

PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT FOLLOWING ADOPTION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ANXIETY AND ASSERTIVENESS AMONG ADULTS IN GEORGIA

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Abstract

Adoption is increasingly understood as a lifelong developmental experience that may shape psychological adjustment through emotional, relational, and identity-related processes. Although a growing body of international research has examined the psychological experiences of adopted individuals, considerably less is known about outcomes in adulthood, particularly in Eastern European and post-Soviet cultural contexts. The present study examined whether adults raised in adoptive families differed in anxiety and assertiveness from adults raised in biological families in Georgia.

A comparative cross-sectional design was employed with 139 adults, including 56 participants raised in adoptive families and 83 raised in biological families. Anxiety was assessed using the Vladimir Norakidze Anxiety Questionnaire, while assertiveness was measured using the Manuel J. Smith Assertiveness Questionnaire. Group differences were examined using appropriate descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.

Overall, the findings showed a similar psychological profile across the two groups. Adults raised in adoptive families did not report significantly higher levels of anxiety than those raised in biological families, and the distribution of anxiety levels was also comparable between the groups. Likewise, no significant differences emerged in assertiveness. Participants from adoptive and biological families showed broadly similar patterns across lower, partial, and higher levels of assertiveness, although a modest tendency toward group differences was observed for partial assertiveness.

These findings suggest that being raised in an adoptive family was not, in itself, associated with greater anxiety or reduced assertiveness among the adults included in this study. Rather than supporting assumptions of poorer psychological adjustment among adopted adults, the results highlight the importance of considering individual, relational, and contextual factors when evaluating adult outcomes following adoption. As one of the first quantitative studies to examine adopted adults in Georgia, the study contributes evidence from an underrepresented cultural context and may inform more individualised and evidence-based approaches to psychological assessment and adoption-related support.

Keywords: adoption; adopted adults; anxiety; assertiveness; psychological adjustment; Georgia

Introduction

Adoption is increasingly conceptualised as a lifelong developmental experience rather than a discrete childhood event. Although adoption may provide children with stable family relationships and opportunities for developmental recovery, it can also involve experiences related to early adversity, separation from biological parents, attachment disruption, and identity exploration. Contemporary adoption research therefore emphasises that psychological adjustment should not be attributed to adoption status alone but understood through the interaction of pre-adoption

experiences, adoptive family functioning, attachment relationships, communicative openness, and broader developmental contexts (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006).

Research on the psychological adjustment of adopted individuals has produced inconsistent findings. Earlier studies and reviews often suggested that adoptees were at increased risk of emotional and behavioural difficulties, including anxiety, depression, behavioural problems, and greater use of mental health services (Brodzinsky, 1993; Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017). More recent evidence presents a more nuanced picture. A meta-analysis focused specifically on adult adoptees found that adopted adults reported poorer psychological adjustment than non-adopted adults across several domains, although the magnitude and consistency of these differences varied across outcomes and samples (Corral et al., 2021). These findings suggest that adoption may be associated with vulnerability for some individuals, but they do not support a simple deterministic interpretation of adoption as a direct cause of later maladjustment.

Current research increasingly focuses on the developmental and relational mechanisms that may explain individual differences among adoptees. Reviews of adoption research indicate that outcomes are shaped by multiple factors, including early adversity, quality of adoptive family relationships, attachment security, openness of communication about adoption, and the availability of social support (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). Recent studies with adult adoptees have similarly highlighted the importance of family functioning, adoption-related communication, and developmental task achievement for psychological wellbeing and self-differentiation in adulthood (Melero et al., 2023; Oliver & Berástegui, 2023). Thus, contemporary adoption research has shifted from asking only whether adoptees differ from non-adoptees to examining the psychological processes that contribute to either vulnerability or resilience across the lifespan.

Anxiety is one of the most frequently examined indicators of psychological adjustment in adoption research. Systematic and meta-analytic evidence suggests that adopted individuals may show elevated risk for some internalising difficulties, including anxiety, particularly when adoption is preceded by adverse early experiences or disruptions in caregiving (Corral et al., 2021; Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017). At the same time, adoption has also been described as a powerful developmental intervention, with evidence of substantial recovery in several domains following placement in stable family environments (Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). These mixed findings indicate that anxiety among adopted adults should be understood not as a direct consequence of adoption status, but as an outcome influenced by broader developmental, relational, and environmental factors.

Compared with anxiety, assertiveness has received considerably less empirical attention in adoption research. Assertiveness is relevant to psychological adjustment because it reflects the ability to express personal needs, thoughts, emotions, and rights in a direct and respectful manner. Within clinical psychology, assertiveness has long been understood as an interpersonal skill that can be strengthened through cognitive-behavioural and social skills interventions (Smith, 1975; Speed et al., 2018). Contemporary reviews indicate that assertiveness is associated with a range of psychological and interpersonal outcomes, including emotional distress, self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and relationship functioning (Speed et al., 2018). Despite this relevance, assertiveness remains understudied among adult adoptees, whose interpersonal development may be shaped by family communication patterns, autonomy support, identity-related experiences, and broader social learning contexts.

Identity development is also central to understanding adoption across the lifespan. Adopted individuals may engage with additional developmental questions concerning biological origins,

family history, belonging, and personal narrative. These questions should not be interpreted as signs of psychopathology; rather, they form part of the broader process through which adopted individuals integrate adoption into their sense of self (Brodzinsky, 2011; Grotevant, 1997; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Research on openness in adoption further suggests that communication about adoption and access to meaningful information may support identity development and adjustment, although outcomes vary according to family relationships and individual experiences (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Oliver & Berástegui, 2023).

Despite the growth of adoption research, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature has focused on children and adolescents, while psychological adjustment in adulthood remains comparatively less explored (Corral et al., 2021; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017). Second, existing studies have focused primarily on anxiety, depression, behavioural difficulties, attachment, and identity, whereas assertiveness has received limited attention as an indicator of interpersonal functioning. Third, available evidence is concentrated mainly in Western research contexts, while empirical studies from Eastern European countries, including Georgia, remain scarce. This gap is important because cultural, historical, and social contexts may influence how adoption, identity, family communication, and psychological adjustment are experienced.

Against this background, the present study compares anxiety and assertiveness among adults raised in adoptive families and adults raised in biological families in Georgia. By examining both emotional and interpersonal dimensions of psychological adjustment, the study aims to contribute empirical evidence from an underrepresented cultural context and to extend the limited literature on adult adoption. The study further seeks to clarify whether adoption status is associated with differences in anxiety and assertiveness or whether, consistent with contemporary developmental perspectives, adult psychological adjustment should be understood beyond adoption status alone.

Method

Design and Participants

The study employed a comparative cross-sectional design to examine differences in anxiety and assertiveness between adults raised in adoptive families and adults raised in biological families. This design was appropriate because the aim of the study was to compare two naturally occurring independent groups at a single point in time.

The final analytic sample consisted of 139 adults. Of these, 56 participants were adults raised in adoptive families and 83 participants were adults raised in biological families. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 65 years, with the largest proportion belonging to the 40–50-year age group. The sample was predominantly female. Gender information was available for 138 participants: 127 were female and 11 were male, while one participant had missing gender data.

Participants in the adopted group were recruited through the Georgian non-governmental organisation Vedzeb, which supports individuals searching for their biological relatives. The comparison group consisted of volunteers raised in biological families who agreed to participate in the study. A convenience sampling strategy was used because access to adopted adults in Georgia is limited and no comprehensive sampling frame for this population was available.

Measures

Data were collected using a demographic questionnaire, the Vladimir Norakidze Anxiety Questionnaire, and the Manuel J. Smith Assertiveness Questionnaire.

The demographic questionnaire was developed for the purposes of the present study and collected information on age, gender, education, marital status, employment status, and adoption status. For participants in the adopted group, additional questions concerned adoption-related background

information, including age at adoption and knowledge of biological family members, where applicable.

Anxiety was assessed using the Vladimir Norakidze Anxiety Questionnaire. The instrument consists of 60 dichotomous items and is intended to assess relatively stable anxiety tendencies. Higher total scores indicate higher levels of anxiety. The questionnaire also includes validity items designed to identify unreliable response patterns. In accordance with the scoring guidelines, questionnaires containing more than four invalid responses were excluded from the final analysis. Anxiety scores were analysed both as continuous total scores and as categorical levels. For categorical analysis, total scores were grouped into four levels: low, moderate, high, and very high anxiety, according to the questionnaire scoring criteria.

Assertiveness was assessed using the Manuel J. Smith Assertiveness Questionnaire. The instrument includes 24 items assessing interpersonal behaviour in situations requiring direct, confident, and respectful self-expression. For the present analyses, responses were scored according to the questionnaire key to produce three assertiveness-related scores: less assertive, partially assertive, and fully assertive. These scores were treated as continuous variables in the statistical analyses, with higher scores indicating stronger endorsement of the corresponding response pattern.

Procedure

Data were collected electronically using Google Forms. Before completing the questionnaires, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the anonymous and confidential treatment of their responses. They were also informed that the data would be used only for research purposes.

Participants in the adopted group were recruited through Vedzeb. This recruitment strategy enabled access to adults with adoption histories, including individuals interested in searching for biological relatives. Participants in the comparison group were recruited through online distribution of the questionnaire via social networks and personal contacts.

Before statistical analysis, all responses were screened for completeness and validity. Questionnaires with excessive missing data or invalid response patterns on the anxiety questionnaire were excluded. Following this screening procedure, the final sample consisted of 139 participants. Because of missing responses on some variables, the number of valid cases varied slightly across analyses.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarise participants' demographic characteristics and the main study variables. Frequencies and percentages were reported for categorical variables, while means and standard deviations were reported for continuous variables.

Independent-samples t-tests were used to compare adults raised in adoptive families and adults raised in biological families on anxiety and assertiveness scores. Levene's test was used to assess the assumption of equality of variances. When this assumption was not met, results based on unequal variances were reported.

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine whether the distribution of anxiety categories differed according to adoption status. Because the low-anxiety category contained very few cases, this analysis was interpreted cautiously.

Effect sizes were calculated to evaluate the magnitude of group differences. Cohen's d was reported for independent-samples t-tests, and Cramér's V was reported for the chi-square test. In addition,

95% confidence intervals for mean differences were reported where applicable. For all statistical analyses, the significance level was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Participant Characteristics

The final analytic sample consisted of 139 adults, including 56 participants raised in adoptive families and 83 participants raised in biological families. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 65 years. The largest age group was 40–50 years, representing 44.6% of the sample, followed by participants aged 31–39 years (20.1%) and 51–59 years (15.8%).

Gender information was available for 138 participants. Of these, 127 participants were female (91.4%) and 11 were male (7.9%). One participant had missing gender data.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Characteristic	n	%
Total sample	139	100.0
Adopted adults	56	40.3
Biological-family group	83	59.7
Female	127	91.4
Male	11	7.9
Missing gender data	1	0.7

Table 2

Age Distribution of the Participants

Age group	n	%
18–19	2	1.4
20–30	17	12.2
31–39	28	20.1
40–50	62	44.6
51–59	22	15.8
60–65	4	2.9
66+	4	2.9
Total	139	100.0

Anxiety Differences Between Adopted and Non-Adopted Adults

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to examine whether anxiety scores differed between adults raised in adoptive families and adults raised in biological families. Levene's test was not statistically significant, $F = 2.849$, $p = .094$; therefore, equal variances were assumed.

The results indicated no statistically significant difference in anxiety scores between the two groups, $t(137) = -0.666$, $p = .506$, Cohen's $d = -0.12$, 95% CI $[-3.28, 1.62]$. Participants raised in adoptive families obtained a mean anxiety score of 32.50 ($SD = 7.90$), whereas participants raised in biological families obtained a mean score of 33.33 ($SD = 6.62$). The effect size was very small, indicating that the difference between the two groups was negligible.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Anxiety Scores

Group	n	M	SD
Adopted adults	56	32.50	7.90
Biological-family group	83	33.33	6.62

Table 4

Independent-Samples t-Test Comparing Anxiety Scores

Variable	t	df	p	Cohen's d	95% CI for mean difference
Anxiety	-0.666	137	.506	-0.12	$[-3.28, 1.62]$

Anxiety Categories by Adoption Status

Anxiety scores were classified into four categories: low, moderate, high, and very high anxiety. A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine whether the distribution of anxiety categories differed according to adoption status.

The analysis revealed no statistically significant association between adoption status and anxiety category, $\chi^2(3, N = 139) = 5.341$, $p = .148$, Cramér's $V = .20$. Thus, adopted adults and adults raised in biological families did not differ significantly in the distribution of anxiety levels. The effect size was small; however, this result should be interpreted cautiously because the low-anxiety category contained very few cases.

Table 5

Distribution of Anxiety Categories by Adoption Status

Anxiety level	Adopted adults n (%)	Biological-family group n (%)	Total n
Low	1 (1.8%)	0 (0.0%)	1
Moderate	11 (19.6%)	9 (10.8%)	20
High	34 (60.7%)	64 (77.1%)	98

Anxiety level	Adopted adults n (%)	Biological-family group n (%)	Total n
Very high	10 (17.9%)	10 (12.0%)	20
Total	56 (100.0%)	83 (100.0%)	139

Assertiveness Differences Between Adopted and Non-Adopted Adults

Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether adopted adults and adults raised in biological families differed in assertiveness. Available data for the assertiveness analyses included 138 participants: 55 adopted adults and 83 adults raised in biological families.

Three assertiveness dimensions were examined: less assertive, partially assertive, and fully assertive. The analyses indicated no statistically significant group differences across any of the three dimensions.

For the less assertive dimension, adopted adults ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.59$) and adults raised in biological families ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.54$) had nearly identical scores, $t(136) = -0.036$, $p = .971$, Cohen's $d = -0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.55, 0.53]$. This effect size indicates no meaningful difference between the groups.

For the partially assertive dimension, Levene's test was statistically significant, $F = 11.141$, $p = .001$; therefore, the unequal variances result was used. The difference between adopted adults ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 2.04$) and adults raised in biological families ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 1.47$) was not statistically significant, $t(90.551) = -1.789$, $p = .077$, Cohen's $d = -0.33$, 95% CI $[-1.20, 0.06]$. Although this effect was larger than the other assertiveness effects, it remained small and did not reach statistical significance.

For the fully assertive dimension, no statistically significant difference was found between adopted adults ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.24$) and adults raised in biological families ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.34$), $t(136) = 0.031$, $p = .975$, Cohen's $d = 0.01$, 95% CI $[-0.44, 0.45]$. The effect size was negligible.

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Assertiveness Scores

Assertiveness dimension	Group	n	M	SD
Less assertive	Adopted adults	55	4.36	1.59
Less assertive	Biological-family group	83	4.37	1.54
Partially assertive	Adopted adults	55	5.49	2.04
Partially assertive	Biological-family group	83	6.06	1.47
Fully assertive	Adopted adults	55	4.16	1.24
Fully assertive	Biological-family group	83	4.16	1.34

Table 7

Independent-Samples t-Tests Comparing Assertiveness Scores

Variable	t	df	p	Cohen's d	95% CI for mean difference
Less assertive	−0.036	136	.971	−0.01	[−0.55, 0.53]
Partially assertive	−1.789	90.551	.077	−0.33	[−1.20, 0.06]
Fully assertive	0.031	136	.975	0.01	[−0.44, 0.45]

Note. For the partially assertive dimension, unequal variances were assumed because Levene's test was statistically significant.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the statistical analyses revealed no statistically significant differences between adults raised in adoptive families and adults raised in biological families in either anxiety or assertiveness. Anxiety scores were comparable across the two groups, and adoption status was not significantly associated with anxiety category. Similarly, no significant group differences were observed across the three assertiveness dimensions.

The effect sizes further supported this interpretation. The group difference in anxiety was very small, and the effect sizes for the less assertive and fully assertive dimensions were negligible. The partially assertive dimension showed a small effect in favour of the biological-family group, but this difference did not reach statistical significance. Taken together, the findings suggest that adoption status alone was not associated with poorer psychological adjustment in the present sample, as reflected by anxiety and assertiveness.

Discussion

The present study examined anxiety and assertiveness among adults raised in adoptive families and adults raised in biological families in Georgia. Contrary to the initial expectations, no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups in anxiety scores, anxiety categories, or assertiveness dimensions. The effect sizes further supported this interpretation: the group difference in anxiety was very small, the differences in the less assertive and fully assertive dimensions were negligible, and the partially assertive dimension showed only a small, non-significant effect. These findings suggest that, within the present sample, adoption status alone was not associated with poorer psychological adjustment as reflected by anxiety and assertiveness.

The absence of a significant difference in anxiety is important in light of previous adoption research. Earlier studies often suggested that adopted individuals may be at increased risk of emotional difficulties, including anxiety and broader internalising problems (Brodzinsky, 1993; Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005). However, more recent systematic reviews and meta-analytic findings present a more nuanced picture, indicating that although some adult adoptees may experience poorer psychological adjustment on average, outcomes vary considerably across individuals, samples, and psychological domains (Corral et al., 2021; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017). The present findings are consistent with this more differentiated perspective. In this sample, adoption status did not distinguish adults with higher anxiety from those with lower anxiety.

The very small effect size observed for anxiety suggests that the absence of a statistically significant difference was not simply a matter of insufficient statistical power. Rather, the observed group difference was minimal in practical terms. Similarly, the chi-square analysis of anxiety categories showed only a small association between adoption status and anxiety level, and this result should be

interpreted cautiously because the low-anxiety category contained very few cases. Overall, the anxiety findings support the view that emotional adjustment among adopted adults is likely influenced by broader developmental and relational factors rather than adoption status alone.

One possible explanation is that anxiety among adopted adults may depend more strongly on factors that were not directly measured in the present study, such as pre-adoption experiences, attachment security, adoptive family functioning, communication about adoption, and perceived social support. Previous research has emphasised that these variables are important for understanding long-term psychological outcomes among adopted individuals (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010; Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). Therefore, the lack of group differences in the present study should not be interpreted as evidence that adoption-related experiences are psychologically irrelevant. Instead, it suggests that adoption should not be treated as a uniform risk factor and that individual life histories may be more informative than group membership alone.

The findings regarding assertiveness also contribute to the literature. No statistically significant differences were found between adopted adults and adults raised in biological families across the three assertiveness dimensions. The effect sizes for the less assertive and fully assertive dimensions were negligible, while the partially assertive dimension showed only a small, non-significant effect. These findings suggest that interpersonal assertiveness may not be directly determined by whether an individual was raised in an adoptive or biological family.

This result is theoretically meaningful because assertiveness is generally conceptualised as a learned interpersonal competence shaped by social learning, family communication, autonomy support, and repeated interpersonal experiences (Smith, 1975; Speed et al., 2018). From this perspective, assertive functioning is likely to develop through the quality of relational and social environments rather than through family structure alone. The inclusion of assertiveness is also an important contribution of the present study, as adoption research has focused primarily on anxiety, depression, behavioural difficulties, attachment, identity, and mental health service use, while assertiveness has rarely been examined as an outcome among adult adoptees.

The Georgian context gives these findings additional significance. In recent years, public discussion around historical illegal adoption practices has increased attention to adoptees' rights, biological origins, identity, and access to personal history. In such a context, adoption may be socially associated with vulnerability, uncertainty, or psychological difficulty. However, the present findings do not support a generalised assumption that adopted adults are necessarily more anxious or less assertive than adults raised in biological families. To the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first quantitative studies in Georgia to compare anxiety and assertiveness among adopted adults and adults raised in biological families. Therefore, even though no statistically significant group differences were identified, the findings provide initial empirical evidence from an underrepresented cultural context and offer a starting point for future research on adult adoption in Georgia.

The results have practical implications for psychologists, counsellors, social workers, and adoption-related services. Professionals should remain sensitive to adoption-related experiences, including identity questions, loss, secrecy, and the search for biological relatives. At the same time, they should avoid assuming psychological vulnerability solely on the basis of adoption status. Assessment and intervention should be individualised and should consider each person's developmental history, family relationships, identity-related experiences, current psychosocial circumstances, and available support systems.

Several limitations should be considered. First, the sample size was relatively modest, especially for detecting small group differences. Second, the sample was predominantly female, which limits the generalisability of the findings to male adoptees and men raised in biological families. Third, participants in the adopted group were recruited through Vedzeb, which may mean that many were

actively interested in biological origins or adoption-related identity issues; therefore, they may not represent all adopted adults in Georgia. Fourth, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which may be influenced by response style, social desirability, or current emotional state. Fifth, the cross-sectional design does not allow conclusions about developmental change or causal relationships. Finally, the study did not directly assess potentially important explanatory variables such as age at adoption, attachment security, family communication, resilience, perceived social support, or contact with biological relatives.

Future studies in Georgia would benefit from larger and more gender-balanced samples, longitudinal designs, and mixed-method approaches. Quantitative research should examine additional variables such as depression, self-esteem, attachment, identity integration, resilience, family communication, and perceived social support. Qualitative research could further explore adoptees' subjective experiences of identity, secrecy, family relationships, and searching for biological relatives. Such studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of adult adoption in Georgia and help identify the factors that contribute to either vulnerability or resilience.

Overall, the present findings suggest that adopted adults and adults raised in biological families demonstrated comparable levels of anxiety and assertiveness in this sample. Rather than viewing adoption as a direct determinant of adult psychological adjustment, the results support a more nuanced understanding in which adopted individuals are considered within their broader developmental, relational, and social contexts.

Conclusion

The present study compared anxiety and assertiveness among adults raised in adoptive families and adults raised in biological families in Georgia. The findings revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups in anxiety scores, anxiety categories, or assertiveness dimensions. Thus, within the present sample, adoption status alone was not associated with higher anxiety or lower assertiveness.

These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of psychological adjustment following adoption. Rather than supporting the assumption that adopted adults necessarily experience poorer psychological functioning, the results suggest that adult adjustment should be understood within a broader developmental and relational context. Adoption may represent an important life experience, but it should not be interpreted as a direct or uniform predictor of emotional or interpersonal difficulties.

To the authors' knowledge, this is one of the first quantitative studies in Georgia to examine anxiety and assertiveness among adopted adults in comparison with adults raised in biological families. This makes the findings particularly important for the Georgian context, where adoption-related issues have gained increasing public attention but empirical psychological research on adopted adults remains scarce. Even though no statistically significant group differences were identified, the results provide original evidence and challenge simplified assumptions about adopted adults' psychological vulnerability.

The findings also have practical implications for psychologists, counsellors, social workers, and adoption-related services. Professionals should avoid making assumptions based solely on adoption status and should instead consider each individual's developmental history, family relationships, identity-related experiences, current psychosocial circumstances, and available support systems. Future research in Georgia should build on these initial findings by using larger and more diverse samples and by examining additional variables such as attachment security, identity integration, family communication, resilience, self-esteem, depression, and perceived social support.

Overall, the present study provides an important starting point for the empirical study of adult adoption in Georgia. It highlights the need for evidence-based, individualised, and culturally sensitive approaches to understanding the psychological adjustment of adopted adults.

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