comparable to past studies sharing similar experiences of being given work flexibility during emergencies and other kinds of tangible support (Boakye et al., 2021).

The positive experiences of low-income working mothers regarding psychological reassurance align with cultural values in Malaysia which emphasises communal support and mutual respect. In Malaysian culture, collectivism and interdependence are valued, and supervisors who demonstrate empathy and understanding contribute to a supportive work environment that fosters employee well-being. Overall, the experiences of working mothers on supervisor support received and how it influenced their psychological well-being showed the importance of supervisor support for the participants in this study. Finally, one participant annotated the lack of need for supervisor support to help her manage her career life and argued that a person has to face life challenges in order to succeed, suggesting the fluctuations of importance for obtaining supervisor support.

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, this study failed to successfully obtain the experience of working mothers from the Chinese community, and only one participant was successfully obtained

for the Indian community. The findings are then inimitable to the Malay culture and do not necessarily reflect the values and experiences of other cultures in Malaysia. Future studies can contribute by ensuring a wider and more diverse sample from different ethnicities in Malaysia.

Moreover, this research was solely conducted online, thus, rapport building during the initial part of the interview may not be satisfactory due to geographical barriers. Studies have shown conflicting findings that mobile or online interviews are susceptible to poorer rapport, while face-to-face interviews are more challenging due to restricted access to participants (Lobe et al., 2022). Concerning this study, the experiences of low-income working mothers who are in the lowest range such as those without internet access and mobile phones are not accessible to the researchers, hence, their versions of supervisor support experiences are not documented. Future studies will benefit further in identifying these target groups for a more comprehensive and accurate finding regarding supervisor support and psychological well-being.

Finally, there were several instances whereby the research team encountered time constraints, such as difficulty in finding a suitable time for an in-depth interview. Since the sample was low-income working mothers, participants were working during the daytime and were busy with household matters during nighttime. Hence, it was challenging to set an appointment date and time that suited the mother's schedule. In regards to this, future studies may opt for a longer period of research duration to ensure sufficient time to schedule and conduct the interview. Ultimately, this research is hoped to progress the field of organisational psychology further in the areas of supervisor support, work outcomes, and psychological well-being.

The findings highlight the need for policies and initiatives that support low-income working mothers in Asian countries like Malaysia. Government-led interventions, such as the enhancement or enforcement of a wider range of affordable childcare services, flexible work arrangements, and minimum wage regulations, can complement supervisor support initiatives and create a more conducive environment for working mothers to thrive. The participants in this study mentioned several conflicts with their supervisors which impacted their psychological well-being. Thus, supervisors within each company should first be trained with adequate psychological knowledge, and should not only be capable of handling work-related matters but psychological matters related to employees as well to ensure that the psychological well-being of employees is cared for. This in return, does not only improve the overall work environment but ensures a longer retention rate as well.

In conclusion, the findings presented in the study have significant implications for low-income working mothers in Asian countries like Malaysia. By addressing the unique challenges and needs of this demographic group, supervisors, organizations, and policymakers can contribute to creating more equitable and supportive workplaces for all employees.

Acknowledgement

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