

Like a “Whopper Virgin”: Anthropological Reflections on Burger King’s Controversial Ad Campaign

The increasingly complex interplay between corporate fast food and non-Western societies took a new and improbable turn recently with the launch of Burger King’s “Whopper Virgins” advertising campaign.¹ This series of web and television ads showcasing the company’s iconic flame-broiled sandwich began airing in December 2008. Featuring a novel variation on the familiar “Pepsi Challenge” taste-test format, this integrated promotional effort specifically targets industry bellwether McDonald’s, most notably its top-selling Big Mac sandwich. At a deeper level, it also reveals the sometimes thorny issues that can arise amid intersections of global fast food, U.S. popular culture, and indigenous populations.

In the commercials, selected participants, dubbed “virgins” since they have purportedly never been exposed to industry marketing, much less eaten fast food hamburgers, are asked to sample both a Burger King Whopper and McDonald’s Big Mac and then indicate which sandwich they like best. The ad campaign’s offbeat and quirky tone, not to mention the provocative, if even overtly sexual, connotations of its title, is in keeping with Burger King’s recent marketing efforts. Indeed, it appears specifically designed to appeal to modern American television viewers’ hip and ironic sensibilities.² These same qualities, however, belie more serious matters related to the commercials’ caricatured portrayal of taste-test participants and their respective communities.

What is so troubling about the “Whopper Virgins” promotion from an anthropological perspective is that, instead of gauging the brand preferences of U.S. consumers, the commercials focus on those small-scale and often vulnerable societies traditionally studied by ethnographers. In this case, taste-test participants are drawn from three widely known and geoculturally distinct indigenous groups: the Hmong (China and mainland Southeast Asia), Inuit (Arctic Canada, Greenland, Russia, and Alaska), and Maramures (northern Romania and western Ukraine).

As detailed in several “Whopper Virgins” television spots and an expanded eight-minute “making-of” web feature, a “documentary” film crew travels to the remote villages of Baan Khun Chang Kiean, Thailand; Isortoq, Greenland; and Budesti, Romania, to record the seemingly unbiased views of local folk about the global fast food rivals’ signature products. The sounds of epic orchestral music play satirically in the background as an animated map documents the filmmakers’ trans-global journey somewhat like the famous scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Participating villagers are filmed not in everyday attire, but in more elaborate traditional garb, awkwardly sampling both Whoppers and Big Macs and offering sometimes droll comments in their native tongues about the burgers to off-screen handlers. The spots are directed by former professional skateboarder turned award-winning filmmaker, Stacy Peralta (*Riding Giants*, *Dogtown and Z-Boys*).

This article’s primary objective is to critically assess the “Whopper Virgins” ad campaign from an anthropological perspective. Of particular interest are the portrayals of traditional peoples featured both in the Burger King commercials and associated manifestations of American popular culture. While recognizing that these small screen promos are meant to be subversively humorous, it is still important to address the problematic depictions of indigenous groups that such web and television advertising perpetuate.

Clearly, the “Whopper Virgins” ad campaign can be approached from various critical perspectives. Scholars in media studies, semiotics, marketing, sociology, and other related fields are well-equipped to critique aspects of this controversial marketing effort, especially matters dealing with the aesthetics of “reality” and representation in television and other media formats that inform these commercials (Alvarado et al 153). Anthropology

provides a useful vantage point from which to consider the Burger King ads given the taste-test participants' traditional backgrounds and stated unfamiliarity with corporate fast food. Among other things, contemporary cultural anthropology concerns itself with human cultural variation and the subtle and profound impact of global economic and political processes on local cultural realities, particularly within non-Western contexts. The fact that a growing number of socio-cultural researchers like anthropologists (Matejowsky 146) have turned their attention to matters of fast food globalization/localization and its myriad popular culture associations only serves to bolster this view (Bosco 23). Indeed, this collective body of research has done much to elucidate the intricacies and contradictions that characterize corporate fast food's growing influence beyond North America and Europe (Wilk 19; Editor's note: See Minjoo Oh, *Studies in Popular Culture* 31.2).

After briefly considering past Burger King ad campaigns amid its ongoing rivalry with McDonald's, attention turns to the public reactions and corporate responses that have emerged in the wake of the "Whopper Virgins" commercials. Notably, details of how the web and television promos were conceived, developed, and implemented are addressed in this section. Next, so as to better situate this marketing effort within a broader popular cultural framework, an overview of U.S. television adverts prominently featuring depictions of indigenous peoples is presented. After that, the Burger King commercials are critically analyzed, before shifting focus to the perspective that anthropologists can bring to bear on the "Whopper Virgins" debate. Taken as a whole, this work highlights the various distortions that commonly inform portrayals of native populations in Western popular culture.

Burger Battles and "Whopper Stoppers"

The "Whopper Virgins" advertising campaign is not Burger King's first attempt at supplanting the Golden Arches as the world's leading hamburger chain through an intensive multipronged promotional strategy. Rather, it is one in a series of marketing efforts designed to expand the restaurant's customer base and strengthen its global brand image vis-à-vis McDonald's. With varying degrees of success, these mass-market adverts have helped alter the fast food landscape in Burger King's favor by pitting their most

popular menu items against those of its chief competitor (Smith 20).

Since the early 1980s, Burger King has engaged in several cross-media ad campaigns that specifically take aim at McDonald's. The company gained some ground on the Golden Arches in 1983 after launching a number of similarly themed "broiling versus frying" commercials. As the name suggests, these spots emphasize distinctions between the restaurants' differing cooking styles. This campaign was followed two years later by a series of print and television adverts urging McDonald's patrons to make "The Big Switch" (ibid). Some of Burger King's assertions in nationally broadcast promos got the chain embroiled in a high-profile lawsuit from McDonald's that came to be known as the "Battle of the Burgers" (Jakle and Sculle 119).

The litigation centered on McDonald's accusations of false advertising against Burger King over claims that its burgers were more popular than those of its closest rival. Rather than face the prospects of a costly and protracted legal battle, Burger King eventually opted to settle out of court (ibid). Despite this setback, it appears that McDonald's recognized the continuing threat posed by Burger King and the popularity of its signature Whopper sandwich. In response, McDonald's developed a number of hamburgers across various regional and international markets that effectively duplicate the Whopper's size, ingredients, and flavors. These so-called "Whopper Stoppers" include the McDLT, the McLean Deluxe, and the Big N' Tasty.

As it currently stands, Burger King still lags behind McDonald's in most key markets including the U.S., where 66 per cent of its 11,550 outlets are located. With a modest to significant market presence in over 70 countries, it is notable that very few Burger King restaurants operate as company-controlled branches. Instead, some 90 per cent of all brand affiliates are privately owned and operated franchises. By the time the "Whopper Virgins" ad campaign was launched towards the end of 2008, Burger King employed more than 37,000 workers serving approximately 11.4 million daily customers (BKC Publications).

“Whopper Virgins”: Public Reaction and Corporate Response

Given its novel and provocative core concept, the “Whopper Virgins” promotion drew sharp public criticism almost immediately. Indeed, snippets of the short teaser ads that aired just prior to the campaign’s official launch were enough to trigger adverse audience reactions. Segments about the growing uproar were soon featured on ABC’s *Good Morning America* and *Fox News*. By mid-December 2008, newspapers in the U.S. and abroad including *USA Today* and *The Guardian* had run stories about the public furor sparked by the adverts. Despite such mainstream media coverage, the most intense criticism of Burger King was in the blogosphere, where debates ranging from corporate exploitation to world hunger raged (Vranica). Essentially at issue was the filmmakers’ apparent ignorance of matters relevant to contemporary indigenous populations.

Many bloggers and other critics reacted strongly to the commercials’ failure to acknowledge the ongoing problems of poverty and hunger that continue to beset some of the regions where the ads take place, especially in rural Thailand (Morrissey; Schrambling; Steinman). Some questioned just how many local villagers can afford the associative costs of dining at Burger King, McDonald’s, or other fast food restaurants when faced with these kinds of persistent hardships. For many, the incongruity of marketing efforts promoting a style of cuisine widely recognized for its excessive attributes within or near impoverished areas underscores the lack of coherent foresight that went into the “Whopper Virgins” campaign, particularly as it relates to how such discrepancies would be greeted by viewers (Steinman).

It is important to recognize that not everyone regards the ads negatively. As reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, Lo Neng Kiatoukaysy, Executive Director of the Milwaukee-based nonprofit, Hmong American Friendship Association, said she and some of her Hmong coworkers viewed and liked the teaser promos (Vranica). Even with such approval, public clamor over the “Whopper Virgins” promotion grew to the point where Burger King felt compelled to answer its critics. In a carefully crafted response to one “Whopper Virgins” detractor accessible through a link in *The Wall Street Journal* Business Technology blog (December 9, 2008), Susan Robinson, Vice President of Corporate Communications for Burger King, defended the commercials. Significantly, her letter provides a more

detailed account of how the “Whopper Virgins” promotional campaign was developed and its involvement with the indigenous groups coordinated (LaVallee).

The “Whopper Virgins” project was created by Crispin Porter & Bogusky, a Miami-based advertising agency whose client list includes Microsoft, Volkswagen, and American Express. Notably, the firm has produced many successful and edgy promotions for Burger King over recent years, including the notorious “Whopper Freakout” television spots from 2007 and 2009’s short-lived “Whopper Sacrifice” web campaign. In these former pseudo-guerilla style commercials, hidden cameras reveal the sometimes upset reactions of real customers after being informed that the top-selling Whopper has been removed from local Burger King menus (Vranica). The latter on-line promotion involves Facebook users dropping or “defriending” ten individuals from their social networking contacts’ list in exchange for a free Whopper coupon (Morrisey).

Crispin Porter & Bogusky also created a minor uproar not long after the “Whopper Virgins” controversy with 2009’s now infamous “SpongeBob Square Butts” television commercials. These ads promote BK Kids’ meals by spoofing old-school rap videos, primarily Sir-Mix-a-Lot’s 1992 hit “Baby Got Back,” with gyrating hip hop dancers in rectangular-shaped short-shorts. The spots culminate with Sir-Mix-a-Lot quipping from his couch, “Booty is booty.” Numerous parental groups including the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood voiced outrage at the “sexualized” nature of these commercials for kids’ meals (Elliot).

According to Robinson, an independent “third-party” firm was commissioned by Burger King and Crispin Porter & Bogusky to develop the “Whopper Virgins” research methodology, gain access to selected testing locations, secure local individuals as test participants, and oversee the taste-tests. In all three countries, the tests were carried out away from the villagers’ home communities, usually in the largest neighboring metropolitan center. Accordingly, around 15 locals from each settlement were transported or flown to these adjacent urban locales. For the Inuit participants, this meant flying from Greenland to testing locations in Reykjavik, Iceland. Robinson also states that Burger King and Crispin Porter & Bogusky personnel were not present during any of the tests. The Big Macs and Whoppers consumed by on-camera participants were prepared locally at

nearby competing Burger King and McDonald's restaurants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Whopper ultimately emerged victorious over the Big Mac as the most favored burger amongst taste-test participants.

It should be noted that, besides treating villagers from all three communities to free Whoppers, Burger King also provided the groups with either material goods or support as a gesture of appreciation. Appropriate contributions for each community were determined after ad personnel consulted with local leaders. As Robinson points out, learning materials were donated to the Hmong villagers in Thailand, while the Inuit community in Greenland received educational children's toys. In Romania, where numerous Maramures wooden churches have been designated as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites, the company helped underwrite a restoration project for a 17th century church.

Information presented in Robinson's letter raises a number of intriguing questions about the planning, implementation, and coordination of the "Whopper Virgins" campaign. For example, were the opinions of anthropologists or other social scientists who conduct ethnographic work amongst the Hmong, Inuit, and Maramures consulted by Burger King or Crispin Porter & Bogusky at any point during (pre/post-) production? Similarly, what was the background and training of those serving as the independent "third party" that directly interacted with the indigenous taste-test participants and their village communities? Finally, how much or in what way were individual participants compensated for their involvement in the commercials and ad campaign? Answers to these questions would go some way towards addressing the concerns of those who view the "Whopper Virgins" promos as little more than crass exploitation.

Television Commercials, Indigenous Peoples, and Popular Culture

Commercials with depictions of indigenous peoples are nothing new to U.S. television viewers. Over the years, a number of spots featuring real or *faux* tribesmen showcasing various products or social causes have gained

wide exposure on the small screen. While some stand out in the public imagination more than others, many of these advertisements are characterized by either caricatured portrayals of traditional groups or some other dubious element.

Indeed, most commercials in this genre follow a basic storyline involving tribal folk confronting or utilizing manifestations of Western consumer culture for seemingly the first time. Their response, whether humorous or serious, usually provides the set-up for the ads' scripted punch line or otherwise climactic moment. Obviously, such advertisements are not meant to raise awareness about the plight of indigenous communities but to sell products and, perhaps secondarily, entertain or inform viewers. Yet, in mostly subtle ways, the depictions of traditional peoples within these promos arguably contribute to prevailing notions in the U.S. and elsewhere about native lifeways and the linkages these groups maintain with the wider world. With no context for critical reflection, adverts of this type can easily obscure or skew everyday perceptions about indigenous populations and their viability vis-à-vis encroaching global modernity.

What follows is a brief review of three television commercials that in many ways exemplify this advertising genre. Dating back some four decades, these adverts reveal the various distortions and limitations that can arise when depictions of indigenous peoples and their relationships with developed societies are presented within a mass-market format comprised mainly of 30 and 60 second promotional spots. Such critical examination provides a fitting backdrop against which elements of the more recent and arguably more problematic "Whopper Virgins" campaign can best be evaluated.

Keep America Beautiful: The "Crying Indian" (1971)

Perhaps this genre's most memorable ad is the iconic "Crying Indian" promo from the *Keep America Beautiful* public service announcements that hit the airwaves on Earth Day 1971. Although not commercially-oriented, this spot, featuring a Native American tearfully confronting the waste and pollution of American mass consumption, is surely ingrained into the consciousness of television viewers of a certain age. So resonant is the "Crying Indian" commercial to most Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, in fact, that its title character has pretty much devolved into stock parody, emerging as a recurring motif in diverse areas of American popular culture, espe-

cially film and television. Notably, he has been spoofed or satirized in episodes of *The Simpsons*, *Futurama*, and *Mystery Science Theater 3000* as well as the feature film *Wayne's World 2*.

Ironically, the actor's ethnicity is not even true-born Native American but rather Sicilian. The character actor Iron Eyes Cody (1904-1999) had a long and successful career portraying Native Americans in over 200 Hollywood Westerns including John Wayne's breakout film *The Big Trail* (1930) and *A Man Called Horse* (1970) with Richard Harris. His tribal chanting even appeared prominently in the 1988 Joni Mitchell song "Lakota." News of his non-Indian ancestry became public when a 1996 story in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* was picked up by several national wire services. Although actively involved in Native American issues for much of his life, even going so far as to adopt two Native American children, these revelations could not help but damage his credibility and effectively tarnish the legacy of the "Crying Indian" promo (Mikkelsen).

Nike: Just Do It (1989)

Possibly just as relevant as the "Crying Indian" ad but almost certainly less familiar to today's television viewers is a Nike *Just Do It* commercial from 1989 ("If the Inamuk"). The spot, filmed mainly on location in Kenya, culminates with a Samburu tribesman in swooshed hiking shoes speaking into the camera in his native Maa language as English subtitles with the translation "Just do it" appear on screen.

With its cutting-edge imagery and high end production values, the commercial embodies nearly all of the qualities that have made Nike's *Just Do It* ad campaign one of the most successful marketing efforts of recent times. Notably, however, the advert's depiction of the Samburu tribesman is clouded by one significant factor. He is not actually reciting the company tagline as the captioning suggests but rather humorously requesting larger and more comfortable footwear.

As cultural anthropologist Lee Cronk, who conducts fieldwork in Kenya amongst the neighboring Mukogodo-Maasai, pointed out at the time, in 1989, the Samburu actor does not, in fact, say "Just do it," but rather, "I don't want these. Give me big shoes." After this dialogue flub became a minor news item in *Forbes* magazine, it soon gained mention in other widely read publications, including *USA Today* and the *New York Times*. Over

subsequent years, the *Just Do It* ad has taken on a life of its own as an Internet story that many continually mistake for an urban legend (Mikkelson).

For its part, Nike issued various statements on the matter after the advertising blunder became public. One explanation suggests that the company was well aware of the incongruity between dialogue and subtitles. The erroneous captioning was retained simply because the tribesman's original remarks sounded better than the more stilted Maa translation of "just do it." Another, perhaps more plausible, account was that no one at Nike anticipated that an American Maa speaker would see the commercial, much less raise issue with it (Cox). All things considered, Nike did not suffer any strong public backlash from the story. By making light of their mistake, even going so far as sending Cronk a free pair of hiking boots for his clarification, the company effectively neutralized any public relations fallout and generated some free national publicity in the process (Mikkelson).

Toyota 4Runner: Singers (2005)

Another television commercial with depictions of indigenous peoples is the 2005 *Singers* Toyota 4Runner ad. This 30-second spot features a Western couple negotiating harsh jungle terrain in a new Toyota SUV as the entrancing sounds of tribal chanting play in the background. Upon arrival at their destination, it is revealed that the otherworldly music is emanating from inside the vehicle. Five scantily clad Brazilian Yanomami Amerindians variously adorned with painted skin, bodily accouterments, and distinctive bowl haircuts are packed into the 4Runner's rear seats. Presumably, the quintet is vocalizing harmonically either as a way to entertain their hosts or pass the time while hitching a ride to their remote *shabono* (large circular hut).

Notably, the *Singers* spot features actual Yanomami tribesmen as the ad's main characters. These first-time actors, along with the set and production, give the promo a semblance of authenticity that appears all but genuine in most key respects. For logistical reasons, however, the commercial was filmed in a temperate New Zealand rainforest and not the tropical jungles of Amazonia. Filming in this non-tropical locale not only gave the Yanomami actors their first opportunity for international air travel, it also subtly skews audience perceptions to some degree (Lemann).

Yet, what is perhaps most problematic about the *Singers* spot is not so much its depiction of indigenous peoples nor its mock village locale but rather the incongruity of having Yanomami Amerindians as the focal point of an American SUV ad. The unintended irony, of course, is that over recent years gas-guzzling SUVs like the Toyota 4Runner have emerged as potent symbols of rampant Western consumerism, a process closely associated with natural resource depletion like the destruction of the Yanomami's rainforest habitat. Although Toyota SUVs and Amerindian passengers make for a curious juxtaposition in this context, the *Singers* commercial does suggest rather accurately that few, if any, contemporary tribal societies remain so isolated that they are untouched by processes of global consumer capitalism.

Anthropology and the Marketing of "Whopper Virgins"

As the preceding television commercials illustrate, depictions of indigenous peoples are subject to varying levels of refraction through the obfuscating lens of this fast-paced and until recently largely ephemeral advertising medium. Yet the shortcomings of the aforementioned promos appear relatively slight compared to those characterizing the "Whopper Virgins" adverts.

What makes the Burger King television and web spots both so distinctive and problematic is that they feature actual villagers from indigenous communities on camera in unscripted situations. Other commercials in this genre rely primarily on the performances of either traditional peoples or professional actors in scripted and staged productions. As the disclaimer on the "Whopper Virgins" web feature states, "Whopper Virgins are real people doing real taste-tests. No actors were used in this film." While such statements may seem to legitimize the adverts' authenticity and depiction of village folk, the commercials actually run counter to local realities in several key ways.

The fact that test tasters are labeled "virgins" seems to suggest that groups like the Hmong, Inuit, and Maramures somehow remain pure and unsullied in the face of encroaching global modernity. From scenes of idyllic rural life to their ornate traditional dress, the commercials simplistically

portray participants and their respective communities as little more than modern-day “noble savages,” living an Edenic existence beyond the corrupting influence of Western society.

An on-screen web film participant alludes to this when he tells the documentary crew, “You’re going to go all around the world and find people that are really off the grid, who perhaps don’t have televisions, who don’t have access to restaurants and what-not, who really live outside of things.” Certainly, the idea that these groups “live outside of things” or “off the grid” is open to criticism, as it comes across as more than just a little patronizing and ethnocentric.

If recent ethnographic work amongst indigenous peoples teaches us anything, it is that nowadays very few small-scale societies remain beyond the transformative sway of global consumer capitalism and the state systems that support it (Bodley). Far from being unaffected by forces of globalization and mass consumerism/media, the groups featured in the “Whopper Virgins” ads are variously enmeshed in webs of social and economic linkages underpinning an increasingly ubiquitous global culture of consumption. Indeed, it is unlikely that these villagers are as unfamiliar with manifestations of Western society as the filmmakers seem to indicate. The fact that two of the communities are within traveling distance to urban centers with Burger Kings and McDonald’s restaurants suggests that local folk are more than vaguely acquainted with processes of market-based consumer capitalism.

No less troubling, the diets promoted in the commercials are far from nutritious. In numerous tests, the trans fats commonly found in fast food cuisine have been shown to negatively impact bodily health (Popkin). Significantly, the spread of corporate fast food outside of the U.S. and Europe has paralleled a rise in obesity and obesity-related conditions like cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes across what was once called the Third World. This rapidly emerging trend of “globesity” stands as a serious health challenge for governments and health care systems worldwide (ibid).

More implicitly, the ads suggest that the “Whopper Virgins” participants have less-sophisticated palates compared to those of Western fast food consumers. The diets and foodways that have sustained these indigenous communities for generations are presented in something of a comical

light, as if they do not really measure up to the bountiful offerings of corporate fast food. Notably, one clip shows a Hmong villager confronting a hamburger with the narration, "They've never seen such a piece of foreign food before. And they didn't even quite know how to pick it up." Arguably, the filmmakers would have just as much difficulty, if not more, negotiating the table etiquette and cuisine of these traditional groups.

Overall, the subtle and not-so-subtle forms of "othering" conveyed in the "Whopper Virgins" spots effectively perpetuate stereotypical and one-dimensional notions of indigenous cultures, particularly those related to their taste preferences. They also, conversely, reveal much about the uniformity underlying current American consumer tastes and foodways. An obvious subtext communicated by Burger King and Crispin Porter & Bogusky in the commercials is one whereby America essentially is a land of convenience and abundance; a society that others will naturally strive to emulate if only properly enlightened about its plentiful offerings.

Burger King Backlash?

Clearly, the "Whopper Virgins" ad campaign is designed to push the envelope, if not openly stir up controversy. While this style of advertising is an increasingly common ploy to grab the attention of jaded consumers in the high-density and heavily trafficked 24/7 commercial terrain of modern mass media, it seems that Burger King misjudged public sentiment to their edgy marketing efforts in this instance. The use of actual tribal folk in fast food taste-tests spotlights the lengths to which today's companies sometimes go to cut through the seemingly endless barrage of competing media and commercials to make an impact on viewers.

Yet, questions of whether or not the depictions of traditional peoples in the "Whopper Virgins" promotion trigger a significant consumer backlash against Burger King appear unlikely at this point. If the response of fast food patrons to the infamous "Whopper Freakout" campaign from 2007 is any indication, the company may actually benefit from the increased, albeit largely negative, media attention. According to ABC News, the restaurant chain reported a significant 20 per cent sales increase after this earlier

earlier marketing promotion hit the airwaves (Alfonsi, Bunn and Ibanga). Moreover, given the short shelf life of fast food television commercials nowadays, any residual negativity generated by the “Whopper Virgins” spots may be minimal once the ads cycle out of viewing rotation.

Conclusion

The “Whopper Virgins” controversy presents anthropologists and others concerned about contemporary indigenous peoples with opportunities to assert a more resonant voice in public discourse about issues relevant to traditional groups like the Hmong, Inuit, and Maramure. Among other things, the value of preserving local foodways amid the growing influence of global food systems in non-Western societies surely warrants advocacy. At the very least, the “Whopper Virgin” commercials offer a timely and familiar example to generate discussion in and out of the classroom regarding the varying levels of misrepresentation and distortion that traditional groups face in Western popular culture.

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Endnotes

¹ This paper developed out of my brief letter to *Anthropology News*, the official newspaper of the American Anthropological Association, in April 2009.

² Given their decidedly edgy tone, it is probably unsurprising that most Burger King ads like the "Whopper Virgins" spots are aimed at the 18-35 male demographic (Horovitz 2007). Notably, the "Whopper Virgins" commercials aired during NFL football games and popular and sometimes controversial animated series such as *Family Guy* and *American Dad*.

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