

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Reimagining Leisure Education Through Freire: A Comprehensive Guide

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Abstract

This paper examines Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed as a transformative framework for leisure and recreation education. Traditional pedagogical approaches in leisure studies remain rooted in hierarchical, banking models that reinforce systemic oppression, including Whiteness, monoculturalism, and exclusion. Drawing on Freire's concepts of critical consciousness, dialogical action, and problem-posing education, we argue that leisure educators must move beyond performative inclusion toward genuinely liberatory practices. We analyse how current pedagogies perpetuate oppression through White Institutional Presence and anti-dialogical actions such as conquest, divide and rule, manipulation, and cultural invasion. We then demonstrate how Freirean dialogical actions, cooperation, unity, organisation, and cultural synthesis can address these inequities through co-creation, praxis, and decolonised pedagogy. Practical strategies include co-designed syllabi, community-engaged projects, and integration of Indigenous knowledge systems. By cultivating critical consciousness and embedding dialogical action, leisure educators can position education as a practice of freedom, challenging dominant ideologies and creating more inclusive, just learning environments.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Freirean Dialogical Action, Leisure Studies, Whiteness and Praxis

Introduction

In recent years, educators across many fields have started to question traditional teaching methods. They have asked whether old approaches actually help students learn or whether they simply maintain unfair systems. Critical pedagogies offer teachers meaningful ways to connect with students through their real-life experiences. These approaches can create learning environments that include everyone and help set people free. However, in the field of leisure and recreation studies, most teaching still follows old patterns. Teachers talk, students listen.

Knowledge flows in one direction. Content is standardised and does not account for different backgrounds and experiences. This absence of critical frameworks is not neutral. It actually reinforces systems of oppression that are built into higher education itself. These systems include Whiteness, monoculturalism, and exclusion (Anderson et al., 2021; Mowatt, 2017).

Many scholars have written about these problems. Rose and Paisley (2012) and Theriault (2023) have pointed out how leisure education often ignores race and power. They have shown how traditional methods can hurt students from marginalized backgrounds. But while the literature has grown, few works have offered specific teaching approaches to counter these problems (Fernandez et al., 2022). This gap matters because identifying problems without offering solutions can leave educators feeling stuck. They may want to change but not know how. This paper aims to fill that gap by examining Paulo Freire's famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a framework for reimagining leisure education. Freire was a Brazilian educator who developed his ideas while teaching poor adults to read in the 1950s and 1960s. He saw education as a practice of freedom rooted in dialogue, reflection, and action. His work provides powerful tools for confronting dominant ideologies and centering student agency.

We argue that leisure and recreation educators must move beyond performative inclusion efforts. It is not enough to add a few diverse readings to the syllabus or to mention inequality in passing. Instead, educators need to adopt teaching practices based on Freirean principles. This means fundamentally rethinking the relationship between teacher and student. It means creating classrooms where knowledge flows in both directions. It means treating students as whole human beings with valuable experiences and insights. We will draw connections between Freire's theory and common practices in leisure classrooms. We will critically examine how current approaches perpetuate oppression. We will then show how Freire's work can lead to more just and transformative models of teaching and learning. Our analysis concludes by offering specific strategies for embedding dialogical action into leisure education. The goal is to cultivate critical consciousness in students and create systemic change in the field.

Understanding Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed

To apply Freire's ideas to leisure education, we first need to understand what he actually taught. Paulo Freire was not just an academic philosopher. He was a practitioner who worked directly with oppressed communities. He saw education not as a neutral activity but as a political act that could either maintain or challenge existing power structures. His most famous book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, was first published in Portuguese in 1968, and the English translation appeared in 1970. It

has since become one of the most influential works in educational theory. The book addresses the tension between freedom and the means through which freedom is achieved. At the heart of Freire's work is the concept of *conscientização*, or critical consciousness. Through critical consciousness, oppressed people become aware enough of their oppression to question and fight their reality. This awareness is not just intellectual. It is practical and emotional. It moves people from passive acceptance to active resistance.

Freire (1970) begins his book by examining what it means to be human. He argues that systems of oppression hinder human development. The oppressor tries to reduce the oppressed to less than human. The oppressed, in turn, see themselves as inferior and self-deprecating. This dynamic is destructive for everyone involved. However, both groups need each other to change this situation. The oppressor cannot truly help the oppressed without their involvement. The oppressed must be full participants in their own liberation. And in doing so, they also liberate their oppressors from their own dehumanisation. Freire (1970) writes that "the pedagogy of the oppressed is an instrument for their critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanisation" (p. 48). He also makes clear that the oppressed must enter into reflection and critical consciousness as full human beings, not as objects. They are not problems to be solved, but people with agency and dignity.

In the second chapter, Freire outlines two distinct pedagogical models. The first is the banking model of education. This model assumes that learners are empty vessels ready to be filled by the teacher with knowledge and facts. The teacher deposits information, and the student receives it passively. Freire (1970) believes this pedagogy keeps students oppressed. It stifles their curiosity and creativity. It rewards meekness and receptivity. Students learn to accept authority without question. The banking model may seem inclusive because it offers education to everyone. But the content of banking often conflicts with the lived experiences of oppressed people. It presents a single-sided view of knowledge that normalises their lack of humanity. Students may be educated, but they are not liberated. They simply learn to fit into the existing system.

The second model is the problem-posing model of education. This is what Freire refers to as critical pedagogy. Instead of depositing knowledge, this method focuses on cognitive interactions between the teacher and learners. Knowledge is co-created. The flow of knowledge is reciprocal. Teachers and students teach each other. This dynamic process is only possible through dialogue. Freire (1970) writes that "problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming, as unfinished, uncompleted beings in a likewise unfinished reality" (p. 84). This highlights the power of education as a means of liberation. It treats humans as always growing and changing. It also treats reality as something that can be

transformed. This model increases humanity and, as Freire often mentions, is an act of love.

The third chapter explores the key concepts of dialogic and anti-dialogical methods, the use of praxis, and thematic investigation. Freire believes these concepts are prerequisites for meaningful problem-posing education. Dialogue, for Freire, is not just conversation. It is "the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (Freire, 1970, p. 88). Through dialogue, humans name their reality and enter into the process of becoming more fully human. The prerequisites for dialogue are love for the world, humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking. Dialogue is positioned as the action associated with liberation. It is not a means to convince the oppressed to take action. It is itself a liberating act.

Freire (1970) also emphasises the need for thematic investigation before dialogical education can commence. Teachers must understand students' reality. Only then can they provide meaningful education. With an understanding of reality, teachers can help students investigate their own situation. This new awareness of limit-situations enables students to view their themes or situations as problems ripe for further investigation. They can see that their circumstances are not fixed but can be changed. This awareness is the foundation for action.

The fourth and final chapter lays out Freire's cultural action theory. He contrasts the methods of cultural change with cultural oppression by describing the theories of dialogical and anti-dialogical actions. The methods of anti-dialogical action include conquest, divide-and-rule, manipulation, and cultural invasion. Conquest aims to mythologise the world to maintain the status quo. It repeats to the oppressed the belief that the world is fixed and cannot change. Divide and rule focuses on helping individuals escape oppression rather than uniting people as a group. Individuals are lifted out of oppression only to return to their communities to propagate control. Manipulation asserts the possibility of class ascent. It distracts the oppressed from the reality of their oppression by promising them the chance to become elite. Cultural invasion imposes the ideas and values of the oppressor elite on the oppressed. It convinces the oppressed that their own ideas and values are inferior.

Freire (1970) then contrasts these with dialogical actions. These include cooperation, unity, organisation, and cultural synthesis. Cooperation exists only through communication. It utilises dialogical methods and problem-posing education, which leads to critical analysis of reality. Unity refers to the union of revolutionary leaders with the oppressed. This is resolved through praxis, the dialogue of thought that leads to liberating action. Organisation is a process that requires freedom and authority. It is established by transforming reality. Finally, in cultural synthesis, the leader's

worldview and the people's worldview are reconciled. The culture itself is confronted, and integration of the people toward action and liberation occurs.

Problematic Pedagogies in Leisure Education

The implementation of Freirean pedagogy in leisure and recreation studies offers opportunities to counter problematic pedagogies. These problematic pedagogies are connected to Freire's anti-dialogical action theory. They represent oppression in education. Central to these problematic pedagogies is the ideology of Whiteness, which is embedded in many structures of higher education. This ideology aligns closely with Freire's concept of the oppressor class. It highlights the dominant, pervasive systemic impact on education.

Scholars have developed frameworks to understand how Whiteness operates in higher education. Gusa (2010) uses the ideologies of Critical Race Theory, the worldview of Whiteness, and White privilege to construct their framework of White Institutional Presence (WIP). This framework has four characteristics: White ascendancy, monoculturalism, White blindness, and White estrangement. These four characteristics align with Freire's anti-dialogical theory of cultural oppression. Each one represents a way that white supremacy is maintained through educational practices. Understanding these characteristics is essential for leisure educators who want to create more just classrooms.

White ascendancy describes the opportunities and positions that a white sense of superiority can attain and maintain. In Freire, this is exemplified by manipulation, in which the oppressor convinces the oppressed of their ability to ascend to the elite class. We observe this conundrum in leisure and recreation studies. The continued use of certain narratives and pedagogies necessitates adaptation to be successful in the field. Several examples illustrate this point. The juxtaposition of wilderness and the use of natural spaces often reflect white values. The use and importance of challenge, as well as physical and social discomfort, also stem from white perspectives. The assumptions of leisure time and freedom ignore the reality that many people do not have the same access to free time or safe spaces (Peterson & Chenault, 2023).

Scholars have critically examined how dominant narratives in outdoor education are rooted in Whiteness. Ho and Chang (2022) examine how narratives tied to wilderness, risk, and self-discovery often exclude or alienate people of colour. Leisure spaces are framed as belonging to an imagined, racially neutral outdoors. But this neutrality is a fiction. Concepts like nature or wilderness function as gatekeeping tools. They limit access and a sense of belonging for marginalised communities. When educators treat these concepts as universal, they reinforce white ascendancy

without even realising it. Rose and Paisley (2012) similarly argue that outdoor education must critically examine its white-centered assumptions.

Monoculturalism describes the uniform set of values and beliefs embedded in white culture. These stifle true diversity in both scholarly work and campus climates. In Freire, this is described as cultural invasion. Cultural invasion similarly stifles creativity and diversity of ideas among the oppressed. The values and beliefs of the oppressors become predominant. Those of the oppressed are often viewed as inferior. In leisure studies, monoculturalism appears in how experiences are understood and constructed. Kivel and colleagues (2009) apply the concept of monoculturalism in leisure through a discussion of how the understanding and meaning of experiences in leisure are constructed. Researchers often use constructivist approaches that focus on the majority of people's perspectives. They ignore or marginalize other ways of knowing. These ideas are grounded in Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Cassar, 2017). Hegemony shows how dominant ideologies control narratives by continuing practices of exclusion and inequities under the cover of freedom and choice.

In an outdoor setting, monoculturalism is exemplified through the values that guide our interactions with nature and wilderness. Land-use ethics taught to practitioners often reflect white perspectives. Indigenous ways of relating to the land are ignored or treated as lesser. This imposes a single worldview on everyone. It tells students that there is only one correct way to think about nature, recreation, and leisure. This is cultural invasion in practice.

White blindness describes the tendency for race to be erased. With this erasure comes a lack of acknowledgement of racism. In Freire, we see the concept of conquest, which aims to mythologise the world as a fixed entity (DeBrew et al., 2024). When the oppressed cannot see their existence as anything but the current perceived reality, they cease to imagine anything different. This blindness to their own oppression is characteristic of the purpose of conquest. In leisure and recreation, this blindness is frequently seen in the perpetuation of Whiteness ideologies. It appears in the design and implementation of programs. It appears in the membership of organisations (Carter & Rose, 2024). Race is simply not discussed. Problems are attributed to individual failures or bad luck rather than systemic racism.

White estrangement describes campus environments where physical and social separation of white people further perpetuates other ideas of Whiteness. In Freire, the concept of divide and rule is the acceptance that oppressor ideologies allow adopters to be lifted out of oppression. But this happens only as individuals. And those individuals lose touch with their own characteristics of oppression. They become isolated from their communities. Leisure and recreation in outdoor spaces have a long history and association with Whiteness. Davis (2018) points out that policies such as

the Wilderness Act of 1964 marginalised African American communities. They privileged elite white ideas of nature and erased Black participation in outdoor spaces. Ideas about wilderness exploration, land use, conservation, and nature access all have their roots in white settler colonialist ideas (Carter & Rose, 2024; Ho & Chang, 2022).

Scholars have critiqued white approaches in leisure studies. Mowatt (2017) critiques the White approaches in leisure studies, which fail to account for the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism and racism on access and participation. Mowatt (2017) calls for a critical expansion of leisure theory by centering racialized histories of land, recreation, and public space. Leisure studies often treat race as an afterthought. It assumes a universal subject position that erases Black and Indigenous experiences. This erasure is not accidental. It is a result of white estrangement, where people are separated from each other and from their histories.

Based on this analysis, we assert that the study and field of leisure and recreation are not exempt from these frameworks. It is part of the higher education landscape. It must therefore seek methods to address change within these four characteristics. We will now explore how Freire's concepts of dialogical action can be used to address these problematic pedagogies.

Applying Freire's Dialogical Actions to Leisure Studies

Freire offers specific approaches through dialogical actions to address systemic inequities. Dialogical actions promote active engagement among individuals. They enable people to understand different perspectives. They foster dialogue that co-creates knowledge and works toward shared goals. These actions ultimately lead to social change or personal transformation. Actions such as cooperation, praxis, and cultural synthesis provide pathways for transformative movements toward equity in leisure and recreation studies. Freire's philosophy presents significant implications for challenging dominant pedagogical practices that reinforce Whiteness, monoculturalism, and exclusion.

Many social science researchers have already highlighted ways to address these systemic inequities. Their work complements Freire's dialogical action theory. Scholars such as bell hooks (1994) and Henry Giroux (1997) have contributed to critical pedagogy in education. They advocate for teaching practices that empower marginalised students and challenge oppressive structures. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) emphasises the importance of engaged pedagogy. This approach centres critical thinking and values the experiences of students, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds. hooks (1994) argues that education should serve as a practice of freedom. It should encourage students to challenge societal norms and become agents of change. This understanding aligns closely with Freire's

belief in education as a tool for liberation. Dialogue and reflection enable students to critically engage with their lived realities. This is the concept of *conscientização*.

Giroux (1997) similarly emphasises the political nature of education. He advocates for teaching that actively addresses social justice issues. He critiques the notion of neutrality in education. Such neutral actions often reinforce existing power structures. Giroux's perspective echoes Freire's critique of the banking model of education. To address this banking model, Freire suggests adopting a dialogical method that emphasizes the co-creation of knowledge. This counteracts oppressive dynamics by centering the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. It ensures that education does not perpetuate racialized hierarchies.

Scholars like Anderson and colleagues (2021) also contribute essential insights. Educators must be critically reflective in practice. This applies even to well-intentioned aims of volunteerism or diversity initiatives. They must recognise leisure as a contested space. Anderson et al. (2021) critique what they call the White Saviour Industrial Complex. In this complex, service-oriented project, the emotional satisfaction or learning experiences of white students are often prioritised over genuine community empowerment. Without critical reflection on power, privilege, and positionality, such engagements can reinforce the very hierarchies they seek to dismantle. Their work calls for pedagogical practices that are dialogical, rooted in praxis, and attentive to race and power. This makes their work an essential addition to Freire's philosophy. Educators can facilitate discussions on how power operates in recreational settings. They can empower students to question and resist these dynamics. Embedding dialogical actions into pedagogical frameworks opens opportunities for educators to create inclusive spaces that promote critical consciousness and foster liberation.

Co-Creation as a Foundation for Justice

Freire emphasises that co-creation and problem-posing education can be tools for dialogical action. Co-creation and problem-posing open the possibility for critical engagement among oppressed communities. They also enable critical discourse on issues in leisure and recreation studies (Dustin et al., 2019). Co-creation is fostered through problem-posing, facilitated by the educator. But the educator is in service to the shared analysis and interrogation of experience. These practices can validate diverse perspectives. They can challenge hegemonic narratives of whiteness in educational settings (Rose & Paisley, 2012).

In the context of leisure studies, co-creation necessitates a rethinking of the educator-student relationship. This rethinking is not just symbolic. It requires concrete changes to how courses are designed and taught. Classes may start with a co-design phase in which students are encouraged to share their learning outcomes. This creates a

platform to practice critical engagement. Knee and Thomas Means (2018) argue that classes may begin with a co-design phase in which students are encouraged to share their learning outcomes. For example, instructors might begin the semester with a co-designed syllabus activity. Students collaboratively identify key social justice themes they want to explore. These might include access to green spaces, the history of exclusion in parks, or the impact of gentrification on recreation opportunities. Students then help shape assignments that allow them to critically engage with those themes. This could involve reflective writing, community-based projects, or research papers.

Another example could involve students co-creating evaluation rubrics for group work or presentations. This centres mutual respect, diverse perspectives, and shared responsibility. It embodies Freire's commitment to dialogical relationships and shared meaning-making. Students have a voice in how they are evaluated. They learn to think critically about what counts as good work. They also learn to negotiate and collaborate with their peers. This is not a simple process. It can be messy and challenging. But that is part of the point. Education should not be about comfort. It should be about growth.

Central to these examples is the idea that co-creation begins with educators considering how to incorporate student voice and choice into course design. This might mean flexible deadlines, multiple assignment options, or student-led discussions. It means trusting students to take responsibility for their own learning. It also means being transparent about power dynamics. Educators should acknowledge that they have authority in the classroom. But they can choose to share that authority. They can invite students to be partners in the learning process.

Co-creation also extends beyond the classroom. Students can co-create programs with community partners. They can work with local organisations to design inclusive recreation programs. This requires genuine collaboration, not just token involvement. Educators should facilitate these partnerships carefully. They should ensure that community voices are centred, not just student learning. They should also help students reflect on their own positionality. This is not just about learning skills. It is about becoming more thoughtful, aware, and ethical practitioners.

Building Collective Agency through Praxis

To counter the divide-and-rule practice, Freire describes the path of unity, grounded in praxis. Praxis is the process of reflection and action aimed at transforming oppressive structures. In leisure studies, unity can be achieved through collaborative projects that address systemic inequities within the field. This perhaps begins with the thematic investigation of the students and educators themselves. They need to better understand their positionality with respect to local communities and systems of

power and oppression. This process may be inherently emotional. Therefore, integrating the work of Schultz and colleagues (2022) on emotional pedagogies can be useful when unpacking positionality and privilege in the context of social justice in leisure education.

Students and educators can then purposefully engage with local communities to design programs that address issues. These might include economic access or historical exclusion from public spaces. For instance, a group project might involve students partnering with a local nonprofit to design inclusive recreation programs for historically excluded populations. As students research barriers to participation and listen to community narratives, they engage in reflection. This is a thematic investigation. They then apply what they learn through collaborative program design. This is action. The educator, meanwhile, participates as a co-learner. They guide but do not dictate. They help students navigate ethical questions, positionality, and impact. This collaborative and critical approach provides the opportunity to engage in praxis. Students identify systemic issues and take collective action to address them. This is far better than perpetuating structural inequities through isolation and spectatorship. Unfortunately, isolation and spectatorship have been institutionalised and practised by educators for too long (Theriault, 2023).

Caution should be taken when shifting from praxis to action and seeking to engage in community work. As Anderson and colleagues (2021) write, particularly for white students and educators, they must "be aware of the historical and structural barriers that have caused the problem they seek to address, their own membership in the hegemonic group that has built or benefited from those barriers, and the complexities associated with accepting recognition for their efforts" (p. 546). This awareness is crucial. Without it, well-intentioned projects can do more harm than good. They can reinforce the very systems they aim to dismantle.

With awareness of the larger implications of action, grounded in thematic investigation prior to praxis and action, collaboration and a critical approach make education a catalyst for collective liberation. This aligns with Freire's vision of education. It is not about individual advancement. It is about collective transformation. It is about building power together to change oppressive structures. This is hard work. It requires patience, humility, and persistence. But it is the only path to lasting change.

Decolonised Pedagogy through Cultural Synthesis

Cultural synthesis promotes the integration of diverse worldviews through dialogue and respect. Freire offers a framework for decolonising education through cultural synthesis. This treats different cultures equally and gives them equal authority. It is the opposite of cultural invasion, which imposes the oppressors' values onto the

oppressed. In leisure studies, dominant narratives often marginalise non-Western perspectives (Carter & Rose, 2024). For example, instead of teaching concepts of wilderness from white Eurocentric narratives, educators in leisure studies can integrate Indigenous knowledge systems. Kimmerer (2013) provides a holistic understanding of human-nature relationships by highlighting interconnections between land, culture, and identity.

A practical application might involve inviting Indigenous community members into the classroom. They can co-facilitate sessions on traditional ecological knowledge. Students can then engage in student-led reflections that connect these teachings to their own cultural assumptions about wilderness. This is not a one-time event. It should be an ongoing relationship built on trust and respect. Alternatively, an assignment might involve students comparing land-use ethics from multiple worldviews. This could go beyond the common preservationist-versus-conservationist dichotomy. Students might compare Western Leave No Trace principles with Indigenous relationality with the land. They could discuss the implications for their future practice. What does it mean to be a recreation professional who respects multiple ways of knowing? What does it mean to challenge dominant narratives in their own work?

Cultural synthesis is not about appropriating Indigenous knowledge. It is about respecting it as equally valid. It is about recognising that Western knowledge is not the only knowledge. It is about creating space for other voices to be heard. This requires humility and a willingness to learn. It also requires action. Educators should not just talk about decolonisation. They should change their curricula and teaching practices. They should seek out partnerships with Indigenous communities. They should support Indigenous scholars and practitioners. They should challenge institutional policies that maintain white supremacy.

Cultural synthesis also applies to other marginalised perspectives. Leisure educators should include voices from Black, Latinx, Asian, and other communities. They should teach about the histories of exclusion and resistance in leisure spaces. They should help students understand that leisure is not neutral. It is shaped by race, class, gender, and other systems of power. By doing this, educators help students become more critical and aware practitioners. They prepare students to work in diverse communities. They also prepare students to challenge injustice in their own fields.

Conclusion

Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), outlines the systemic issues used by the oppressor to maintain control over the oppressed. To continue exploitation, the oppressor employs tactics that deceive the oppressed into believing in their own nobility. White Saviour is an example where, instead of addressing the root structural

cause, white people offer momentary consolation to keep control over marginalised people (Anderson et al., 2021). Freire offers dialogical actions such as cooperation, praxis, and cultural synthesis as practical tools. These counter oppressive practices and offer a practical approach to integrating theories into practices that can lead to social change and liberation.

Leisure educators should adopt Freire's framework as a theoretical foundation to guide transformative practices. They should move away from banking models of instruction. They should move toward co-created learning experiences that centre on students' lived experiences and community engagement. Educators should critically reflect on their positionality. They should intentionally cultivate dialogical classrooms where knowledge flows bidirectionally. Institutions should support pedagogy that challenges dominant ideologies, including Whiteness and monoculturalism. They should create space for multiple epistemologies to thrive. This means changing policies, hiring practices, and evaluation criteria. It means supporting faculty who do this work. It means valuing community engagement and social justice as much as traditional research.

By cultivating critical consciousness and embedding dialogical actions into their teaching, leisure educators can position education as a liberatory force. This commitment to reflection and co-created action enables educators and institutions to challenge oppressive structures. It creates an inclusive future aligned with Freire's vision of education as liberation. In doing so, educators affirm the humanity of their students and themselves. They help co-create a more inclusive and just future for the field. This is not easy work. It requires ongoing effort and learning. But it is essential for creating a field that truly serves all people. It is essential for building a world where everyone can experience the freedom and joy of leisure.

The path forward is clear. Educators must embrace Freire's vision. They must commit to dialogue, reflection, and action. They must challenge oppressive structures in their classrooms and beyond. They must centre the voices of marginalised communities. They must be willing to learn and change. This is the work of liberation. It is the work of love. And it is the work that leisure educators must undertake if they want to create a more just and inclusive world.

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