



An Analysis of Hotels Response to Online Guest Complaints

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Abstract. *Business writing by hotel administrators in responding to guest complaint reviews on TripAdvisor is crucial for maintaining an appropriate tone that fosters positive feedback from the guest as a single mishandled TripAdvisor complaint can rapidly decrease the prospective guests' trust. The purpose of this study is to examine the structures and identify the language expressions used in complaint replies by the hotel administrators on an online platform called TripAdvisor, and also examine the alignment between the practice and Shirley Taylor's theory to provide a strategic business writing framework for replying complaints efficiently. The method of this study is a descriptive-qualitative approach, which requires interpretation of the data patterns. This study conducted on Tripadvisor, an online platform, focuses on the Harris Kuta Tuban and Melia Hotel. The result of this study showed the specific structure of business writing (introduction, details, action or response, and closing) and the language expressions (greeting, apologies, etc.) used by those hotel administrators. The findings of this study provide a strategic business writing structure that is going to make it easier to write complaint replies efficiently. In addition, we are going to learn more about the language expressions used by prestigious hotels to reply to customers' complaints.*

Keywords: *Business Writing; Complaint; Correspondence; Language Expressions; Structure*

1. INTRODUCTION

In business, communication is a key to success. We have to build great and effective communication either through verbal or nonverbal communication; furthermore, as a businessperson, we have to write professionally. Our writing should state our messages clearly and convey our sincerity to evoke the response that we want from the readers. In contrast, imprecise language and unstructured or drawn-out sentences, whether spoken or written, will leave a negative impression; at worst, there might be miscommunication, which can cause certain problems in the future. Taylor (2012) stated that in written communication, the readers need to find other ways to evaluate or criticize the person who is 'speaking' (writing) by looking at the writer's 'style' because they could not see or hear the writer. Style here means encompassing consistent structure, proper form, creativity, visual attractiveness, and elements that create impactful messages. Taylor also proposes a simple four-point plan framework for structuring business messages, namely introduction, details, response or action, and close.

There are several studies that have explored the structure of business writing, which showed two different results. Rachmania & Mirahayuni (2009) showed that in business letter writing, copy notation, interest, salutation, complimentary close and signature can be ignored or not used either intentionally or unintentionally, while the letterhead, date, inside address, subject line, body of the letter are always available. On the other hand, Assanova & Kurmanova (2017), Sundari (2018), Dewi et al. (2020), Dewi et al. (2020), Sverdlova et al. (2020),

Pusparani et al. (2022), and Iliescu (2024) showed that in business writing, all elements should be available to maintain the formality and professionalism.

Several researchers have analyzed the structure of business writing responses to maintain rapport with customers. Krisnawati et al. (2022) and Lestari et al. (2024) emphasize empathy, apologies, problem-solving, solutions, reassurances, and follow-ups for handling complaints. Tam et al. (2022) differentiate responses for positive reviews feature greetings, expressing feelings, thanking reviewers, and acknowledging the reviewer's value, while complaint ones use personalized responses. Taw et al. (2022) showed that opening, acknowledging feedback, dealing with complaints, positioning hotel brand, concluding and closing are moves to handle complaints. Mahayana et al. (2025) found that attitude, engagement, and decisiveness significantly influence guest satisfaction.

Numerous studies have explored the language used in business writing to respond to the customers. Damayanti et al. (2025) showed that the language used in responding to guest complaint emails such as thanking, apologizing, giving a reason, offering something, suggesting, and showing sympathy. Yaghubyan (2024) highlighted the importance of concise language, simple structure, and unitary contents to establish successful business communication. Overall, effective business writing should prioritize clarity, empathy, and appropriate tone to foster positive relationships with customers.

Effective business writing by hotel administrators in responding to guest complaint reviews on TripAdvisor is crucial for maintaining an appropriate tone that fosters positive feedback as a single mishandled TripAdvisor complaint can rapidly decrease the prospective guests' trust. This research reveals pressing gaps in current practices. In contrast to prior studies that focusing on private email-based correspondence, this research targets public replies on TripAdvisor. Existing analyses overlook structured frameworks like Shirley Taylor's four-point plan strategy, which no prior study has applied to online review responses. This study examines replies from Harris Kuta Tuban Hotel and Melia Bali Hotel as both hotels actively engaging with the guests on TripAdvisor. Identifying alignment of online review responses with Shirley Taylor's strategy provides actionable guidelines, simplifying complaint replies, and enhancing professionalism

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Complaint Replies in Business Writing

Hart (2000) stated that business writing is all about communication. Great Communication in writing means convey the message clearly to the readers and avoid misleading or confusing them. It is in line with Al-Maskari (2013) that stated business writing aims to communicate with the readers, not to impress them with the vocabularies. In conclusion, business writing is communication used in professional set up that takes a lot of consideration in its structure, language, and others; therefore, the readers could understand the information in it without confusion. Bennie (2009) stated that not all styles of communication are the same; a style that works well in one context might be completely inappropriate in another. For instance, the vocabulary used as writing a novel, e-mailing, or speaking to a friend will be significantly different. An accurate, brief, and clear writing style is usually used in writing letters, reports, advertisements, et cetera.

Business writing is communication used in professional set up that takes a lot of consideration to convey the message clearly to the readers and avoid misleading or confusing them. One example of business writing is complaint replies in business set up such as product reviews. Taylor (2017) explained that complaint replies are professional responses from a business person to a customer's formal complaint, act as 'silent salesmen', typically addressing issues like wrong goods, poor service, et cetera. They aim to acknowledge the problem, apologize sincerely without defensiveness, explain briefly, offer a clear resolution (e.g., refund, repair, or replacement), and rebuild trust by showing eagerness to serve.

Structure in Business Writing for Complaint Replies

There are several studies that have explored the structure of business writing, which showed two different results. Rachmania & Mirahayuni (2009) showed that in business letter writing, copy notation, interest, salutation, complimentary close and signature can be ignored or not used either intentionally or unintentionally, while the letterhead, date, inside address, subject line, body of the letter are always available. On the other hand, Assanova & Kurmanova (2017), Sundari (2018), Sverdlova et al. (2020), Pusparani et al. (2022), and Iliescu (2024) showed that in business writing, all elements should be available to maintain the formality and professionalism. In line with it, Dewi et al. (2020) stated that the structure of email covers opening (greeting and introduction), body (expressing gratitude, stating the purpose, providing information, and offering further assistance), and closing (words of appreciation and signature). Dewi et al. (2020) stated that greetings, confirmation, expressing gratitude, providing details,

extending an invitation, and close are used by 100% of the respondents in correspondence because they follow the email or letter structure of the hotel.

Several researchers have analyzed the structure of business writing responses to maintain rapport with customers. Krisnawati et al. (2022) stated that empathy, apologize, and follow up were strategies to handle complaints. Lestari et al. (2024) showed that empathy, problem-solving, offering solutions, apologizing, reassurances, and follow-up actions are identified as essential components in handling guest complaints. Tam et al. (2022) concluded that responding to positive reviews typically include elements like greetings, expressing feelings, thanking reviewers, and acknowledging the reviewer's value, while responses to customer complaints vary more such as personalized responses are crucial for rebuilding trust, as they demonstrate the hotel's concern for customer opinions and highlight their engagement. Taw et al. (2022) showed that there are six main moves in responses to negative reviews, namely opening, acknowledging feedback, dealing with complaints, positioning hotel brand, concluding and closing. Mahayana et al. (2025) found that attitude, engagement, and decisiveness significantly influence guest satisfaction.

Taylor (2017) presents the four-point plan strategy to respond a written complaint that is going to be used by the writer to investigate the data, namely:

“1) Introduction (personalized your reply and thank the customer; explain why you appreciate the complaint and apologize for what has happened). 2) Details (acknowledge the customer's point of view; state what action you have taken to fix things; keep it simple and specific). 3) Action (perhaps state what was learned from what happened; aim to exceed the customer's expectations; it may be appropriate to send a small corporate gift or voucher). 4) Close (close positively).”

Here are the details of Taylor's (2012) strategies. In the opening of introduction, the first paragraph states the reason for the communication that is basically setting the scene. It may involve acknowledging previous correspondence, referring to a meeting or contact, and introducing the topic being discussed. In the central section (details) provides all the information that the recipient requires, or the writer may be requesting information instead, sometimes both. Details should be provided simply and clearly, with separate paragraphs used for individual sections that flow rationally to a natural conclusion that most likely states any necessary action. In the conclusion (action or response) draws the message toward a rational conclusion that may state the expected action from the recipient or the action that the writer intends to take as a result of the provided details. Lastly, a simple one-line closing sentence is sufficient to complete a message, which should be relevant to the content of the message.

Language Expression in Business Writing for Complaint Replies

Numerous studies have explored the language used in business writing to respond to the customers. Damayanti et al. (2025) showed that the language used in responding to guest complaint emails such as thanking, apologizing, giving a reason, offering something, suggesting, and showing sympathy. Yaghubyan (2024) highlighted the importance of concise language, simple structure, and unitary contents to establish successful business communication. Overall, effective business writing should prioritize clarity, empathy, and appropriate tone to foster positive relationships with customers. Based on Taylor (2017) there are several examples of language expression in four-point plan for replying to complaints that is going to be used by the writer to investigate the data such as.

“Openings (I am sorry to hear that the goods sent under this order did not reach you until...; I am sorry that you have experienced delays in the delivery of...; Thank you for your letter of ... and we are sorry for this most unfortunate mistake.; Thank you for your message and we are sorry for the unfortunate mistake that was made.) Useful central phrases (We appreciate the opportunity to clarify this issue.; It is obvious that on this occasion a mistake happened on our side.; You have rightly pointed out that...; In the circumstances, it is important that we make amends for your inconvenience.; Due to an oversight...; It is unfortunate that...; I am sorry about the distress this caused you.) Action/close (We assure you that we are doing all we can to rush delivery. Once again, we apologise for the inconvenience this delay is causing you.; We hope you will be satisfied with the arrangements we have made.; We hope these arrangements are satisfactory and look forward to receiving your future orders.; Once again, we apologise for the inconvenience.; We are sorry for the unfortunate mistake and can assure you that a similar incident will not happen again. As a gesture of goodwill, I am pleased to enclose...; Thank you once again for taking the time to write to us.)”

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study examined and identified the structure, the language expressions used in complaint replies on Tripadvisor, and the alignment between Shirley Taylor's four-point plan strategy and the hotel administrators' business writing for replying to complaint reviews on TripAdvisor through observation sheets; therefore, this study conducted using a qualitative approach and descriptive method by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's theory. Miles et al. (2014) stated that qualitative research attempts to capture a specific case, a focused and bounded phenomenon embedded in its context, through intense and prolonged contact with the participants in a particular setting which is done mostly with words based on observations,

documents, et cetera. A line with it, Bogdan & Biklen (2007) stated that qualitative research is descriptive in nature, with data collected in the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. In addition, Dowson (2007) stated that qualitative explores attitudes, behavior, and experiences that require a process of understanding social or human problems formed in words. The subjects of this research were 50 complaint replies performed by the hotel administrators of Harris Kuta Tuban and Melia Hotel on the guest reviews on TripAdvisor website that consisted of 25 complaint replies from each hotel.

As this study was conducted according to Interactive Model Analysis by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), it involved a number of steps, including data collection, reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. Data collection entailed purposively sampling and systematically documenting 50 TripAdvisor complaint replies (25 from Harris Kuta Tuban and 25 from Melia Bali Hotel) most relevant to the research questions on administrators' response. Data reduction condensed these through coding key features like introduction, details, actions, and close. Data display organized findings into tabels for cross-hotel comparisons, revealing patterns of the structure and language expressions. Conclusion drawing/verification interpreted these displays to formulate propositions, verified against raw data. This model emphasizes the connections between of these phases, this approach enables researchers to repeatedly review earlier steps as new insights emerge, improving the analysis's accuracy and depth.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study focused on the structures and language expressions of complaint replies written by hotel administrators on TripAdvisor and the alignment between Shirley Taylor's four-point plan strategy and the hotel administrators' business writing for replying to complaint reviews on TripAdvisor. The structure and language expressions of complaint replies written by hotel administrators on TripAdvisor in this study was observe based on Shirley Taylor's strategy that involves 4 main points (Introduction, Details, Response/Action, and Close). In this study, the data were collected through systematic visual documentation of complaint replies written by Harris Kuta Tuban and Melia Bali Hotels' administrators on TripAdvisor from 2024-2026 to have the latest information focusing on their facilities and services. The research result was organized based on the topic and the details of the results could be seen as follows.

Structure Used in Business Writing by the Hotel Administrators for Replying to Complaint Reviews on TripAdvisor

Taylor (2017) classified several strategies in business writing, a simple framework for structuring all written messages called four-point plan, namely introduction (related to the writer's background or purpose of writing), details (related to giving or asking for information or instructions along with the details), response or action (related to the action that the reader should take, action the writer is going to take, and notify the deadline if necessary), and close (related to a simple one-line closing sentence). Below is the tabulation of structure used by hotel administrators at Harris Kuta Tuban and Melia Bali Hotel in replying complaint reviews that shows the elements that mention on Shirley Taylor's strategies and how the hotel administrators apply them in their complaint replies.

Table 1. Tabulation of Structure Used by Hotel Administrators at Harris Kuta Tuban and Melia Bali Hotel in Replying Complaint Reviews

	Criteria (0-3)	Practice at Harris Kuta Tuban	Practice at Melia Bali Hotel
Introduction	0=None, 1=Generic greeting, 2=Personalized thanks, 3=Empathetic apology + name	1, 2, and 3	1, 2, and 3
Details	0=Absent, 1=Vague reference, 2=Factual recap, 3=Specific issue acknowledgment	0	2 and 3
Actions	0=No action, 1=General promise, 2=Specific fix, 3=Timeline	1	1 and 2
Close	0=Abrupt end, 1=Standard sign-off, 2=Return invite, 3=Optimistic goodwill	1 and 2	1 and 2

The table above showed that the administrators of Harris Kuta Tuban, a 4 star-hotel, mostly use more general structure replies that starts with the introduction. It features a general greeting, personalized thanks, and empathetic apology. The details are totally absent and continue to the actions that features general promise. Standard sign-off and a return invitation followed as the close. Meanwhile, administrators of Melia Bali Hotel, a 5 star-hotel, mostly use more personalized structure replies that starts with the introduction. It features a general greeting, personalized thanks, and empathetic apology. Followed by details that features actual recap and specific issue acknowledgment. The actions stated a general promise and specific fix. Close by a standard sign-off and a return invitation.

Language Expressions Used in Business Writing by the Hotel Administrators for Replying to Complaint Reviews on TripAdvisor

Taylor (2017) stated that language expression is the way the writer uses language to establish relationships, communicate the ideas precisely, and convey a good impression. Taylor (2017) also explained that complaint replies are professional responses from a businessperson to a customer's formal complaint, typically addressing issues like wrong goods, poor service, et cetera that aim to acknowledge the problem, apologize sincerely without defensiveness, explain briefly if needed, offer a clear resolution (e.g., refund, repair, or replacement), and rebuild trust by showing eagerness to serve the customers. Thus, the way the writer uses language to write complaint replies is important, as it determines the impressions of the guest toward the company's image and responsibility. Below is the tabulation of language expressions on every element that is mentioned in Shirley Taylor's strategies (four-point plan) used by hotel administrators at Harris Kuta Tuban and Melia Bali Hotel in replying to complaint reviews.

Table 2. Tabulation of Language Expressions Used by Hotel Administrators at Harris Kuta Tuban and Melia Bali Hotel in Replying Complaint Reviews

Sample		
Harris Kuta Tuban	Introduction	Greeting: Cheers! [name], General thanks: Thank you for your valuable time to write a review of our hotel and for sharing your constructive feedback. Empathetic apology: Please accept our apologies for the unpleasant experience. We sincerely hope that the recent stay has not marred your impression of you on us.
	Details	-
	Actions	General promise: We assure you that your review will encourage our players at HARRIS KUTA TUBAN Bali to delight all of our valuable guests.
	Close	Return invitation: We will look forward to having the privilege of welcoming you again in the near future. Standard sign-off: HARRISly yours,
Melia Bali Hotel	Introduction	Greeting: Dear [name], Warmest greetings from Melia Bali!, Personalized thanks: Thank you for taking the time to share your feedback about your recent stay with us. Appreciate compliment: I am glad to hear that you ... / Your compliments are greatly appreciated.
	Details	Empathetic apology: I am truly sorry to learn about the inconveniences you faced with ... / I sincerely apologize for the discomfort you experienced with ... / We sincerely apologize for ... / We regret that ... / Factual recaps and Specific issue acknowledgment: Your concerns about <i>the room condition, restaurant closures, and limited food options</i> are well noted.

Actions	<p>General promise: Our team is working with the utmost urgency to resolve this matter as quickly as possible and to ensure that every guest receives proper care, support, and clear communication throughout the process. / The issues you've raised about ... will be addressed to ensure future guests do not face the same challenges. / Please know that we are actively working to address this concern to ensure a more enjoyable experience for all our guests. /</p> <p>Specific fix: We understand the need for renovation and are pleased to inform you that significant improvements are scheduled. / To best accommodate your needs, we are pleased to offer the following options: 1. Relocation to one of our trusted hotel partners, 2. Rescheduling your reservation, or 3. Full-refund, depending on what is most convenient for you. /</p>
Close	<p>Return invitation: We truly hope to have the pleasure of welcoming you back in the future. / we hope to have the opportunity to offer you a more satisfying stay in the future. /</p> <p>Standard sign-off: Best regards,</p>

The table showed that the administrators of Harris Kuta Tuban, a 4 star-hotel, mostly use standardized language expressions' in replying to guests' complaint reviews. The introduction features a general greeting (e.g., "Cheers! [name],") paired with personalized thanks (e.g., "Thank you for your valuable time ... constructive feedback") and an empathetic apology (e.g., Please accept our apologies for the unpleasant experience. We sincerely hope that the recent stay has not marred your impression of you on us.). The details is notably absent, lacking any reference, factual recap or specific issue acknowledgment. The action offers a vague or general promise (e.g., "your review would encourage our players... to delight all... guests") without specifics fixes. The close adheres to standard sign-off (e.g., "HARRISly yours") and followed by a return invitation (e.g., "look forward to... welcoming you again").

On the other hand, administrators of Melia Bali Hotel, a 5 star-hotel, mostly use standardized language expressions' in replying to guests' complaint reviews. The introduction starts with a general greeting (e.g., "Dear, [name]", "Warmest greetings from Melia Bali!") paired with personalized thanks (e.g., "Thank you for sharing your feedback/ Thank you for taking the time to share your feedback about your recent stay with us.") and an empathetic apology (e.g., "We are deeply sorry to hear about your disappointing experience"). In the details, the responses are expressed precisely and balance, with factual recaps (e.g., "hotel's condition... outdated facilities," "breakfast variety and service," "issues at the pool," "staffing concerns") paired with empathetic phrases (e.g., "We apologize... inconvenience caused," "we understand/regret," "concerns... are noted"). Positive notes are highlighted appreciatively (e.g., "We appreciate your positive comments about the food quality"), softening critiques while owning specifics. The actions offer proactive and general commitments (e.g., "we will work to enhance," "are being addressed," "committed to supporting") with targeted fixes (e.g.,

"significant improvements are scheduled," "better service for all our guests," "supporting [staff] during this transition" and renovation context for facilities/pool, dining enhancements). Close with standard sign-off (e.g., "Best regards") and followed by a return invitation (e.g., "hope to welcome you back once the renovations are complete").

Discussion

Structure Used in Business Writing by the Hotel Administrators for Replying to Complaint Reviews on TripAdvisor

The research result showed that administrators at Harris Kuta Tuban, a 4-star hotel, rely on a general and templated reply structure, namely an introduction with a standard greeting, personalized thanks, and empathetic apology; a broad or general promise of action; and a conventional close with sign-off and return invitation. Details (vague reference, factual recaps, and specific acknowledgement issues) are completely absent. It showed that Harris Kuta Tuban's replies are not personalized and missed several elements in four-point plan by Shirley Taylor such as Details and vague actions that lead to incomplete format. In contrast, Melia Bali, a 5-star hotel, used a more personalized structure, namely a general greeting, personalized thanks, and empathetic apology; followed by details that include factual recap and specific issue acknowledgment; actions that mention a general promise with a targeted fix; and a conventional close with sign-off and return invitation. It showed that Melia Bali Hotel's replies are personalized and have complete structure align with four-point plan by Shirley Taylor. Melia Bali Hotel's replies mention contact-person's email address that Shirley Taylor didn't mention and perfected Shirley Taylor strategy.

The result showed that Melia Bali Hotel's complaint replies more align to Assanova & Kurmanova (2017), Sundari (2018), Dewi et al. (2020), Dewi et al. (2020), Sverdlova et al. (2020), Pusparani et al. (2022), and Iliescu (2024) that showed all elements should be available to maintain the formality and professionalism rather than Rachmania & Mirahayuni (2009) that some elements can be ignored either intentionally or unintentionally, while the introduction and body are always available. The result also aligned with Krisnawati et al. (2022), Tam et al. (2022), Taw et al. (2022), Lestari et al. (2024), and Mahayana et al. (2025) emphasize empathetic opening, apologies, problem-solving, solutions, reassurances, follow-ups, concluding and closing that are more personalized for handling complaints to significantly influence guest satisfaction. Overall, the 5-star approach adds customer-centric elements like personalized thanks, recaps, and precise solutions to foster greater trust and satisfaction, aligning with higher-tier service expectations, while the 4-star method emphasizes efficiency

but miss the opportunity to foster greater trust and satisfaction as they ignore to expressing empathy and validating customer feelings.

Language Expressions Used in Business Writing by the Hotel Administrators for Replying to Complaint Reviews on TripAdvisor

The research result showed Harris Kuta Tuban (4-star) followed 3 from 4 points of Shirley Taylor's four-point plan in TripAdvisor replies: a greeting "Cheers! [name]", general thanks ("Thank you for your valuable time"), no details, vague promises ("your review will encourage our team"), and a simple close "HARRISly yours" with return invitation. It showed that Harris Kuta Tuban is prioritizing efficiency rather than personalized and formal tone. Melia Bali (5-star) used 4 from 4 points of Shirley Taylor's four-point plan: warm introduction ("Dear [name], Warmest greetings"; "Thank you for sharing"; "deeply sorry"), specific details, clear actions (general promises and fixes like "improvements scheduled"), and a formal close with return invitation. Melia Bali Hotel's detailed, empathetic style better fits Shirley Taylor's strategy for building trust, suiting 5-star service, while Harris Kuta Tuban keeps it short. This result aligned with Yaghubyan (2024) and Damayanti et al. (2025) that showed the language used in responding to guest complaint emails such as thanking, apologizing, giving a reason, offering something, suggesting, and showing sympathy, which highlighted the importance of concise language, simple structure, and unitary contents to establish effective written business communication.

5. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Melia Bali Hotel (5-star) demonstrated superior alignment with Shirley Taylor's four-point plan for complaint replies, featuring a complete structure: a warm *Introduction* with personalized greetings, thanks, and apologies; detailed, non-defensive *Details*; specific *Response/Action* commitments like "improvements scheduled"; and a positive *Close* with return invitations. It even enhances the strategy by adding unmentioned elements, such as contact-person emails and acknowledgments of guests' compliments, embodying a customer-centric approach that fosters greater trust and satisfaction—perfectly suiting higher-tier service expectations. In contrast, Harris Kuta Tuban (4-star) executes only 3/4 elements superficially: a casual greeting like "Cheers! [name]" and general thanks in the *Introduction*, vague promises in *Response/Action* without fixes or contacts, and a branded *Close* like "HARRISly yours," while skipping *Details* entirely. This prioritizes templated efficiency over empathy and validation, missing opportunities to build deeper trust. Ultimately, Melia Bali Hotel's detailed, empathetic style fully realizes Shirley Taylor's intent,

while Harris Kuta Tuban's templated replies suit mid-tier efficiency but ignore the importance of conveying complaint resolution.

Based on the findings of this study, the writer suggests the future researchers to conduct interviews with the administrators of those hotels to uncover the underlying rationales behind their chosen response structures and specific wordings. These interviews could explore decision-making processes, such as template standardization for efficiency, cultural influences on empathetic phrasing, or training protocols shaping proactive commitments, thereby enriching quantitative content analysis with qualitative depth. This approach would enhance methodological triangulation by integrating textual data with firsthand insights, revealing potential gaps between policy intentions and actual guest perceptions.

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