



DEPICTING THE DESIRED IDENTITY THROUGH
THE PRACTICE OF PERSONAL DRESS

HOW IS IDENTITY SHAPED AND TRANSFORMED
THROUGH PERSONAL DRESS?

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Figure 1 - The Huxleys, Works on Glitter, *Putting on the Glitz* 2015

ABSTRACT

Dress is part of every individual's everyday life, this research investigates how personal dress assists in shaping and transforming our identities as human beings. Expanding on ideas of Identity, Depiction/Perception and Adornment by fashion theorists Joanne Entwistle, Elizabeth Wilson, Roach-Higgins and Eicher, this research argues the way that fashion or personal dress is a daily practice undertaken by every individual and therefore can be considered a means of shaping one's identity. Through exploring the jumpsuits or bodysuits of designers Jean Paul Gaultier, Viktor and Rolf and the costumes of David Bowie, it also touches on the notion of clothing being the protective barrier between self and society and how individuals can create different identities they wish to portray through the use of fashion and personal dress.

INTRODUCTION

Dress is part of every individual's everyday life and assists us to create or shape the identity we wish to depict to the world. Whether this may be a conscious or subconscious thought to action process, the individual uses personal dress and adornment to portray themselves and to create the boundary between self and society. This may differ daily for individuals depending on situations of environment, emotions or social circumstances. Exploring themes of how people dress to express one's self and how dress is used to display the desired self, this thesis will explore how fashion and dress play such an important role in individual identity.

This thesis will explore in detail the question, 'How is Identity Shaped and Transformed Through Personal Dress?' along with sub-questions surrounding each themes of *Identity*, *Depiction/ Perception* and *Adornment*. Within these themes the questions addressed are ones such as 'Can fashion create different identities in which individuals wish to portray to the outside world?', 'Do individuals use adornment as a form of protection and a barrier of one's true identity or part of that they wish to keep concealed?', 'Is fashion and the garments we choose to wear considered a form of creative expressionism?', 'What are some difference between cultural adornment and those of personal aesthetic purposes?'. Exploring these questions, with supported research from theorists such as Joanne Entwistle, Elizabeth Wilson, Joanne B Eicher, Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and many others, and reflecting on my own personal studio practice and experience that this thesis will aim to uncover and delve deeper into the practice of personal dress as many could consider such theme insignificant because it is such a subconscious act that every individual partakes in daily.

This thesis will aim to unveil the notion of our personal presentation being a social barrier between self and society; this again may not usually be considered although when investigated it becomes apparent that clothes do assist this outcome. Whether an individual chooses to purchase and dress themselves in the latest fashion trends and to somewhat 'follow the crowd' or alternatively, to dress in a manner of standing out, clothing and adornment acts as somewhat of a protection. Through exploring this, the obvious stance is that of course clothing protects us, concealing body parts that are deemed private, along with sheltering us from the cold or even preventing us from damage/harm to the body. But it is through research and expanding knowledge of these themes that this thesis will attempt to present the concept of dress being more of a metaphorical barrier between self and society, explored further through the theme of *Identity*.

The act of dressing is often overlooked as a practice as it is such a subconscious act every individual partakes in daily, even though the average human will spend approximately half an hour thinking about and deciding what to wear each day, averaging at 109.5 hours a year, states Colette Werden in her '*They're not Just Clothes*' 2016 talk, further explored in this writing through the theme of 'Depiction/Perception' (Werden 2016).

Exploring the three key themes previously mentioned, being *Identity*, *Depiction/Perception* and *Adornment* this thesis will not only address these in the context of personal dress but will also consider sub questions of the themes to expand and explain each one in depth with the assistance of relevant research. Evidence will be supported by researching the theorists previously mentioned, along with practitioners such as Australian duo, fashion designers and performers, The Huxleys, Australian designer and artist Adele Varcoe, Dutch designers Viktor & Rolf, French designer Jean Paul Gaultier and British designer Alexander McQueen. Artist David Bowie will also be considered to bring in an art aspect, as fashion is an art form and the act of dressing could be considered an art.

Utilising key publication such as, *The Fashioned Body; Fashion, Dress & Modern Social Theory* by Joanne Entwistle, text from *Invisible Fashion; From the Interface to Re-Embodiment: Experience Beyond Clothes* by Luca Marchetti and Emanuele Quinz, report *Dress and Identity* by Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher along with analysing a selection of relevant images for each

theme, this will assist in creating the visual representation for the reader of what each theme is addressing, this will also be done with the use of referencing practitioners and artists.

The bodysuit is discussed in relation to identity and through examining practices by Australian Artists and Designer, Adele Varcoe it can be noticed that the jumpsuit, (or 'onesie' as Varcoe refers to them as) can not only be an expression of identity and but also, an extension of identity.

My own studio practice will be discussed, in particular, the use of the bodysuit and its connection to the body, being almost a second skin. This is intended to add another element and to create a clear and relatable link to the themes and arguments, to the real world and to every individual.



Figure 2 - David Bowie performing as Ziggy Stardust

IDENTITY

The theme of *Identity* through fashion is important to the main question which considers that fashion can arguably shape and transform our identity, or in some cases, identities. In her seminal text, *The Fashioned Body*, Entwistle (2015) reinforces theories of Identity, such as the notion that fashion and dress “can be expressive of identity” in the manner that the way someone dresses can in fact present their identity or the identity they wish to put forward, yet Entwistle also states that on the other hand, clothes “do not straightforwardly ‘speak’ and can therefore be open to misinterpretation”(Entwistle 2015:114). Entwistle writes about fashion as a means of disguising and of protection or armour.

Marchetti and Quinz, Roach-Higgins and Eicher also write about the productive nature of fashion and how it reflects societal boundaries as it communicates identity. Entwistle assists in making the connection between the two themes; “The clothes we choose to wear can be expressive of identity, telling others something about our gender, class, status and so on” (Entwistle 2015:112). This gives an understanding of how everyday dress can assist and be a major contributor to individual’s identities, whether or not the individual is conscious of it or not. “Identity can be said to be ‘immanent’ in appearance and yet, how it can also be mistaken, hidden behind a ‘disguise’” states Entwistle (2015:112), examining works of Sennett (1977) and Finkelstein (1991). When expanding thoughts behind the theory of fashion depicting the identity, it considers the theory that perhaps fashion assists in disguising or protecting the individual’s identity.

Entwistle also explores the notion of protection through fashion when she states, “Fashion serves to protect one from prying eyes and enables one to put a distance between self and other - it is the ‘armour’ of the modern world” (Entwistle 2015:120). This concept is also explored through ‘Invisible Fashion, From the interface to re-embodiment: experience beyond clothes’ by Luca Marchetti and Emanuele Quinz, published in 2009. Themes of identity through fashion is discussed but by using the term ‘clothes’ this creates a more refined example rather than using the broader term ‘fashion’. As stated, “more and more often clothes become the grounds for confrontation and conflict, opposing different identities: sexual, ethnic, social and even political” (Marchetti & Quinz 2009:117). This is not only suggesting that clothing assists in shaping identity but can create and shape different identities in which the individual possess. Through this book they also explore the theory that clothing encompasses the body and the body encompasses the soul and identity. “Through the act of putting on clothes the body is transformed” (Marchetti & Quinz 2009:118) states the writers as they explore the theme of transformation through dress, again, referring back to how clothes can fashion an array of identities for the individual.

In the report ‘Dress and Identity’ by Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, the writers explore how individuals form and shape their identity through dress, “Dress contributes to the acquisition of identities and the development of sense of self” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992: 5). The writers also expand the notion of identity through dress by considering economic status, social status, religion, and environment and suggesting that one’s dress as communication could change with these different structures therefore, creating a change in one’s identity or conveyed identity, “no two people encounter exactly the same environmental circumstances, social and otherwise, for acquiring ways of behaving that lead to establishing of identities. Therefore, the identities for any one person, including those communicated by dress, are uniquely personal” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher 1992: 5).

The bodysuit can be seen as a clear way to express identity. Australian Artist and Designer Adele Varcoe uses the bodysuit or, as she refers to them, 'onesies' to assist in changing the perception of fashion and clothes and puts forth the notion to question why people wear what they do. Adele explores questions such as "why are you wearing this", Varcoe states "Sometimes I felt self conscious, but then over time it became the norm, like a skin" (Varcoe for Reich 2018).

In 2016 Varcoe partook in a 'wardrobe swap', a self initiated 12 month long social experiment in which she swapped her wardrobe with a male named James from New York. In Varcoe's own dissertation, *Feeling Fashion*, she explains how much of an impact this had on her and states "I almost didn't go ahead with it. I had a minor anxiety attack the night before...who will I be when I'm not the girl in the jumpsuits?" (Varcoe 2016: 152) Varcoe also explained "I don't really feel like myself in these clothes...[I] don't feel like Adele in these clothes" in the 2016 video interview, *Price Versus Adele Varcoe*. In this interview she also expresses that while she wore her "somewhat provocative" onesies "people would respond in different ways" (Varcoe for Prince 2016) and although at times not in nice ways Varcoe took all comments in her stride and began to see the "power of dress and what can come about from the clothes we wear" (Varcoe for Prince 2016).



Figure 3 - Adele Varcoe

Referring back to Adele Varcoe's personal dissertation she states that "my fashion practice developed from thinking about clothing and dress purely as visual communication to considering the immaterial, social affects of fashion" (Varcoe 2016:23). "I believe that social interaction plays a role in the way in which garments shape us and we construct our identity and can extend our performance and perception of others through dress" (2016: 82). It is through these quotes that it becomes evident that to Varcoe garments and fashion are forms of expression and communication of oneself to society, as explored throughout this writing.

Through exploring the notion behind Adele Varcoe's practice of becoming the 'onesie' girl it became evident that the motivation behind a majority of it is one of individuation. This became apparent when reading Varcoe's personal dissertation, especially in the section which she recalls the wardrobe swap and how wearing James's clothes effected her, stating "I am in the background, invisible" (2016:156). It is through this statement and many others through the recollection of the experiment that Varcoe suggests that when not in her 'onesie' and looking unique and individual that she started to feel uncomfortable and people's perceptions of her changed and also how she felt about herself and her identity, "I hadn't only swapped my clothes but I had swapped part of my character, self and the roles I play. The way I have known myself for the past four years was fun,

outgoing and adventurous. People's expectations towards me informed this character. Their responses and engagement shaped the way I felt and lived in the jumpsuit. Without that I am another character." (2016:156). This quote really reinforces the notion that Varcoe began to lose a sense of her personal identity without her 'onesie'.



Figure 4 - The Huxleys, Works on Glitter, *Kiss Kiss Kiss* 2015

Australian costume designers and performers, The Huxleys, consisting of Will and Garrett Huxley also use bodysuits as their main form of costume. Through the concealment of their entire bodies and in most cases, the head too, the pair create characters to enhance their performances. "Wearing costumes and makeup is a kind of a protective thing for me...when I design costumes I design them with my head completely covered so there's no identity which I find more interesting but it also does hide who I am" (Garret Huxley for Creative Couples ABC Documentary 2017).

Much like Varcoe, the Huxleys use dress to express themselves and to feel comfortable during their performances by transforming themselves and creating different identities to display to their audience or the world around them. In the 2008 *Vogue Living* article by Annemarie Kiely the Huxleys noted that people often ask them whether they "are a guy or a girl?" (Huxleys in *Vogue* 2018) This presents the idea that they have completely transformed their identities when in performance mode through the use of fashion and the art of dress.

English signer/songwriter, David Bowie was renowned for his bold style and highly influential music and when he created his alter-ego, Ziggy Stardust in the early 70s Bowie created a whole new identity for himself. As explained in the 1977 *CBC Music The Vault* interview, "Ziggy for me was a very simplistic thing, it was what it seemed to be, an alien rockstar and for performance value I dressed him and acted him out, I left it at that. But other people reread him and contributed more information about Ziggy than I'd put into him" (David Bowie for *CBC Music The Vault* 1977). This quote can reflect Entwistle's statements concerning how clothes can be misinterpreted although in this instance, a whole character was open to interpretation or misinterpretation.

It was through adorning himself with fashion and make-up that Bowie could transform himself into Ziggy Stardust, "the clothes were simply outrageous and nobody had seen anything like them before" (David Bowie for Joe Smith 1988) said Bowie in the 1988 interview with Joe Smith and suggests that that was perhaps the reason for all the fame in Ziggy's short lived life from approximately '72 to '76. Much like the Huxleys, Bowie used dress to create a whole new character and identity purely for performance.



Figure 5 - David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust

Looking at the different aspects of identity through fashion and exploring these different authors and theorists it is evident that the theme of identity through fashion takes many forms and in many instances it boils down to opinion as well as the individual themselves. While Entwistle interprets identity through fashion being a form of protection but equally that fashion can be an expression of one's identity. While Marchetti and Quinz agree with these arguments, they also put forward the aspects of self, such as sexual, ethnic, social and political status being presented through dress. But they also make note of how clothing encompasses the body, which then encompasses the soul. It is through this notion that it can be related to Entwistle's argument of protection, in that how the individual presents themselves is protecting something within. Roach-Higgins and Eicher's stance on the theme of identity is one that suggests it is through dress that the individual can develop a sense of self. Much like Marchetti and Quinz, the idea that the individual can inform the world around of their true identity through the use of fashion and dress.

While it has been suggested that fashion can shape one's identity, fashion and the act of dressing is also a form of bodily adornment and a form of expressionism. As explained, identity can be an array of personal traits which we wish to share with the world around and by using fashion as this expression we are portraying the aspects of ourselves we wish to, putting forward the self we want others to see.

Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher also investigate this as an 'aesthetic experience'. They write how "the individual can derive aesthetic pleasure from both the act of creating personal display and from the contemplation of his own display and that of others" (Roach, Eicher 1979:7). It is through this statement that we can connect this theme to one of depiction and perception as it is manifested that the individual is in charge of their own appearance and how they wish to be perceived.

DEPICTION / PERCEPTION

As individuals we portray our desired self through depiction and create the identity of ourselves we wish others to perceive. Fashion is often an outlet of expression for an individual and changing our appearance can then change other's perception of us.

Personal Branding Expert, Colette Werden explores this through individual's visual representation which leads to other's perception of the individual and how "pieces of fabric" can shape this perception. In her talk 'They're not just clothes: How these pieces of fabric influence your identity' Werden explains her own research and found that through many Harvard studies that individuals will make 11 decisions about the person they have just encountered "in just 7 seconds" (Werden 2016). Drawing from the notion of 'judging a book by it's cover' Werden steps onto stage expressing, "as I step onto the stage your mind will begin judging me. As soon as you saw me today your mind had already decided whether you like me or not, what personality traits you think I have and whether you think I'm successful at what I do or not" (Werden 2016).

Through the Harvard study by Michael Solomon, PhD, Psychologist, Chairman, Marketing Department Graduate School of Business, the 11 decisions made in the first 7 seconds of meeting someone are their economic level, education level, competence; honesty; believability; credibility, sex role identification, level of sophistication, trustworthiness, level of success, religious background, social; sexual; professional desirability, political background and ethnic background.

It is often up to the individual as to how they wish to depict themselves in their day-to-day lives and this often decided with their mood or emotions of that particular day, this is explored by S.G.J Ouseley in the book 'Colour Meditations'. He states, that colour is "a vital force, a strong power and influence in our lives" and that "colour exerts a powerful influence on the minds and emotions" (Ouseley 1949: 7). According to Ouseley, "there is the psychological aspect, the study of the influence of colour on the mind and emotions, there is the esoteric aspect, the symbology and attributes of colours, and the colour aspects of the aura" (Ouseley 1949: 8).

This concept of colour having such an impact on individuals and their emotions can be explored through fashion, as Janet Best states in 'Colour Design, Theories and Applications, second edition', "It has long been recognised that colour does indeed influence the consumers purchasing behaviour, many items of clothing are purchased in accordance to a particular 'colour-code' " (Best 2017: 306) Ouseley also explores the notions of which different colours are related to, for example "red is essentially the physical colour: it is connected with the element of fire, the essence of energy" (Ouseley 1949:20), this supports the study of moods and emotions with colour however many other experts such as Adam Akers and Jo Barton find colour and emotions hard to refine as these are different for each individual considering colour is a mental conception as stated by Ouseley and reiterated by Aker and Barton, "little is known about the underlying cognitive mechanisms responsible for such effects" (Akers, Barton 2012).

Although little proof on particular colours supporting moods for different individuals is presented, Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher addresses that clothing alone can support the mood of a particular individual, "to banish depression and melancholy, an individual may deliberately wear dress of colour and design which is thought to express opposite feelings, the joyful and buoyant, for example" (Roach, Eicher 1979: 8). Coming back to the theme of *depiction/perception* it is through fashion and one's choice of how they depict themselves on the outside can be a direct representation of how others will perceive them, as expressed by Adele Varcoe when undertaking her social experiment of the wardrobe swap.



Figure 6 - Viktor & Rolf, Fall 2017 collection

This image is taken from Viktor & Rolf Fall 2017 Collection in which models were sent down the runway wearing big doll-like heads. This image coincides with the theme of Depiction/Perception of this thesis. It is through this image that this theme is evident as both models wear the same outer garment yet each model presents the particular garment so differently that the fact it's the same garment may be overseen. This is the most obvious notion of perception through this image. Further examination of this image gives the viewer an almost opposite feel of the depiction of the models and garments. The model dressed with the dolls head presents a child-like visual and gives off that 'perfect' connotation that dolls often hold. The model presented without the doll-head gives off more of a relaxed depiction of the look and arguably looks a little more 'thrown together'. It is through examining these images side by side that the theme becomes so apparent and enhances this particular depiction/perception theme that is explored through this thesis.

ADORNMENT

Adornment through fashion is a diverse subject that varies between individuals and groups, regarding the way people may dress using garments or how they express themselves through other mediums such as tattooing or body paint. These can vary between cultures and have different meanings and symbols or be used simply for personal and aesthetic purposes. According to Oxford Dictionary of English, the definition of 'adornment' is "a thing which adorns or decorates", stemming from the term 'adorn' which is to "make more beautiful or attractive".

With these definitions in mind, Joanne Entwistle covers 'adornment' in 'The Fashioned Body; Fashion, Dress & Modern Social Theory', in this Entwistle closely links fashion, for obvious reasons as it concerns embellishing the body, as does fashion but she also links adornment to sexuality. "If adornment is close to the body, it would seem to go without saying that it is close to sexuality...it would seem misleading to assume that bodily adornments such as clothes, jewellery, tattoos simply reflect a pre-sexed and pre-sexual body; in fact, they do much more than this, they embellish the body, infuse it with sexuality" (Entwistle 2015: 181).

Although I do not wish to go into this aspect of sexuality through adornment, I felt it necessary to address this position of the theme as it becomes apparent through this chapter that it is intrinsic to human nature to adorn ones self for the purpose of sexual attraction.

Fashion historically uses elaborate fabrics for adornment such as lace or embroidery, beading or sequining, feathers, and more, along with the use of make-up for full adornment and transformational looks. Tattoos are also a frequently used form of adornment, whether for cultural or purely aesthetic purposes, the tattoo is arguably the most common form of permanent adornment, as the other forms of fashion and make-up are only temporary and can be changed daily. Masks are a less popular form of daily adornment yet can not be overlooked when it comes to the concealment and disguising of one's self.

However, Cordwell and Schwartz states in their edited book, *The Fabrics of Culture; the Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment* that "there is the role of adornment in particular societies and in Society... there is the relationship between Nature, Man, Clothing and Culture." (Schwarz & Cordwell 1979 : 29) Through exploring the notion of alternative adornment for different cultures it is said that "clothing is universal among human groups [it] seems proper to raise the questions as to its role in Society as well as in societies... the use of adornment has something to do with man's image of himself in relation to the world he experiences" (Schwarz & Cordwell 1979: 40).

Through this we can see other researched themes of *Identity* and *depiction/perception* as the world around play such a role the individual's self, who they are and who they become throughout their lives, vastly through their experiences and how one's experience is so unique to them. With adornment being presented and interpreted in many different forms, such as the obvious; garments, along with make-up, jewellery and tattoos, as perviously mentioned it is through these known forms that one can transform themselves. When interviewed for Milan Fashion Week by Vogue, American designer Rick Owens stated "adorning oneself is a primitive impulse that has been with us from the beginning of time and people have wanted to display themselves to each other forever" (Owens for Vogue 2020). This quote reinforces the importance of fashion and the art form that fashion is and also shows the significance every individual places on presenting themselves through adornment or dressing. A practice that has been around forever and one that will never fade as self adornment is a major aspect to every individual's life, whether it is thought consciously or not.



Figure 7 - Jean Paul Gaultier, Spring 2007 collection

This figure shows a lace bodysuit by French fashion designer Jean Paul Gaultier from 2007 Spring Couture Collection. This image presents the model completely covered in the full length bodysuit along with the elaborate headpiece that covers and conceals the model. It is through the use of covering the entirety of the model in a skin tight manner that the theme of adornment is visually evident. The use of lace reveals the body underneath and while embellishing the body and highlighting sections it also hides others. This could also reflect the perspective of identity that this thesis deals with, in that the use of garment or accessory could be revealing a particular identity, presenting the desired 'look' that the individual is striving for. The model in this image presents a strength, perhaps in her stance but with the assistance of the outfit she is depicted as almost 'fierce' looking. Looking closer to examine the actual garment, the bodysuit, it can be seen that there are printed illustrations that have then been added to the surface of the lace. Through further investigation it is realised that these illustrations are in fact religious symbols and figures. These create a whole other aspect to the garment and entire outfit and the connotations referring to religion can again, link back to the theme of Identity as many individuals worldwide consider religion or aspects of it, key to shaping their identities.

PERSONAL PRACTICE

Through my own studio practice and experiences with dress depicting a desired identity or creating that metaphorical barrier between self and society. It is through my practice that I also attempt to blur the lines between fashion and costume and refer to them together as one art practice. Through the imagery of the bodysuit being a recurring figure to my practice, this aims to convey the notion of a second skin, the skin that the idea community sees, concealing the true self beneath the tight fabric. The concept of adornment shines through the use of the bodysuit, as though the bodysuit is the skin and the embellishments such as sequins and hand-painted patches adorn the body, creating an aesthetically pleasing garment yet also attempting to represent a protection barrier between self and society, true identity and the one presented.

In relation back to Adele Varcoe's stance on the power of fashion and how in her own experience and life when she is not dressed as herself she does not feel herself, I personally can relate to this notion and almost get embarrassed when people see me without my personal adornment, for me my clothing and embellishment is somewhat of a facade I portray to the world around that makes me feel most comfortable and like my true self. Displaying myself in quite a bold manner is my way of expressing how I wish for others to see me and by doing so, much like Varcoe, I receive many different responses from people yet do not feel myself when not presenting myself in such way.

Through my personal experience of portraying a particular desired identity to the world around, the quote by self-confessed New York Dandy, Patrick McDonald from the documentary *Bill Cunningham New York* comes to mind, in which he states "we're all canvases, we're all blank canvases when we get up in the morning, and we paint ourselves. Sometimes we're surreal, sometimes we're impressionistic, sometimes we're modern, it just depends on the day" (McDonald 2010). This quote supports many aspects along with the themes of this thesis and really reflects the general consensus being put forward.



Figure 8 - 2020 collection prototype



Figure 9 - Millie DeBoo, Restraint Romance 2019



Figure 10 - Jean Paul Gaultier, Fall 1995 collection

CONCLUSION

Through investigating and exploring the main question of 'How is Identity Shaped and Transformed through Personal Dress?' and doing so through the three principle themes, Identity, Depiction/Perception and Adornment, the importance of dress for shaping one's desired identity can be seen.

Expressing this also through examples of practitioners including the Huxleys, Adele Varcoe, Viktor & Rolf and Jean Paul Gaultier, along with theorists and my own personal practice, this writing displays arguments to support the main question. Using the bodysuit as a physical garment foundation to support the evidence, it is shown how such a simple silhouette encompassing the body can in fact transform an individual's identity or even create a new identity as explored through The Huxleys and David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust.

Themes of emotions and dressing for emotions with colours have been researched, along with the use of adornment for protection, physical protection but also as a metaphorical barrier between self and society.

By exploring and experiencing these themes through my personal practice it becomes a relatable subject for many as the act of personal dress and adornment is one undertaken by every individual daily, has been since the beginning of time and will continue to be a major aspect of every individual's lives forever.

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