

# Branding strategies in specialty coffee packaging design: semiotic analysis of visual and verbal signs

Estratégias de branding no design de embalagens de cafés especiais: análise semiótica de signos visuais e verbais



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## ABSTRACT

Packaging is a medium that encourages customers to discover brands and products at the point of sale. It materializes brand identities, communicates product attributes, and thus translates aesthetic and symbolic cultural meanings. How can we explore the different layers of meanings that specialty coffee packaging communicates to consumers? In this manuscript, we apply Peircean semiotic concepts to investigate how different visual and verbal signs are integral to the construction of specialty coffee packaging design in the Brazilian market. We argue that semiotic analysis enriches the understanding of the meanings that the packages construct, considering their communicative potentials and their interactions with consumers during the shopping experience.

## KEYWORDS

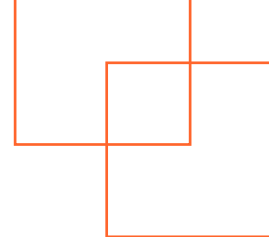
Branding; Specialty coffee packaging; Applied semiotics.

## RESUMO

As embalagens são mídias que incentivam os clientes a descobrirem marcas e produtos nos pontos-de-venda. Elas materializam identidades de marcas, comunicam atributos de produtos e, assim, traduzem significados estéticos e simbólico-culturais. Como podemos explorar diferentes camadas de significados que as embalagens de cafés especiais comunicam para os clientes? Neste trabalho, aplicamos conceitos da semiótica Peirceana para investigar os modos como diferentes signos visuais e verbais articulam-se na construção das embalagens de cafés especiais no mercado brasileiro. Por fim, concluímos que a análise semiótica enriquece a compreensão de sentidos que as embalagens constroem, considerando seus potenciais comunicativos e interações com consumidores nas experiências de compra.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Gestão de marcas; Embalagens de cafés especiais; Semiótica aplicada.



## INTRODUCTION

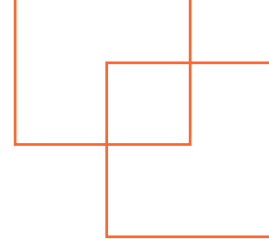
Brands deliver meaningful benefits to consumers such as perceptions of quality, brand experiences, symbolic relationships, and senses of identity (Oswald, 2012) through tangible and material branding elements: logos, packaging, ads, etc. that express, communicate and visualize the brand (Wheeler, 2008). Similarly, for Bourdieu (1984) product aesthetics helps position users within social spaces because it indicates and symbolizes objectively and subjectively the sense of distinction that consumers experience by consuming those goods (Bourdieu, 1984).

Packaging is particularly relevant to consumer experiences as it encourages consumers to discover brands and products at the point of sale. It materializes brand identities and communicates product attributes and benefits, thus translating aesthetic and symbolic-cultural meanings that contribute to the construction of meanings. Consequently, it helps consumers to engage in a more interactive experience. In fact, “consumers shop for meanings, not stuff” (Oswald, 2012, p.1). Accordingly, considering the relevance of packaging for consumers and marketers, this manuscript explores the different layers of meanings that specialty coffee packaging communicates to consumers.

Therefore, we apply Peircean semiotic concepts to explore how different visual and verbal signs are integral to the construction of specialty coffee packaging design in the Brazilian market. Semiotics studies meanings of words, images, languages, and communication processes in nature and in culture and is widely used in diverse fields such as Marketing and Design.

Using semiotics to understand the layers of meanings that packaging conveys to consumers is relevant because, as Danesi (2006) highlights, the trajectory from a product-commodity to a brand has a semiotic nature. Brands have strong emotional appeal, based on meaningful associations intertwined with their identity. Furthermore, brands acquire new meanings when interacting with consumers in dynamic ways, being particularly reinforced by the current ubiquitous communication environment (Danesi, 2006).

In this context, Niemeyer (2010) emphasizes that semiotics helps us to understand the meaning of packaging, which, in addition to being aesthetically attractive or functional, must communicate qualities and



characteristics of the methods of production and usage purposes to consumers. Thus, each product communicates messages from users to themselves and from users to others, but also diffuses the aesthetic, symbolic and cultural values of the contexts with which it interacts (Niemeyer, 2010).

In this manuscript we investigate how different visual and verbal signs participate in the construction of specialty coffee packaging design in the Brazilian market. First, we define the segment of specialty coffee based on previous works by Quintão, Brito and Belk (2017). Next, we present the theoretical-methodological approach used. Finally, we argue that packaging design plays a relevant role in specialty coffee consumption as it is the branding element that materializes the desired distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), anchoring the consumer experience.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

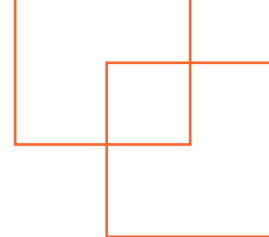
### 2.1 Food and symbolic meanings

Food consumption is central to human relationships (Counihan; Van Esterik, 2012) and society has enforced rules about what represents a 'good' or a 'bad' food and 'right' or 'wrong' eating behavior since antiquity (Askegaard et al., 2014; Johnson; Thomas; Grier, 2017). In fact, a large body of research has looked at food consumption from different perspectives and epistemological positions. For example, Lévi-Strauss (1990) set out to create a universal system of meanings in the language of foods, while Mary Douglas (1972) aimed at deciphering the social codes of meals and for Bourdieu (1984), food expresses and defines class relations.

Coffee, in particular, has been extensively studied in relation to consumer culture. For instance, Thompson and Arsel (2004) have looked at the hegemonic influence that Starbucks exercises upon local coffee shops by imposing its servicescape (Bitner, 1999) while an anti-Starbucks discourse simultaneously circulates in popular culture. Moreover, Karababa and Ger (2011) demonstrate that, in the context of the early Ottoman coffee shop, consumers and marketers challenged the authority of the state and religion, to discuss the implications of the centrality of transgressive hedonism in this process.

More recently, Pomiès (2016), has investigated how professional coffee preparation contests influence baristas' practices during championships





first, and then baristas' everyday practices in coffee shops. She states that a normative discourse emerges from these contests and eventually shapes baristas' practice whether they participate in the championship or not. Additionally, Quintão et al. (2016) explain how amateur consumers relate to baristas and to the public during their consumption practices. Similarly, Quintão et al. (2017) address the role played by ritual in connoisseurship consumption and consumers' taste in the context of high-end coffee shops, also theorizing the process that converts regular consumers into connoisseur consumers by establishing and reinforcing differences between mass and connoisseurship consumption.

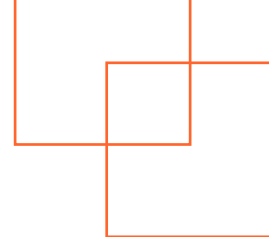
According to Quintão, Brito and Belk (2017) the specialty coffee segment was defined by Erna Knutsen in 1978 as “beans with unique flavor profiles produced in special geographic microclimates” (ibid. p. 486). The cultivation, preparation, and degustation constitute the superior quality of this specific segment, differentiating specialty coffee from regular coffee (ibid.).

However, despite the relevant contributions provided by these studies to our exploration of coffee consumption meanings, understanding the role of servicescapes (Bitner, 1999) and brand advertising has been prioritized, while the role of packaging has been only tangentially explored. Consequently, we propose to close this gap by using applied semiotic research to bridge the existing knowledge from the Design and Consumer Culture Theory literature.

### 3 THE ROLE OF PACKAGING IN CREATING FOOD MEANINGS

Product meaning is inherent within the form of the product itself (i.e., the artifact of the bean/beverage) and in the discourses surrounding that form (i.e., in its packaging and marketing) (Elliot, 2001). In fact, the importance of packaging in consumer's purchases of food products cannot be minimized, and research has even argued that consumers buy products – at least in part – because they like the packaging (Lebesco; Neccenato, 2008).

In this sense, Roncarelli and Ellicott (2010) emphasize that good packaging design may transform an ordinary product into an exceptional one. For this reason, advertising budget has been redistributed to packaging design of several categories. These authors highlight packaging



design must communicate distinction, through images and information which clearly express the product attributes and benefits, to show its content is relevant to customers. In addition, they emphasize ergonomic design and a consistent brand identity are also important factors to convey meaningful packaging design (ibid).

## 4 METHODOLOGY

This section includes three topics. First, we introduce the analytical framework. Second, we briefly describe the context of the coffee category, and specialty segment in Brazil. Finally, we detail fieldwork procedures. It is worth mentioning this paper is focused on the sharing of preliminary results of an ongoing research project, to be continued in upcoming publications.

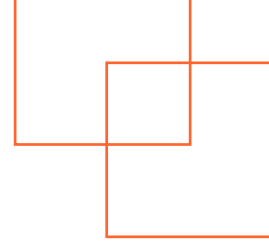
### 4.1 Analytical framework

The semiotic analysis is based on Peircean theory, which understands the sign as a triadic relationship. A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (CP, 2.228 apud Bergman; Paavola, 2013)

According to Santaella (2004, p. 69), when analyzing a design product from a semiotic perspective, we aim at understanding the communicative potential of a product. In this sense, semiotic analysis explores what effects a product may produce while interacting with a consumer.

Instead of analyzing one specific sign or product package, in this manuscript we have conducted a semiotic mapping of specialty coffee packaging to understand frequent visual and verbal signs communicated by this segment in Brazil.

The analytical steps explore three semiotic points of view, previously described by Santaella (2004): (1) qualitative-iconic, (2) singular-indexical,



and (3) conventional-symbolic.

(1) The qualitative-iconic point of view explores first impressions evoked by the sign, its visible and abstract qualities. For instance: free associations are iconic, hypothetical and uncontrollable. Spontaneous and comparative relations among similarities between sign and object are also iconic. These impressions and associations include material qualities, such as colors, shapes, textures, volumes, and abstract qualities (simplicity, sophistication, among others).

(2) The singular-indexical point of view considers that the existing sign belongs to a specific context in space and time. Thus, its origin and identity aspects, methods of production, usage purposes are investigated, but how the sign interacts with its target audience is also explored.

(3) The conventional-symbolic point of view involves sociocultural values and symbolic meanings associated with the sign, such as myths and archetypes connected to its message, and especially how symbolic aspects are culturally building the brand identity.

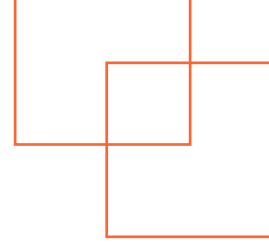
The specialty coffee segment in Brazil

Studies recently published by the Brazilian Coffee Industry Association (ABIC) indicate the global coffee market has been growing steadily since the 1990s. Brazilian coffee production represents 35% of world production, and Brazil is the world's largest coffee exporter. Additionally, the average Brazilian consumes approximately 839 cups of coffee per year, thus, Brazil has the second-largest per capita consumption of coffee in the world (ABIC apud FIA, 2019).

According to ABIC, 95% of the Brazilian population consumes this beverage at home or in coffee shops. The traditional segment (mass market) leads the market with 90 to 95% of domestic consumption, but the premium segment is growing and conquering a demanding customer niche that values high quality, controlled origin, sustainable production, and new methods of preparation. Some premium consumers appreciate the consumption of the beverage in coffee shops, while others usually buy specialty coffee at retailers, in supermarkets, or online (SEBRAE-SC, 2019).

## 4.2 Fieldwork procedures

The data collection was carried out from March to July 2019, in Sao Paulo and in Florianopolis. It included visits to five retail outlets (three supermarkets and two coffee shops in each city), totalizing ten points of sale.



We visited coffee shops and supermarkets in Sao Paulo and Florianopolis to observe how coffee packaging is displayed at the points of sale. During the fieldwork, we perceived relevant differences among coffee packaging in coffee shops in comparison to supermarkets. Coffee shops were offering premium products, reinforcing artisanal, organic, and fair-trade trends. In contrast, supermarkets were selling a wide range of products: from mass market to premium segments, including different value propositions and packaging types (instant, pillow bags, stand up pouch, vacuum-packed, capsules).

Since both data published by ABIC (2019) and fieldwork notes indicated that the premium segment was expanding from the coffee shop niche to the mass market sales channels – with particular emphasis in supermarkets – the authors focused the semiotic analysis on specialty brands sold in supermarkets.

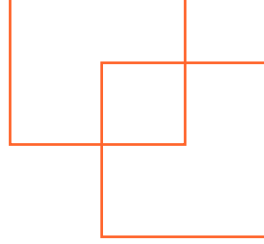
It is worth mentioning that ground and dark roasted coffee lead the domestic market. Oftentimes, traditional coffee is sold in conventional pillow or vacuum packs to the mass market. On the other hand, specialty coffee offers a more diverse product range, including different types of packaging (capsules, vacuum, one-way valve packs) and roasts (light, medium and dark).

The table below (figure 1) sums up the most relevant features of the

**Table 1** – Coffee Segments in the Brazilian Market. 2019

<b>Mass market (industrialized + supermarkets)</b>	<b>Specialty coffee (industrialized + supermarkets)</b>	<b>Specialty coffee (artisanal + coffee shops)</b>
Ground coffee and instant coffee Conventional pillow and vacuum packs Dark roasted Accessible price range Intermediate quality Large scale production	Ground coffee Capsules, vacuum, coffee bags with one-way valves and tin ties Light, medium or dark roasted Intermediate price range Very good quality Medium scale production Growing segment	Ground coffee or beans Coffee bags with one-way valves and tin ties Light, medium or dark roasted Premium price range Excellent quality Small scale production Niche but growing segment

Source: prepared by the authors, 2019



## 4.3 Findings

At the supermarkets, several coffee brands are displayed side by side on the shelves. Their most relevant codes are clearly communicated by each segment (see figures 1, 2 and 3).

**Figure 1** – Photographic record: instant coffee.



Source: prepared by the authors, 2019

**Figure 2** – Photographic record: mass market coffee.



Source: prepared by the authors, 2019



**Figure 3** – Photographic record: capsule and specialty coffee.



Source: prepared by the authors, 2019

### Mass market packaging signs

**Figure 4** – Photographic record: mass market coffee.

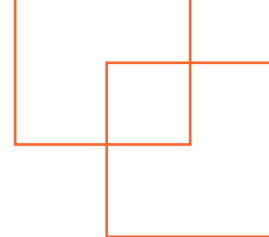


Source: prepared by the authors, 2019

As we can notice in figure 4, vibrant colors such as red, orange and yellow gradients predominate in traditional, mass market coffee packaging. Visual composition frequently has two main volumes: the brand logo and a cup of coffee. Some decorative elements, such as coffee beans and shapes imitating the steam movements are recurrent, as well as bolder fonts, and big brand names inside geometric shapes.

Visual codes convey warm feelings, for instance, sunshine effects with sunrise warm tones in the background; or green backgrounds, such as in the Melitta pack which imitates a coffee plantation texture. The appetite





appeal is conveyed by the representations of the dark cup with steam rising, also suggesting attractive flavor and aroma. The visual messages powerfully express the packaging contains coffee. They emphasize didactic aspects and functional uses of the product. Consequently, there is a clear indication of the pack content.

Despite the impact of dominant codes in this segment, there is low differentiation among players. Most of them use bold typefaces, vivid colors, coffee cups, traditional or extra strong versions and discount offers.

3 Corações. Uma paixão Tradicional. Leve 500g e pague 475 g. [3 Corações. A Traditional passion. Buy 500g and pay 475g.]

Pilão. O café forte do Brasil. [Pilão. The strong coffee from Brazil].

3 Corações Extra Forte. Seu café forte. [3 Corações Extra Strong. Your strong coffee].

Most mass market coffee is sold in pillow or vacuum packs, indicating intermediate quality both inside and outside the pack. Thus, product content and packaging material both reflect the same level of quality and suggest affordable prices.

Brand names such as Brasileiro, Pelé and 3 Corações highlight Brazilian origin, the dark color of the beverage, and the habit of drinking coffee on a daily basis, as illustrated by the Bom Jesus brand tagline: “Forte e gostoso. Seu bom café de todos os dias”. [Strong and tasty. Your good coffee everyday].

As previously mentioned, drinking coffee is a strong tradition in Brazil, as is soccer. Therefore, a mass aesthetic taste is reflected in the design standards which, although not refined, are impactful. In this way, packs stand out on shelves, are easily identified and familiar, leading to quick and automatic purchasing.

Consequently, packaging in this segment (see figure 4) communicates didactic messages to a massive audience. In other words, this segment offers a good cost benefit for Brazilians who enjoy hot, black and freshly brewed coffee.

## Specialty coffee packaging signs

**Figure 5** – Photographic record: specialty coffee

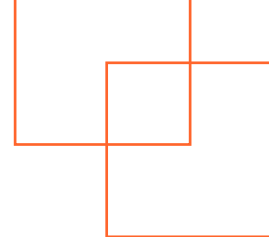


Source: prepared by the authors, 2018

Visual compositions suggest sophistication, refinement, and distinction in the specialty coffee packs, by using neutral colors and/or distinctive textures and patterns. Unlike mass market coffee packs, there is a diversity of graphic elements, including textures, patterns, gold ornaments, and delicate illustrations imitating handmade drawings among premium packs. This set of visual codes suggest high quality and superior taste (see figure 5).

Logos are subtle and contemporary in design. Nothing is too bold or flashy. Most players have clean, and sophisticated packaging design. However, there is a richness and diversity of visual and verbal signs across brands. For instance, regionalism is indicated by maps, figures, illustrations, textures and written messages. So, these packs clearly inform shoppers that they contain premium coffee from the best regions of Brazil, as well as, suggesting a pleasurable consumption experience.

Details on origin, region, elevation, flavor notes, roast, cultivation, producer, certification and preparation are described, combining visual and verbal elements. Graphic elements and ornaments highlight information hierarchies (e.g. color tags for each region). In addition,



material aspects of the packaging indicate higher quality, with one-way valves to smell the product.

Undoubtedly, a more sophisticated didacticism is employed, and highlighted by quality seals (ABIC, Organic, Rainforest, ISO), certainly valued by a refined target audience who believe it is worth paying more for high quality coffee.

The names of product lines – Gourmet Especial de Origem, Rituais, Regiões Brasileiras [Gourmet Special of Origin, Rituals, Brazilian Regions] – and brand taglines also communicate relevant differentiation. Café do Centro is presented as a true trip through Brazil's coffee regional history and culture; while 3 Corações Rituais invites customers to discover emotions that will make ordinary things memorable.

Consequently, specialty coffee pack design (figure 5) encourages consumers to discover what they are buying, its origin, cultivation, type of bean, roasting, and method of preparation. As a result, thoughtful reading is often required, but welcomed by customers who seek for high differentiation and sophisticated aesthetic standards.

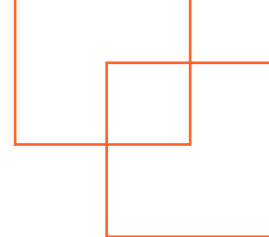
## 5 DISCUSSION

The object of the semiotic analysis reported here is composed of a set of packages of coffee that were firstly observed and selected at points of sale. Secondly, the images were registered with digital photographic resources and studied. The research was carried out by observing and reading those packages of specific products, generically referred to as "coffee":

1- First, the products were recognized through the interpretation of symbolic elements or the symbolic signs of the packaging, mainly through the reading of words related to the name and function of the coffee products.

2- After symbolically identifying the packaging of the coffee product, its iconic-aesthetic differences were recognized. We observed whether the presentation of the iconic signs was relatively more or less colored in each package, and we also noted the saturation of each color. The characteristics of the shapes were perceived with different sizes and expressions, in different types of packaging.

3- Regarding the indexical aspects or index signs, the packages studied were all materially considered, as indexes of different supports: paper, cardboard, and similar materials, with more rustic or sophisticated



surfaces, with different treatments and laminations (or coatings). Iconic effects or photographic records of aesthetic-significant elements such as suggestions or impressions of sewing and embroidery were also observed on the packaging. The photographic records printed on the packages were considered index or indexical signs and the other graphic decorations were considered iconic signs.

As a synthesis of the considerations on the study of the visual, iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs of packaging, it was observed that the aesthetic-semantic or iconic-symbolic references and also the packaging materials of the most popular coffee products sold at more affordable prices, they showed themselves aesthetically-visually with brighter, more colorful materials and with more saturated colors. In turn, the packaging of coffee products presented as being of higher quality and offered at higher prices, proved to be more discreet, with materials and finishes that were apparently more rustic and handcrafted and with graphic or photographic representations that reinforce the meanings or impressions of be a handmade product.

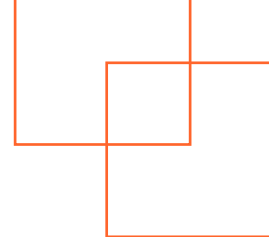
Packaging narratives refer to the singularities of the product lines, particularities of the farming regions or cultural origins to add value to specialty coffee brands. Different visual elements express gourmetization throughout distinct and diverse development of visual and written codes.

According to Oswald (2015, p. 51), while the word gourmet is the most associated with premium beverage and food, luxury prevails for premium fashion and design categories. We agree with her that coffee brands connect the gourmetizing codes, by borrowing signs from gastronomy and gourmet consumer culture. As Oswald (2015) clarifies:

Gourmet consumer culture emphasizes connoisseurship, expertise, and food quality. Gourmet culture is steeped in European gastronomy. It is a masculine domain, as illustrated in the dominance of men tasting, sniffing, and measuring ingredients in the cultural data. The value proposition is based upon the connoisseurship and ranking of the producer, as measured by diplomas, rankings, badges of quality, and taste tests (OSWALD, 2015, p.51-52).

However, some Brazilian brands of specialty coffee go beyond regionalism or gourmetizing trends, because they are also linking to Brazilian arts and crafts, and coffee culture. In this way, they add innovation to cultural traditions and symbols, such as the packaging of Café do Centro's gourmet line.

While at the high-end independent coffee shops studied by Quintão, Brito and Belk (2017) and Pomiès (2016), the customer experiences a sense



of belonging to a community of experts that is a key cultural-symbolic sign; at the supermarkets, it is the packaging signs that stand out to communicate a rich set of visual and verbal signs. As Perez (2004) emphasizes, the meanings of packaging are revealed at the first time that consumers get in touch with a brand, especially in supermarkets. We agree with Perez (2004) that packaging works as powerful semiotic media because they communicate impactful and relevant messages about brands. Thus, they do not only transport, protect or identify product content, because they also inform branding content materializing brand identity.

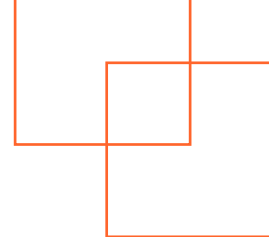
In this manuscript, we applied Semiotics to explore visual and verbal signs of coffee packaging in Brazil to bridge existing knowledge in the Design and Consumer Culture Theory literature. We begin by referring to Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) previous studies on specialty coffee and high-end independent coffee shops, connected with consumer cultural habits and rituals related to the premium coffee consumption.

The Design literature contributes to our analysis because it is focused on the physical-tangible dimensions of brands to inform and express brands as graphic signs, such as product packs. Thus, for designers, brands especially regard what consumers see and touch. Finally, from the Semiotic perspective, what matters is the meaning-making processes, in other words, how products or services become meaningful brands for consumers. In this sense, a semiotic mapping can be an insightful route to explore a specific scenario, such as specialty coffee in Brazilian supermarkets.

In the upcoming steps of this research, we intend to discuss how this gourmetizing trend is transforming customers' experience in the supermarket conducting a qualitative fieldwork, to understand the role played by packaging from the consumers' perspective.

## 6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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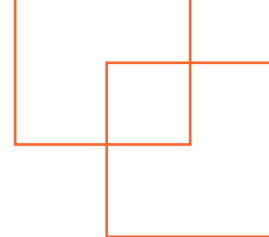
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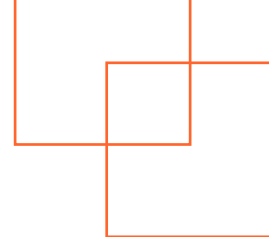
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