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Uporaba društvenih medija od strane političkih aktera: Analiza uporabe Twittera od strane čelnika političkih stranaka u Turskoj

Sažetak

Učinkovitost aplikacija društvenih medija postaje sve važnija u javnoj sferi. Političari, koji su akteri zastupanja idonošenja odluka u javnoj sferi, su prepoznali ove aplikacije i počeli ih koristiti kako bi došli do saznanja o političkom sudjelovanju javnosti i njihovim zahtjevima. Danas mnogi političari aktivno koriste društvene mreže u Turskoj i širom svijeta, dakle, u mogućnosti su doći do više ljudi i širiti svoje političke poglede široj publici. Ova studija ima za cilj istražiti kako čelnici političkih stranaka koje su zastupljene u parlamentu u Turskoj koriste društvene medije. Kako bi se utvrdio profil uporabe društvenih medija stranačkih čelnika u Turskoj, ispitana je učestalost i svrha korištenja društvenih medija od strane političara. Analiza je provedena na porukama političara, jeziku, razgovoru i vizualnom materijalu koje dijele na Twitteru. Nadalje, studija je istražila koriste li političari Twitter interaktivno – odgovaraju li na pitanja svojih sljedbenika ili ne. Rezultati koji su se dobili istraživanjem pokazuju koliko efikasno politički čelnici koriste društvene medije da dopru do javnosti.

Ključne riječi: društveni mediji, politički akteri, politička komunikacija, Twitter

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Usage of Social Media by Political Actors: An Analysis on the Usage of Twitter by Leaders of Political Parties in Turkey

Summary

The effectiveness of social media applications is becoming increasingly important in the public sphere. Politicians, who are the actors of representation and decision-making in the public sphere, recognized these applications and they have begun to use social media applications for the political participation of public and find out the demands of them. Nowadays, many politicians actively use social networks both in Turkey and around the world, thus, they are able to reach more people and radiate their political views to a wider audience. This study aims to explore how the leaders of political parties that represented in the parliament in Turkey, use the social media. In order to determine the social media usage profile of party leaders in Turkey, the frequency and objectives of usage social media by politicians will be examined. The analysis will be conducted on the politicians' message, language, discourse, visual material etc. which share on Twitter. Further more, the study will also handle whether the politicians use the twitter interactively -answer the questions of their followers- or not. The findings that obtained from the survey will show us how effective the party leaders use the social media to reach the public.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Actors, Political Communication, Twitter

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Introduction

Social and political participation are seen as an important element of democracies. In order to attain participation, political parties and actors in democratic societies should feel responsible to canalize citizens towards political decision making processes¹. Citizens should also be willing and ready to participate. It is assumed in democratic political systems that in order to reach a sufficient level of participation, citizens should have access to means and tools of communication enabling them to share their demands and preferences with political decision makers. However, it can be said that prior to the internet it was mostly journalists who spread political discourses and discussion since they had better means of communication. It is accepted that with the advent of internet and more importantly social media, an interactive means of communication has come into being that will provide more functionality to modern democracies. According to many thinkers and researchers, the use of this communication medium will thereby lead to a more democratic society by displacing the classical means of political communication where the politicians talk and the public listens². The responsibility of political actors towards citizens and their requirement to account for their actions is known to be a commonly observed situation in democratic societies. However, it can be said that social media eased these processes and made them more efficient³.

Along with the fact that social media has become widespread and gained importance with the possibilities that it provides political parties, leaders, actors, organizations and most importantly commonplace citizens, this medium has become a very important modern means of political communication. Today, many political parties, foundations and establishments or political figures strive to stay online and make important investments. For it can be said that political parties, political movements, establishments or candidates have started to use the internet and especially social media applications excessively in their search for new

¹ Stefan Stieglitz, Tobias Brockmann, Linh Dang-Xuan; "Usage of Social Media for Political Communication", http://pacis2012.org/files/papers/pacis2012_T2_Stieglitz_341.pdf (14.10.2012).

² "The Role of the Internet in Political Mobilization", <http://odinakadotnet.wordpress.com/2012/07/23/the-role-of-the-internet-in-political-mobilization/> (06.10.2012).

³ Cihan Çıldan and Others; "Sosyal Medyanın Politik Katılım ve Hareketlerdeki Rolü" ab.org.tr/ab12/bildiri/205.doc (18.10.2012).

communication opportunities. To further this statement, it can be claimed that developments in new information and communication technologies restructure the current political communication strategies⁴.

It should also be stated that this new medium of communication and especially the use of social media applications in politics is not limited to the use of parties or candidates during election period as a means of propaganda. Social media has also become a medium where political dissidents organize and take action. As can be seen from examples such as the election of the president in Iran, Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, social media is more important for political dissidents who do not have sufficient means of communication when compared with mainstream politicians. To this end, it should be stated that social media is also important for political organization. Social media has paved the way for citizens to get together for various political decisions or events thereby enabling them to rally faster and act commonly against the decisions of governments or corporations which would otherwise be impossible to stand against.

In addition, it should be emphasized that social media is not only a means of communication that is used during election period or a medium where political dissidents organize; but that moreover it is a medium of communication that is continuously used by political movements or people. As is the case in many countries all over the world, it is observed that political actors in Turkey who have discovered the opportunities brought about by social media are more or less using this medium. The objective of this study is to examine how the leaders of political parties in the Turkish parliament use social media. It has been examined how frequently and for what purposes politicians use social media, especially Twitter in order to put forth the social media usage profile of political party leaders in Turkey.

⁴ “The Role of the Internet in Political Mobilization”, *ibid*.

Social Media As a New Means of Political Communication

It is observed that the use of social media applications rapidly increases in line with technological and social developments. When data from the past year is examined it is seen that more than 900 million people have signed up in Facebook worldwide and that more than 500 million people are Twitter users⁵. Whereas in Turkey, the ratio of homes with means of internet access has increased from 42,9 % in 2011 to 47,2 % in 2012 according to Turkish Statistical Institute (TSI) data⁶. It is not known for certain but it can be said that there are about 30 million facebook and about 5 million Twitter users in Turkey⁷. These incredible numbers show that this new means of communication that is rapidly spreading provides an important platform to both the citizens and political actors to carry out political discussions or share political content. When the difficulty and cost of gathering people together for a political activity are considered, the importance of new possibilities brought about by social media which enables the same message to reach millions of people at the same time at no cost will be better understood.

Hence, it can be stated that the effectiveness of social media in the public sphere is gaining importance. The ability of social media tools which expand their area in daily practices (especially of young people) to reach a wide audience has been noticed by political actors whose sole pursuit is to reach a wide audience. It is observed that politicians who are actors of the mechanism of representation and decision making in the public sphere are using social media more actively in recent years. Political actors use social media to communicate their political goals, views, ideologies, actions to the masses as well as to share their approaches to daily political or non-political events with their followers and thereby the public. Political actors who sometimes even share with their followers multimedia elements such as photos, texts, videos and sound files within the limitations of private life, can at other times establish direct communication with their followers on an endless number of topics. Thus,

⁵ Stefan Stieglitz, Tobias Brockmann, Linh Dang-Xuan; *ibid*.

⁶ "2012 Yılı Hane Halkı Bilişim Teknolojileri Kullanım Araştırması", Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, Ankara, 2012. <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=10880> (14.10.2012).

⁷ "Türkiye'de Kaç Twitter Kullanıcısı Var?" <http://www.sosyalmedyahaber.com/turkiyede-kac-twitter-kullanicisi-var/>

masses can be directed to political participation via social media tools that have undertaken important roles in the political world.

Social media which is used as a means of propaganda during election time, is mostly used in Turkey and the world as a means to be recognized more, to reach more people, to effectively and efficiently evaluate the opinions of people and thereby to establish a more effective communication with their followers. This aforementioned interactive communication process can be effective in the opinions and decisions of political actors as should be the case in a democratic environment as well as in affecting the political behavior of followers by changing their levels of knowledge regarding politics.

It can be stated that social media which is seen as an important media where political messages and discourses are shared has along with the important developments in the field of communication technologies captured an important part (for now not all) of the effectiveness of traditional media. Social media which enables users to share information, thoughts and either static or non-static images at the same time while allowing immediate means of direct communication⁸; which allows users to create and change content⁹, increases its importance in daily life. Thereby it has become very popular in terms of political communication as well. It is seen that social media applications not only provide various opportunities to political actors; but also have the means to contribute in the establishment of a participant political environment by enabling common citizens to participate in political processes, discussions and to have means to change the outcome. Thereby social media provides citizens a new means for communication/interaction¹⁰ with other citizens regarding political topics as well as giving them new opportunities to participate in discussions and interest groups related to themselves.

In short, social media enables the establishment of an effective communication thereby providing the grounds for political actors to reach a wider audience in a shorter amount of time and to measure¹¹ their reactions more easily. Social media provides similar communication

⁸ İdil Sayımer; *Sanal Ortamda Halkla İlişkiler*, Beta Basım Yayın, İstanbul, 2008, s.123.

⁹ Andreas M. Kaplan, Michael Haenlein; "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media", *Business Horizons* (2010) 53, 59 - 68, s.61

¹⁰ Itai Himelboim ve diğerleri; "Social Media and Online Political Communication: The Role of Interpersonal Informational Trust and Openness", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56(1), 2012, pp. 92–115, s.92.

¹¹ Cihan Çıldan and Others; *ibid.*

opportunities to common citizens, followers of political actors and more importantly to social dissidents. In this sense, it should be stated that social media eases the formation of alternative political opinions as a new means of political communication spreading suppressed information or political criticisms as was the case during the Iran President election in 2009¹². It is assumed that social media that eases communication, interaction between citizens and political actors makes the actions and decisions of political elites more pellucid. In other words, it is thought that social media gives citizens to question politicians who have a responsibility towards themselves more easily and efficiently; while providing the ground.¹³ for politicians to get to learn the opinions of citizens more easily.

Research Population and Sample

Twitter messages of party leaders with public support of over 95 % in total and parliament groups have been selected as the sample of the wide population in this study which designates political actors in Turkey as the object of study. The sample which is thought to represent the study population sufficiently to allow for the statement of an opinion was followed for a period of 30 days (1-30 October 2012).

Study Objective and Method

The objective of this study is to analyze the forms of social media usage – in the Twitter example which best explains the concept of social media – of leaders of political parties which are represented in the Turkish parliament. In order to put forth the social media usage profile of Turkey's political party leaders, their frequency and goals of use are examined. A thematic analysis of the messages/discourses of party leaders shared via Twitter are also examined in the study which contains evaluations regarding the data obtained as a result of this analysis.

¹² "The Role of the Internet in Political Mobilization", *ibid.*

¹³ Cihan Çıldan and Others; *ibid.*

Results of the Study and Evaluation

In this study, the Twitter accounts of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, “@RT_Erdogan”, the leader of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, “@kilicdarogluk”, the leader of the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), Devlet Bahçeli “@dbdevletbahceli”, the leader of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and Selahattin Demirtaş “@bdpdemirtas”, the co-chairman of the Democracy and Peace Party (BDP) have been followed for a period of 30 days. It should be stated that more than one account was found in the name of the governing party leader Prime Minister Erdoğan and that the account named “@RT_Erdogan” was followed since it was in direct accordance with the Prime Minister’s discourses.

Quantitative Results

When the followers of the leaders are examined it was observed that Prime Minister Erdoğan was ranked first with *1 million 914 thousand 516* people. Main Opposition Leader Kılıçdaroğlu was ranked second with *949 thousand 026* people and MHP leader Bahçeli was ranked third with *391 thousand 407* people whereas BDP Co-Chairman Demirtaş was ranked fourth with *85 thousand 647* followers. When the number of followers of the parliament party leaders are examined, it is observed that these numbers are in accordance with the vote ratios and their number of parliament members obtained during the 2011 general election.

It was determined that among the political party leaders included in the study, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan was the first to open a twitter account. The twitter account of Erdoğan was opened in 23 August 2009 and it was seen that his first tweet was in English as «*Prime Minister Of Turkey*». His second English tweet included the following statement, «*The world could wait, but in the last 6 years of Turkey we have developed so much that if it goes like this soon Turkey is a world power*», thereby referring to the economic stasis in the world and stating that Turkey has been rapidly developing since they came into power and that with this rate of development Turkey will soon be a world power. It has been observed that later tweets that were mostly in Turkish were related to political actions and activities. In

addition, it should be stated that the tweets from Erdoğan's account are mostly composed of statements and discourses from the Prime Minister's speeches seen in media. Main opposition party CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu comes second with his account that has been set up in 27 August 2010. Kılıçdaroğlu's first tweet was «*Dear twitter users, from now on I will share my program and important topics from here* » and with his following tweets Kılıçdaroğlu has become the political leader that most actively uses this social media application. Whereas MHP Chairman Bahçeli set up his twitter account in Twitter 10 November 2010 and his first tweet was «*Welcome to my TWITTER page that I set up to share my thoughts with you in line with the technological advancements of our age. With kind regards* ». When Bahçeli's twitter account is followed, it can be stated that he is the party chairman that uses this social media application the least. It has been observed that among the political leaders included in the study, BDP Co-Chairman Demirtaş has been the last one to start using Twitter. The first tweet of the leader of BDP which has the smallest group in the parliament was written as «*regards from me as well*» on 11 December 2010. In line with the political attitude and the topics included in the political sphere of BDP, it was observed that Demirtaş's following tweets were mostly about topics such as the Kurdish issue, human rights, right abuses, democratization.

Based on the aforementioned data, it can be stated that the political leaders of Turkey have generally been late in using social media and especially Twitter. When the influence of Obama's effective use of social media in his victory during the 2008 U.S.A. presidency election; or the use of social networks and especially Twitter by the opposition during the 2009 Presidency election in Iran to make themselves be heard are considered, it can be put forth that stating the fact that Turkish leaders have been late in using social media applications that enable people to reach the masses very easily is seen to be right.

When the number of accounts followed by the party leaders included in the study are examined, it can be seen that despite the millions of followers following their account they neither follow no one or that they follow a negligible number of people. Even though he has almost 2 million followers, it has been observed that the ruling party AKP leader Erdoğan along with Bahçeli, who is the chairman of the nationalist MHP party follow no one. Whereas it is observed that the most active figure in Twitter, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu who has a follower base of about one million follows 470 people; whereas BDP co-chairman Demirtaş with a follower base of about 86 thousand follows 661 people.

Data regarding the number of people followed by political leaders put forth that Prime Minister Erdoğan and MHP leader Bahçeli who do not follow anyone are not interested in political discourses, actions and criticisms shared via social media. Thus, it can be stated that Erdoğan and Bahçeli are not even curious about their rivals who are active in social media and that they are not directly aware of the political activity going on. Therefore, it is observed that they do not completely make use of the interactivity of social media and especially twitter. Based on the fact that two of the four political party leaders do not follow anyone, it can be stated that twitter is regarded as a one-way platform to share thoughts and that these leaders are of necessity perceived as political actors who are shut off to dialog and who are not interested in what others think. This in turn shows that the functionality of twitter as a platform to bring together the masses and the politicians is not correctly used by Turkish politicians.

It has been recorded that as of the end of October, the number of tweets written by the Prime Minister Erdoğan was 1453, that of Kılıçdaroğlu was 1570, for Bahçeli this was 786 and for Demirtaş this number was 945. According to this data, it can be stated that the number of tweets shared by Prime Minister Erdoğan and the Main Opposition Leader Kılıçdaroğlu are close and that they use twitter more frequently in comparison with Bahçeli and Demirtaş. When the number of tweets written during the study period is examined, it can be stated that the same pattern is valid here as well. The number of tweets shared by the political leaders during 1-30 October can be listed as follows; Prime Minister Erdoğan; 44, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu; 123, Selahattin Demirtaş; 14, Devlet Bahçeli;11. When the studied period is examined, it is observed that the Main Opposition Party Leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is the most active twitter user among the political leaders as was the case in general standing.

It is observed that Devlet Bahçeli is the least active leader in terms of shared tweets. This was also the case during the sampling period between 1-30 October 2012. Bahçeli used twitter only on 11 October 2012 during the one month period and shared 11 tweets that day. When the period before October 11 is examined, it was observed that the last tweet of Bahçeli was dated August 24, 2012. Hence, it has been determined that MHP Chairman Devlet Bahçeli uses twitter the least among the political leaders included in the study. Even though the other political leaders use twitter more frequently than Bahçeli, it cannot be stated that they use this social media application sufficiently and effectively. This in turn shows that the convenience provided by twitter via immediate messages – as seen

more in the Bahçeli example – has not been sufficiently noticed in Turkish politics.

Qualitative Results (Prominent Themes in Messages)

A thematic separation has been made under this heading in which the prominent themes of the Twitter accounts of political leaders are examined. The topics mentioned by the political leaders have been evaluated under six variables in this section which aims to put forth the characteristics of the messages or tweets which are; general political topics of Turkey, Economic issues, Syria Crisis, Social Cultural issues, Hunger Strike and October 29 Republic Day Celebrations. Of the 192 total tweets regarding the handled variables, 46 % (88) was about the general political issues of Turkey, 25 % (48) was about the Syria Crisis, 20 % (38) was about social issues, 4 % (7) was about the hunger strikes, another 4 % (8) was about the October 29 Republic Day Celebrations and the remaining 1 % (3) was about economic issues. The mentioned ratios regarding the tweets of political party leaders have been specified in detail in *Table 1*.

Table 1. The number and ratios of the tweets of political leaders regarding the prominent themes

	General Political Issues		Economic Issues		Syria Crisis		Social Cultural Issues		Kurdish Issue and Hunger Strikes		October 29 Republic Day Celebrations		TOTAL	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Erdoğan	18	%20	3	%100	16	%33	4	%10	0	%0	3	%37	44	%23
Kılıçdaroğlu	63	%72	0	%0	30	%63	25	%66	0	%0	5	%63	123	%64
Bahçeli	5	%6	0	%0	0	%0	6	%16	0	%0	0	%0	11	%6
Demirtaş	2	%2	0	%0	2	%4	3	%8	7	%100	0	%0	14	%7
TOPLAM	88	%100	3	%100	48	%100	38	%100	7	%100	8	%100	192	%100

During this one month study carried out to put forth the twitter usage profile of the party leaders of four political parties in the Turkish parliament, it was observed that the conflict/discussion between the leaders of the ruling party AKP and the Main Opposition Party CHP has

continued in twitter as well and it has been noticed that the two leaders have replied to each other via twitter. It was observed that the tweets written by the main opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu mostly consisted of critical discourses regarding the government and its political actions. Similarly, most of the 18 tweets written by Prime Minister Erdoğan during this one month interval consisted of replies given to Kılıçdaroğlu opposition. It has been observed that both leaders have especially targeted their social media followers during their discourse regarding the events of the current agenda. It has been seen that MHP leader Bahçeli wrote 5, whereas BDP leader Demirtaş wrote 2 tweets stating their opinions regarding general political issues via social media.

Starting with its onset, the Syria crisis has become a central issue among the political discussion in Turkey. In addition, the Syria crisis has become the most important agenda of Turkey in the beginning of October. The official permit taken by the AKP government from the parliament after the shells that fell on Akçakale district from Syria was heavily criticized by CHP during this period. Political discussions in Turkey regarding Syria have been reciprocated in social media. Main Opposition leader Kılıçdaroğlu has shared his opinions and thoughts that criticize the government regarding the permit with his followers via 30 tweets. Whereas Kılıçdaroğlu heavily criticized the permit allowing the government to send military forces abroad (Syria lands) via Twitter; the governing party AKP leader and Prime Minister Erdoğan has written tweets stating the necessity/accuracy of the permit regarding Syria policy. Prime Minister Erdoğan has tried to explain the AKP government policy regarding this international issue via tweets and in addition has replied to the criticisms of Kılıçdaroğlu. Moreover, BDP co-chairman Demirtaş has written only 2 tweets regarding the Syria crisis whereas it was striking to see that Bahçeli, leader of MHP with its principles stating that the nation and the country cannot be divided, has not used twitter for this issue. It can be stated that Kılıçdaroğlu uses twitter more actively in comparison with other party leaders regarding both general politics and the Syria Crisis and that he is aware of the effect of this social media application thereby using it more efficiently.

It has been observed that more or less all political leaders have written tweets regarding social and cultural issues during the period included in the study. However, it was determined that CHP Chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu had the highest number of tweets during this period. It has also been observed that Kılıçdaroğlu writes tweets showing his

sensitivity to social issues along with cultural and artistic events taking place in the country. It should be stated that this attitude of Kılıçdaroğlu who has written a total of 25 tweets for only these topics is in accordance with his social democratic identity which is expected to be sensitive to social, cultural and artistic events.

It has been observed that political party leaders have written a very low small number of tweets (3 in total) regarding economic issues. It should be stated that a similar issue is valid for the Kurdish issue which is the most discussed issue in Turkey. Besides BDP Co-Chairman Demirtaş who has placed the Kurdish issue to the center of his political activities, no tweets were written by the other political party leaders regarding Kurdish issue and the hunger strikes related to it. It has been determined that only BDP leader Demirtaş wrote a total of 7 tweets regarding the hunger strike of over 700 PKK member convicts since September 12, 2012 with demands regarding the lifting of the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan and the public use of Kurdish as the mother tongue in public areas. Most of the tweets written by Demirtaş regarding this issue have stated the necessity that the government should solve this issue and should reach a settlement with those on hunger strike. Moreover, it has been striking to see that Prime Minister Erdoğan has not made any comments via twitter regarding the hunger strikes spanning a period of about 2 months.

Lastly, the response given by the public and political parties when the “Republic Walk” that takes place every year in the Capital city of Ankara as part of the October 29 Republic Day Celebrations was prohibited by the Ankara Governorship has been included in the study. When tweets regarding this issue are examined, it is observed that BDP leader Demirtaş and MHP leader Bahçeli have not made any comments via their twitter accounts. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the Republican People’s Party which takes its name from the republic has been the politician who has shown the most reaction. The 5 tweets of Kılıçdaroğlu regarding this issue have focused on discourses stating that the republic and its values should be protected since they are the foundation of freedom and democracy. Whereas Prime Minister Erdoğan has stated in his 3 tweets regarding the Republic Day that the Republic belongs the public and not to a specific group.

In conclusion, when the prominent themes of the twitter accounts of Turkish political leaders are examined, it is observed that they are not very different from the political discussions in the agenda of Turkey.

However, it should be stated that whereas political leaders do not hesitate to express their opinions regarding events in Turkey or the world; they are not as active in twitter.

Conclusion

When the twitter messages of the leaders of the four political parties written throughout October 2012 are separated thematically, it was observed that mostly political issues were discussed followed by a small number of tweets regarding the crisis between Turkish and Syria, hunger strikes and the October 29 Republic Day celebrations. It has been determined that CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has been the most active twitter user in this one month period. However, it is apparent that the twitter account of the main opposition party leader Kılıçdaroğlu is used to criticize ruling party AKP policies and actions. In addition, it has also been observed that Prime Minister Erdoğan frequently gives replies to Kılıçdaroğlu via twitter. In other words, the conflict between the ruling and the opposing parties has continued via twitter as well and the party leaders inform their followers using this new social media. On the other hand, it has been determined that MHP and BDP parti leaders use twitter very infrequently.

Political party leaders in Turkey have not shied away from using the new social media applications in their politics. However, when the twitter usage frequencies are examined, it is understood from this study focusing on twitter that the party leaders have not internalized the active use of twitter in politics. Hence, it should be stated that the awareness of Turkish politicians regarding the effect area and power of social media is not at an effective level. Negative findings observed throughout the study period have been the facts that the twitter accounts of political leaders included in the study are closed to messages, that the number of people they follow is negligibly low, that they write tweets very infrequently and that they see twitter as a platform to share their own thoughts and ideas.

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