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THE EFFECT OF SPIRITUALITY ON DEATH-RELATED DEPRESSION, DEATH ANXIETY, AND LONELINESS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

Genç Yetişkinlerde Maneviyatın Ölümle İlişkili Depresyon, Ölüm Kaygısı ve Yalnızlık Üzerindeki Etkisi

Zafer KORKMAZ¹  İlhan ÇİÇEK²  Rıdvan SÖĞÜT³ 

¹Ministry of Education, Ankara

²Batman University, Health High School, Batman

³Siirt University, Kurtalan Vocational High School, Siirt

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ABSTRACT

There has been a significant increase in research focusing on the healing role of spirituality in recent years. In this context, the purpose of the current study is to examine the effect of spirituality on death-related depression, death anxiety, and loneliness in young adults. A total of 539 young adults, 315 (58.4%) women and 224 (41.6%) men, participated in the study. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 32 (M = 28.23, SD = 2.63). Personal Information Form, Spirituality Scale, Death Distress, and Loneliness Scale were used in the study. The data of the study were analyzed with SPSS 24. The results of the study show that there is a significant and negative relationship between spirituality and death related depression, death anxiety, and loneliness. The simple linear regression analysis revealed that spirituality explained 7% of the variance in death related depression, 12% of the variance in death anxiety, and 6% of the variance in loneliness. These results can be concluded that spirituality has a protective function against destructive factors such as death related depression, death anxiety, and loneliness. This study once again reveals the importance of carrying out studies to strengthen the spirituality of young adults in particular.

Keywords: Death anxiety, Death related depression, Loneliness, Spirituality, Young adult.

ÖZ

Maneviyatın iyileştirici rolüne ilişkin araştırmaların sayısında son yıllarda belirgin bir artış gözlemlenmektedir. Bu bağlamda mevcut çalışmanın amacı genç yetişkinlerde maneviyatın ölümle ilişkili depresyon, ölüm anksiyetesi ve yalnızlık üzerindeki etkisinin incelenmesidir. Çalışmaya 315 (%58.4) kadın ve 224 (%41.6) erkek olmak üzere toplam 539 genç yetişkin katılmıştır. Katılımcıların yaşları 18 ile 32 aralığındadır (M=28.23, SD=2.63). Çalışmada Kişisel Bilgi Formu, Maneviyat Ölçeği, Ölüm Stresi Ölçeği ve Yalnızlık Ölçeği kullanılmıştır. Çalışmanın verileri SPSS 24 ile analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmanın sonuçları, maneviyat ile ölümle ilişkili depresyon, ölüm anksiyetesi ve yalnızlık arasında anlamlı ve negatif bir ilişkinin olduğunu göstermektedir. Yapılan basit doğrusal regresyon analizinde maneviyatın, ölümle ilişkili depresyondaki varyansın %7'sini, ölüm anksiyeteki varyansın %12'sini ve yalnızlık varyansının %6'sını açıkladığı ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu sonuçlar maneviyatın, ölümle ilişkili depresyon, ölüm anksiyetesi ve yalnızlık gibi yıkıcı faktörlere karşı koruyucu bir fonksiyonun olduğu değerlendirilebilir. Özellikle genç yetişkinlerin maneviyatlarını güçlendirmeye dönük çalışmalarının yapılması gerekliliğinin önemi bu çalışmayla bir kez daha ortaya çıkmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Genç yetişkin, Maneviyat, Ölüm anksiyetesi, Ölümle ilişkili depresyon, Yalnızlık.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals deeply search for identity during young adulthood, often navigating the intricate terrains of spiritual dimensions (Smith, McCullough & Poll, 2003). This developmental period is marked by a reflection on personal values, beliefs, and worldviews, which spirituality can profoundly influence, aiding individuals in integrating these elements into their lives (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Şanlı et al., 2023; Tunç & Ümmet, 2024). Empirical evidence robustly correlates spirituality with enhanced psychological well-being in young adults (Chung, Cha & Cho, 2015), underscoring its role in fostering emotional equilibrium (Ellison & Levin, 2016). Moreover, spirituality has been linked to increased life satisfaction, the formation of meaningful relationships, and personal development (Arslan & Yıldırım, 2021).

Notwithstanding the solace spirituality provides, the inescapable reality of death looms, compelling young adults to confront their mortality and life's inherent transience (Cook, 2004; Freeny, Peskin, & Schick, 2020; Tanrıverdi, Çiçek & Gültekin, 2021). This existential contemplation often intensifies during young adulthood, with individuals ruminating on their mortality and life's purpose (Rasmussen & Johnson, 1994; Yalom, 2000). The intricate interplay between spirituality and death is a focal area of scholarly inquiry, with studies demonstrating a significant correlation between death anxiety and spiritual beliefs (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs & Yali, 2014). Spirituality in young adults often catalyzes profound reflections on death's meaning, significantly influencing personal development and endowing life with meaning (Kızıltepe & Kurtgöz, 2022; Yıldırım, Arslan, & Alkahtani, 2022a). This reflective process can augment young adults' capacity to cope with death, fostering inner peace (Rosmarin, Pargament & Koenig, 2021). Thus, the nexus between death and spirituality is pivotal across the lifespan, guiding individuals toward a meaningful existence (Pargament, 2011).

Within this existential framework, death-related depression emerges as a salient construct. Death-related depression, characterized by pervasive sadness, hopelessness, and distress linked to death (Dadfar & Lester, 2020; Smith et al., 2003), reflects individuals' anxieties about mortality and their struggle with life's impermanence (Arslan & Yıldırım, 2021; Çiçek, 2021). This condition can severely impair daily functioning, strain relationships, and diminish life quality (Exline et al., 2014; Yalom, 2000). The potential of spirituality to mitigate death related depression is an area ripe for exploration (Oviedo, 2024). Research indicates that spiritual commitments can alleviate symptoms of death-related depression, enhancing psychological well-being (Yapıcı, 2011; Yıldırım, Arslan, & Wong, 2022b). Spiritual practices

such as prayer and meditation can provide solace, aiding individuals in navigating death-related emotional turmoil (Pargament, 2011; Rezai et al., 2021).

The extensive body of research underscores spirituality's efficacy in reducing death anxiety, with religious and spiritual practices demonstrating significant potential in mitigating death-related fears (Çakar, 2020; Çiçek, 2020; Ellison & Levin, 2016; Guner et al., 2023; Tanhan, 2007). Practices like prayer, meditation, and worship can foster inner peace, helping individuals confront death-related anxieties (Puchalski et al., 2009). These spiritual activities can fortify beliefs, offering a sturdy foundation amidst existential uncertainties (Koenig & Büssing, 2010; Rezai et al., 2021). Additionally, spiritual beliefs can bolster mental health by facilitating life's meaning acceptance and fostering inner balance (Kao et al., 2020; Rosmarin, Pargament & Koenig, 2021). Consequently, spirituality's influence on death anxiety is crucial, potentially enhancing life quality by helping individuals manage their fear of death (Chung et al., 2015; Yıldırım et al., 2022a).

Loneliness, defined as the gap between desired and actual social relationships (Walton, Shultz, Beck, & Walls, 1991), manifests as a negative emotional response to social isolation and lack of companionship (Çiçek, 2021; Gündoğan & Babacan Gümüş, 2023). The dynamic relationship between spirituality and loneliness profoundly impacts individuals' inner experiences and social interactions (Ellison & Levin, 2016).

Research conducted in Turkey highlights a negative correlation between spirituality and loneliness (Gündoğan & Babacan Gümüş, 2023; Yapıcı, 2021), suggesting that spirituality can mitigate loneliness and strengthen social connections. Spiritual beliefs can alleviate loneliness by providing a profound sense of meaning and purpose, fostering inner peace (Oviedo, 2024; Pargament, 2011). Additionally, spiritual engagement can enhance social relationships and community bonds (Ellison & Levin, 2016). Participation in spiritual and religious groups can facilitate connections with like-minded individuals, creating supportive social networks (Pargament, 2011). Thus, spirituality can play a vital role in reducing loneliness, fortifying social ties, and improving mental health and life quality.

This study identifies 'spirituality' as the independent variable and 'death-related depression,' 'death anxiety,' and 'loneliness' as dependent variables. These variables encapsulate fundamental emotional states that significantly impact psychological well-being and life quality. Spiritual beliefs are crucial in imbuing individuals' lives with meaning and purpose, aiding in death coping, and reducing loneliness (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Tunç & Ümmet, 2024). Spiritual practices facilitate coping with mortality (Exlexine et al., 2014), alleviating death anxiety, and fostering inner peace (Çakar, 2020). Moreover, engagement in

spiritual communities can enhance social connections and reduce loneliness (Gündoğan & Babacan Gümüş, 2023). Therefore, this study examines the impact of spirituality on death related depression, death anxiety, and loneliness.

Extant literature robustly supports the link between spirituality and psychological well-being in young adults (Chung et al., 2015; Ellison & Levin, 2016; Şanlı et al., 2023). However, research specifically investigating the effects of young adults' spiritual beliefs and practices on death-related depression, death anxiety, and loneliness in Turkey is limited. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the impact of young adults' spiritual beliefs on these psychological states. By elucidating the influence of spiritual practices on quality of life and psychological well-being, the study seeks to inform the development of mental health interventions and policies. The findings may highlight spirituality's potential role in coping with death and reducing loneliness, providing valuable insights for mental health professionals and emphasizing the importance of spiritual support mechanisms in society.

This study aims to clarify the influence of young people's spiritual conceptions on psychological problems, specifically in the Turkish environment. The objective is to explore the ways in which spiritual practices enhance one's overall psychological well-being. The subsequent hypotheses were formulated:

1. Increased spirituality is predicted to decrease death-related depression. High spiritual beliefs and practices are expected to reduce death-related depression in young adults.

2. Increased spirituality is predicted to decrease death anxiety. High spiritual beliefs and practices are expected to reduce death anxiety in young adults.

3. Increased spirituality is predicted to decrease loneliness. High spiritual beliefs and practices are expected to reduce loneliness in young adults.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Research Design

The current study used a cross-sectional design to examine the relationships between spirituality, death-related depression, death anxiety, and loneliness among young adults in Turkey. The cross-sectional nature of the study enabled data to be collected from participants over a single time period, providing a snapshot of the relationships between these variables. A cross-sectional design is a type of research that examines the relationships between variables by collecting data from a group of participants at a single point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) The study collected data using online survey methodology, which allowed for the effective collection of data from a diverse sample from different geographic regions. The

measurement tools included validated scales to measure variables such as spirituality, death anxiety, death related depression, and loneliness, ensuring the reliability and validity of the data collected.

Research Population and Sample

A total of 539 adults, 315 women (58.4%) and 224 men (41.6%), participated in this study. The age range of the participants varies between 18 and 32, and the average age is 28.23. Before starting the data collection process, necessary permissions were obtained from Batman University Ethics Committee (Ethical Code 2024/01-07). The data was collected online between January 20, 2024 and February 15, 2024 through social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram. A consent form was provided on the first page before the survey was distributed to participants. In the consent form, participants were given detailed information about the purpose of the study, anonymity provisions, their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and confidentiality of the data. No fee was paid to the participants during the data collection process.

Data Collection Tools

Spirituality Scale

The scale developed by Demirci and Ekşi (2018) consists of 6 items. The scale is a 5-point Likert-type scale, scored as 1 (not at all suitable for me) to 5 (completely suitable for me). The lowest score from the scale is 6 and the highest score is 30. High scores from the scale indicate that individuals have high levels of spirituality. A sample item is “I live my life according to my beliefs”. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient was found to be 0.90.

Loneliness Scale (UCLA-8)

The UCLA Loneliness Scale was developed by (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980). The scale, which is a 4-point Likert type, consists of 8 items. The scale is scored as follows: (1=Never to 4=Frequently). A sample item is “There is no one I can turn to.” High scores from the scale indicate high levels of loneliness individuals. Turkish adaptation of the scale was made by Doğan et al. (2011) conducted research on a sample of Turkish university students and reported that the scale had strong internal reliability. In the current study, the Cronbach alpha internal consistency coefficient value of the scale was found to be 0.74.

Death Distress Scale (DDS)

Death Distress Scale (DDS), developed by Dadfar and Lester, (2020), consists of three subscales: anxiety, depression, and obsessive thoughts. DDS items, which are a Likert-type scale, are rated from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Each subscale consists of 3 items. Sample items; “The thought of death does not bother me at all” (anxiety), and “Passing through cemeteries makes me sad” (depression). Higher scores indicate higher levels of death distress. The Turkish adaptation of the scale was made by Yıldırım and Güler (2021). Within the scope of this study, the death depression and death anxiety subscales of the scale were used. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficient value of the scale was found to be 0.82 for death related depression and 0.72 for death anxiety.

Data Analysis

In this study, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and linear regression analysis were used to examine the relationships between variables and the effects of spirituality on death anxiety, death-related depression, and loneliness. Descriptive statistics included measures of central tendency and distribution, such as mean, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis, and Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient, to understand the characteristics of each variable. Correlation analysis was conducted using Pearson correlation coefficients to identify the relationships between spirituality, death anxiety, death-related depression, and loneliness. Linear regression analysis was performed to predict the effects of the independent variable (spirituality) on the dependent variables (death anxiety, death-related depression, and loneliness) and to test the significance of these relationships. The regression analysis results were evaluated using regression coefficients, standard errors, beta coefficients, R^2 values, and F statistics. These analyses were conducted to answer the research questions and to understand the impact of spirituality on death anxiety, death related depression, and loneliness.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the difficulty of observing changes over time due to its cross-sectional design and the exclusion of individuals without internet access because the data were collected through online surveys. Additionally, the use of self-report measures may increase the risk of bias. Since the study is limited to young adults in Turkey, the generalizability of the findings to different cultural contexts may be limited. These limitations should be considered, and future research with broader and more diverse samples is recommended. Turkey-specific social dynamics may influence participants' approaches to concepts such as spirituality and loneliness, which could limit the generalizability of the results.

Research conducted in different cultural contexts can help us better understand these interactions

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Helsinki Declaration of Human Rights. Prior to the commencement of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee (decision dated 31.01.2024, no. 2024-01-051) and written permissions were obtained from the institutions where the study was conducted. The form containing the necessary explanations about the study's purpose and methodology was sent online to the participating students, and their consent was obtained.

RESULTS

Table 1 contains the results of descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. It provides measurements of variables such as mean standard deviation Pearson correlation coefficients, skewness, kurtosis, and Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient (α).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation

Variables	<i>Ort.</i>	<i>SD</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	Skew.	Kurt.	α
1. Spirituality	23.99	5.02	-	-.35**	-.26**	-.25**	-1.21	1.25	0.90
2. Death Anxiety	7.46	2.54	-.35**	-	.34**	.22**	.320	.126	0.72
3. Death Related Depression	8.02	3.29	-.26**	.34**	-	.27**	.430	-.631	0.82
4. Loneliness	16.30	4.53	-.25**	.22**	.27**	-	.296	-.394	0.74

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

According to the data, the mean value of spirituality is 23.99 and the standard deviation is 5.02. Death anxiety was calculated as 7.46 on average, death related depression as 8.02 and loneliness as 16.30 on average. Correlation analysis shows negative and significant relationships between spirituality and death related depression and anxiety, as well as loneliness. The correlation between death related depression and spirituality was -0.26 ($p < 0.01$), the correlation between death anxiety and spirituality was -0.35 ($p < 0.01$), and the correlation between loneliness and spirituality was -0.25 ($p < 0.01$).

Table 2. Linear Regression Analysis Correlates of Death Anxiety

Death anxiety	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(constant)	11.731	.52		23.3	<.001
Spirituality	-.17	.02	-.35	-8.69	<.001

$R = .35, R^2 = .12, F = 75.59, p < .001$

Table 2 presents the results of the linear regression analysis of death anxiety. In the analysis, it appears that spirituality predicts death anxiety ($\beta = -.35, p < .001$). This shows that

spirituality has a significant negative effect on death anxiety. Additionally, the R^2 value, which evaluates the explanatory power of the regression model, was calculated as 0.12, meaning that spirituality explains 12% of the variance of death anxiety.

Table 3. Linear Regression Analysis Correlates of Death Related Depression

Death related depression	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(constant)	12.10	.68		18.64	<.001
Spirituality	-.18	.03	-.26	-6.23	<.001

R=.26, R²=.07, F=39,95, p<.001

Table 3 presents the results of the linear regression analysis of death depression. Results showed that spirituality significantly predicted death related depression ($\beta=-.26$, $p<.001$). This shows that spirituality has a significant and negative effect on death related depression. Additionally, the R^2 value, which evaluates the explanatory power of the regression model, was calculated as 0.07, meaning that spirituality explains 7% of the variance of death related depression.

Table 4. Linear Regression Analysis of Correlates of Loneliness

Loneliness	<i>B</i>	<i>Se</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(constant)	21.88	.92		23.71	<.001
Spirituality	-.23	.04	-.25	-6.16	<.001

R=.25, R²=.6, F=38,02, p<.001

Table 4 presents the results of the linear regression analysis of loneliness. According to the analysis results, it was determined that spirituality significantly predicted loneliness ($\beta=-.25$, $p<.001$). This shows that spirituality has a significant and negative effect on loneliness.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the effects of spirituality on death related depression, death anxiety, and loneliness among young adults in Turkey. The findings of the study indicated that spirituality has significant and negative relationships with these three psychological states. In this section, the findings obtained in line with the hypotheses of the study will be discussed, compared with previous research, and the implications of these findings for practical applications will be discussed.

The first hypothesis of the study suggested a negative relationship between spirituality and death related depression. The results of the study show that spirituality explains 7% of the variance in death related depression. The negative relationship between spirituality and death related depression is supported by the findings of our study. Our findings show that death related depression decreases as the level of spirituality increases. These results are also

consistent with previous research. Research shows that spiritual beliefs and practices can increase individuals' psychological well-being and be effective in reducing symptoms of death-related depression. Understanding the effect of spirituality on death-related depression is important to support individuals' mental health and improve their quality of life (Akbar & Ketan, 2024). Researchers such as Arslan and Yıldırım (2021) emphasize that spiritual coping strategies reduce individuals' stress and anxiety levels and increase their general psychological well-being. Similarly, Chung et al. (2015) found in their study among Korean university students that spiritual well-being was negatively related to death anxiety and depression. These findings suggest that spiritual guidance and support programs can help individuals cope with emotional difficulties related to death. Durmuş and Durar (2021) state that spiritual well-being plays an important role in reducing fear of COVID-19 among Turkish elderly, supporting the protective effects of spirituality on general mental health. Additionally, Heidari Gorji et al. (2024) suggest that spiritual well-being among cancer patients is effective in reducing death anxiety and may help individuals achieve inner peace and acceptance.

The second hypothesis, which evaluated the relationship between spirituality and death anxiety, predicted that death anxiety would decrease as the level of spirituality increased. The results of the analysis based on this hypothesis reveal that spirituality explains 12% of death anxiety. This finding emphasizes that spiritual beliefs and practices are effective in reducing individuals' anxiety about death. Previous research suggests that spiritual and religious practices, especially prayer and meditation, may be effective in alleviating death-related fears (Koenig & Büssing, 2010). Similarly, a systematic review conducted on cancer patients supports the effect of spirituality in reducing death anxiety. This research shows that spirituality not only provides emotional relief but can also have positive effects on a physiological level (Heidari-Gorji et al., 2024; Yıldırım-Üşenmez et al., 2023). Rezaei et al. (2021) found that spirituality significantly predicted death anxiety in older adults with chronic illness. Their findings show that death anxiety decreases as spirituality increases. These results suggest that spirituality may play a potentially important role in coping with death anxiety. In their study, Arslan and Yıldırım (2021) emphasize that spiritual coping strategies reduce individuals' stress and anxiety levels and increase their general psychological well-being. Yıldırım et al. (2022b) show that spiritual experiences help individuals accept the meaning and transience of life and therefore reduce death anxiety. Gündoğan and Babacan-Gümüş (2023) found that spiritual well-being plays an important role in reducing death anxiety in elderly individuals and that this effect is related to loneliness and social support. These findings suggest that spiritual practices provide important support in individuals' processes of coping with death-related concerns. As

a result, the decrease in death anxiety along with the increase in spirituality can contribute to individuals living a healthier life by increasing their spiritual and emotional well-being. These positive effects of spirituality can play an important role in helping individuals reduce their fear of death and gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of life.

The third hypothesis, which examines the relationship between spirituality and loneliness, predicts that the level of loneliness will decrease as the level of spirituality increases. This hypothesis is based on the assumption that individuals will reduce the feeling of loneliness by increasing their social ties and strengthening their spiritual dimensions. The results of the study reveal that spirituality explains 6% of the variance in loneliness. Therefore, it shows that spiritual beliefs and practices have a significant impact on individuals' struggle with loneliness. The study of Puchalski et al. (2009) emphasizes that spiritual commitment and faith play an important role in finding social support and reducing loneliness. Likewise, Walton et al. (1991) research also states that spiritual commitments have positive effects on social isolation and loneliness. Participation in spiritual communities has been observed to help individuals connect with others with similar beliefs and create supportive social networks (Pargament, 2011). Arslan and Yıldırım (2021) indicated that spiritual coping strategies are effective in reducing loneliness and increasing social connectedness. Their studies suggest that spiritual beliefs can help individuals cope with loneliness and encourage them to seek social support. Again, Yıldırım et al. (2022b) state that spiritual experiences can reduce the feeling of loneliness by increasing individuals' emotional and social well-being. Additionally, Akbayram and Keten (2024) state that spiritual beliefs and practices strengthen individuals' social relationships and thus reduce the feeling of loneliness. It has been observed that spiritual practices help individuals establish stronger and more meaningful connections with their social environment, and these connections significantly reduce the feeling of loneliness. These findings highlight that spiritual practices play an important role in the process of reducing feelings of loneliness and strengthening individuals' social bonds. Thus, it appears that as spirituality increases, individuals are more likely to have healthier and supportive social relationships.

Cultural factors such as personality traits, socioeconomic status, geographic location, and family background can influence the effects of spirituality on death-related depression, death anxiety, and loneliness. (Tanhan, 2007; Tanhan, Kassap & Ünsal). According to the research findings, while spirituality explains a limited portion of the variance in these psychological states, it is important to explore other variables. Future studies could illuminate how these alternative factors affect the relationships between spirituality and psychological outcomes, thereby allowing for a broader assessment of the impact of spirituality on mental health.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the positive effects of spirituality on death-related depression, death anxiety, and loneliness in young adults. It is understood that spirituality serves a protective function against these three psychological states, making it essential to develop interventions and support programs to strengthen the spiritual practices of young adults. For example, expanding spiritual guidance and counseling services could help individuals find inner peace, alleviate death-related anxiety and depressive feelings, and enhance their social connections.

However, it is important to consider that the findings may only be applicable to young adults in Turkey, emphasizing the significance of cultural context. Concepts such as spirituality, death anxiety, death depression, and loneliness can be influenced by various cultural and social dynamics. Consequently, the generalizability of the findings may be limited when accounting for the cultural specificity of the sample. Research conducted in different cultural contexts could help us better understand the dynamics of these relationships. Additionally, the fact that spirituality only explains a small portion of the variance suggests the need to explore the effects of other underlying variables, such as personality traits or socioeconomic status. Future research should consider these alternative explanations for a more comprehensive evaluation.

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