

EVALUATION OF THE PRAGMATIC COMMUNICATION APPROACH IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN DOKA, DOMA LOCAL GOVERNMENT OF NASARAWA STATE

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Abstract

Communication plays a good role in changing perceptions and behavioural patterns in human society. This study examined communication approaches as the specific method or strategy used to share information, ensuring it is clear, appropriate, and understood. It focused on pragmatic communication, which puts the demands of the audience, context, and function ahead of rigorous perfection. Rural areas in central Nigeria have endured conflicts between farming communities and cattle rearers in what has been termed 'Farmers-Herdmen Conflict'. This article applies pragmatic communication in the context of managing peaceful coexistence arising from the farmer-herdsmen conflict in Doka, Doma Local Government Area of Nasarawa State, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the persistent violence, loss of life and property, and breakdown of social relations resulting from the conflict between farmers and herdsmen in the area. A qualitative case study approach was employed, and data were gathered through key person interviews, focus group discussions, and the review of relevant documents. This design enabled a comprehensive exploration of stakeholders' experiences and perspectives utilising Freeman's Stakeholders' Theory. The collected data were analysed thematically in alignment with the study's research objectives. The results indicated that the conflict stemmed largely from rivalry over access to land and water, destruction of crops, indiscriminate grazing, ineffective land-use policies, weak enforcement of existing laws, and deep-seated mistrust between farmers and herders. The study recommended that pragmatic communication, being effective in connecting communities in conflicts, should be used proactively rather than reactively.

Keywords: Conflict, Conflict management, Farmers-Herdsmen, Mediation, Pragmatic Communication

Introduction

The purpose of communication is to exchange ideas and establish a common understanding. It enables information sharing, persuasion, emotional expression, relationship building, and action coordination. Pragmatic communication, on the other hand, qualifies communication as putting the demands of the audience, context, and function ahead of rigorous perfection to make a message

suitable and understood. It emphasises social standards of communication, such as taking turns, interpreting body language, and adjusting tone to suit or motivate an audience.

Conflict is a natural phenomenon among people, and it arises where individuals or groups have different interests. There have been different types of conflict within Nigerian society, which include communal conflict, religious conflict, farmers and herdsmen conflict, among others. The Doka conflict features two distinct groups whose modes of livelihood are becoming increasingly incompatible. First are the settlers who are farmers by nature and belong mainly to the Koro, Tiv and Alago tribes. They aim to defend the farmland from any form of invasion and to ensure that they are able to cultivate their farmlands and harvest them after the crops reach full maturity without being destroyed. They also want to be able to cultivate the land for many years, just like they had done in the past. This farmland is considered a valuable property to the farmers, and is not only used as an economic resource but also as an inheritance to pass on to the future generation. Second are the nomadic Fulani herdsmen who derive their mode of living through cattle rearing. These herders, who have practised nomadic pastoralism for centuries, always look out for grazing land, water sources to sustain their herds, and routes along which they can move their cattle, which represent their wealth, their cultural heritage, and their means of survival. However, when grazing lands become scarce, or routes are blocked, their entire livelihood faces a serious problem.

The crisis that now plagues Doka did not emerge overnight as the origins of the conflict can be traced back to the late 1990s, though the seeds were sown even earlier through a series of interconnected developments that gradually transformed the relationship between farmers and herdsmen from one of mutual accommodation to outright hostility (*Guardian*, 19th December, 2025). Further, the prevailing clashes between farmers and herders in many parts of Nigeria have been attributed to the destruction of farmlands by cattle, which are mostly owned by the herdsmen. The herdsmen are mostly migrants who transit, especially in the dry season, to seek greener pastures for their droves. Udemezue & Kanu (2019).

Similarly, in many of these conflicts, life and property have been lost, farm products have been destroyed, people have been displaced, and governments at various levels local, state, and federal have spent so much money on setting up either committees for resolutions or resettlement camps for the displaced persons. International and local media reports have confirmed the death of so many persons, which is the consequence of the farmers and herdsmen clashes. Every attack and clash between the two land users is often accompanied by the deployment of government security personnel to affected communities, who are shortly withdrawn after the conflict wanes, creating an avenue for the launch of fresh attacks more severe than initial ones.

Moreover, various policies and programmes of government targeted at bringing lasting solutions to the crisis have either not been implemented or monitored. Ofuoku & Isife (2009) asserted that the limited implementation and enforcement of existing laws, inadequate security presence in rural areas, and the proliferation of arms among herders and criminal elements are some of the factors hindering the resolution of the conflict and fostering coexistence between different groups in the society. Adeoye (2017) is of the view that "effective peace building is premised on dialogue, participatory communication approaches and trust building" The conflict resolution processes and communication approaches, including negotiations, community-based mediation, peace messaging, media advocacy and the engagement of all relevant stakeholders, when used, can de-escalate conflict. In most of the communities affected by this conflict, communication and community-based mediation, and traditional leaders have played a good role towards resolution of the conflict. Ademola (2023) observed that "Town hall meetings, community dialogue and mediation efforts led by elders have been effective in de-escalating the tension in the community". The effectiveness of

these approaches, however, has been limited by political influence and an obvious lack of institutional and government support in achieving lasting peace. Additionally, the coming of social media in different societies of the world has established a new way of conflict communication. The different platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, WeChat, WhatsApp, etc. have been variously used to increase and decrease the conflict. Olabode (2023) summarised how misinformation on different social media platforms has fuelled the conflict between crop farmers and cattle breeders, while digital peace building awareness by different civil society organisations has sought to counter hate speech and promote reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in different communities affected by the conflict between the crop farmers and cattle breeders.

Further, the conflict between arable farmers and pastoralists is a security issue that is complicated by different factors, one of which is the increase in population, which has given rise to scarcity in resources like land, food, water, etc. Ariemu (2023) argued that "the National Population Commission estimated that the annual growth rate of Nigeria has reached 3.2%, signaling that more people will continue competing over usable and available land". The different communities affected by this conflict usually face persistent threats to their safety and livelihood, leading to widespread fear and a sense of insecurity.

Methodology

This study explored the communication approaches used in conflict management between farmers and herdsmen in Doka, Doma Local Government Area of Nasarawa State. The researcher employed the descriptive research design. According to Kothari (2004), descriptive research design seeks to uncover elements related to certain occurrences, results, situations or types of behaviour; it is a fact-finding technique. Descriptive design is useful to describe answers to queries of what, where, how and who (Burns et al., 2009). The research entailed face-to-face engagement with the residents of Doka community to interface with them on their group perception of the causes, manifestations, and possible solutions to the conflicts. Key Person Interviews were conducted with the leaders of both groups and with heads of governmental security agencies in the area. Focus group interviews were held with youth groups among the farming community as well as the herders' groups. The data from the two information-gathering processes were transcribed and qualitatively analysed by thematic objectives of the effectiveness of local approaches to conflict mediation. The study then examined the effectiveness of these participatory approaches in resolving conflicts and identifying the barriers to effectiveness using the pragmatic communication processes available in the community.

Theoretical Framework

For the theoretical framework, this study is anchored in Freeman's (1984) Stakeholder Theory, which posits that sustainable peace in resource-conflict zones requires the identification and active engagement of all affected parties. A stakeholder is any group or individual who can affect, or is affected by, the achievement or lack of achievement of an organisation's objectives.

By mapping the divergent interests of farmers, herders, local authorities, and traditional institutions, this framework provides the structural basis upon which pragmatic communication strategies can be deployed to rebuild trust and address the root causes of conflicts. A communication strategy or peace intervention must identify, consult with, and balance the interests of every group with a stake in the land and water resources of Doka. Ignoring even one key stakeholder will cause the communication/peace effort to fail. The Stakeholder theory therefore helps the study to locate who needs to talk to whom and about what, and to apply community engagement as the method for making those conversations effective.

Concept of Conflict and Conflict Management

Conflicts are a normal part of human relations, since individuals and collectives always have varying interests, ideas, and perspectives. According to Tjosvold (2008), conflicts occur whenever the parties involved feel incompatible regarding their objectives, values, and approaches, leading to tensions that need to be addressed. This happens in many aspects of our daily lives, both personally and professionally. Conflict does not necessarily indicate failure but may rather suggest an issue that needs addressing. How this is done will determine whether the relationship is improved or deteriorated.

According to Hall-Baker (2017), conflict can be defined as a situation resulting from misunderstanding, poor communication, and differences in perception, interests, and behaviour patterns among parties. Such an interpretation of conflict reveals its interpersonal nature since it focuses on how conflicts are created due to the lack of proper communication and differences in perspectives. Thus, it should be noted that disputes are not only caused by practical and objective differences; in fact, they may also be a consequence of personal perception, assumptions, and practices creating interpersonal tensions. In turn, according to Stephen et al. (2023), conflict can be viewed as a situation of disagreement regarding a specific problem. Nevertheless, in the case of management and organisations, it becomes clear that the definition of conflict goes far beyond the traditional one. Specifically, conflict within organisational frameworks is much more than just disagreements; it is about underlying phenomena such as competition, power struggles, and conflicting interests.

Sinnaiah et al. (2023) opined that having a good understanding of conflict dynamics will play a crucial role in fostering positive attitudes within the workplace and improving effectiveness, especially in a workplace environment where collaboration and cooperation are necessary for the operations of the organisation. Conflict usually arises due to the perception that one's point of view has not been considered or when one's values conflict with the overall goals of the group. These scenarios may result in tensions, which strain the relationship among employees and reduce overall effectiveness. According to Okuthe (2022), such interactions involving conflicting viewpoints can be used as an opportunity to raise concerns that have never been raised for quite some time.

According to Touitou (2020), conflict management refers to deliberate steps taken to reduce negative aspects of conflicts while enhancing their positive aspects for the benefit of individuals involved in such conflicts. Conflict management is not an attempt to eliminate conflicts but rather to manage them in ways that prevent conflicts from causing problems to those involved in them and encourage cooperation. Conflict management entails strategies and actions used to prevent conflicts from escalating, resolving conflicts, and maintaining stability. Fearn-Banks (2016), states that conflict management requires understanding the root causes and triggers of conflicts and adopting appropriate strategies to manage such conflicts in a way that meets the interests of all parties involved. The purpose of adopting such strategies is to prevent conflicts from escalating into crises and achieving satisfactory resolutions for all concerned. Fink (2013) emphasises that conflict management is not about silencing or suppressing conflicts but rather addressing them effectively.

Effective conflict resolution mostly relies on the communication methods used, as ineffective communication exacerbates conflicts while effective interaction will either resolve the conflict or prevent its escalation. According to Alifanova (2021), communication management is vital for organisations, especially in crises when consistent and transparent communication allows managers to act and provide all stakeholders with an opportunity to voice their opinions. In cases of miscommunication or its absence, misunderstanding often ensues, which may lead to the worsening of conflicts. As Coombs (2015) states, in cases of organisational conflict threatening the reputation

and functioning of the organisation, timely and well-planned communication is imperative. The efficiency of the entire crisis management process depends significantly on the speed of information coordination and the thoroughness with which the stakeholders' opinions are considered. As explained by Frandsen and Johansen (2018), communication in crises can be proactive, reactive, or interactive, but all require thorough planning to ensure minimal damage.

Farmers and Herdsmen Conflict in Doka in Perspective

Government, law enforcement agencies and the communities are three critical stakeholders identified in the conflict following the precepts of Freeman's Stakeholders' Theory. The farmers and herdsmen conflict in Doka, Nigeria, is driven by some interlinked causes, with the competition for scarce resources being at the heart of the matter. Competition for scarce fertile lands and water sources is aggravated by increasing population and environmental problems.

Paramount to the conflict are Ineffective government policies, which ensure that laws are drafted without consultation of the various groups in the conflict. In addition, weak law enforcement by security agencies has failed to protect farmers. Continuing weak engagement between the groups in the conflict also stamped deep-seated mistrust. Stakeholders have failed to communicate their needs honestly to one another over time.

The community leader of Doka mentioned this when he stated that scarcity of resources such as water and land has been the basis of the continuing conflict. The leader also attributed the conflict to an increase in agricultural activities and climate change, which has led to desertification and low rainfall. Chief Dazhe Amos reiterates that, "rain has been inconsistent and the harsh sun is drying up grasses for cattle to feed on, which makes some herders to lead their flock into the farms. A lot of our people are going into farming because of hunger and lack of money, and such expansion has led to increased pressure on land". (Key informant interview, 10th May 2025) He further observed that competition over land, grazing and water escalated the conflict, and for over three years, none of them stayed in their community.

For the farmers in Doka, there is a need for arable land for farming purposes, whereas the herdsmen require grazing grounds and water for their livestock. These two factors result in conflicts arising between the two groups whenever livestock interferes with crops. The leader of the farmers reiterated that resource-based conflict is the reason for the persistent crisis between farmers and herdsmen. He echoed the issue of land scarcity and blocked grazing paths, emphasising how herders' movements into farmlands spark hostilities: "Herders will leave the old grazing routes or inside thick forest where they normally graze and will bring their cows to our farms to eat up our crops. When you refuse them, they will attack you" (Key Person Interview, 10th May 2025).

Water shortage is another big issue, especially during the dry season. These shortages often bring herders from other states in the northeast and northwest where water is lacking. Further, the respondent also linked land-use changes and encroachment on traditional grazing routes as central concerns: "Farmers are expanding their farms and blocking our traditional grazing routes that our fathers and grandfathers have been using for many years". The respondent further described how this displacement has resulted in cattle straying into farmlands, often unintentionally: "When our cattle cannot find their usual paths, they sometimes enter farmlands accidentally". However, the opinion of the security agencies on this issue is not different from what other parties affirmed. The personnel of the NSCDC stated: "From what we have observed while interacting with the two parties, what seems to be the foundation causes of farmers and herdsmen conflict is as a result of scarce resources, grazing routes or fields, water, and land dominance."

The personnel provided a viewpoint from a mediator perspective, suggesting that as access to resources narrows, competition becomes inevitable, especially when there are no clear state-led mechanisms for land demarcation and usage; hence the violent conflict. Though the parties differ in their duties, there is no dispute among them regarding the root cause of the conflict, which is the shortage of resources, including land and water. The lack of proper land tenure systems also contributes to the problem because disputes about land ownership create tension between individuals. This is not just a struggle for natural resources but a very personal one because livelihoods depend on them.

The issue of communication barriers has been identified as significantly contributing to the escalation of farmers-herdsmen conflict in Doka, Nasarawa State, according to the people involved. The problem of communication barriers is a recurring theme in their responses. The community leaders explained that “some people hear, but they don’t listen” and that “If both sides agree on peace, then it will work. But when there is anger, when guns are involved, then communication can be a problem. However, communication has prevented and stopped many fights.” (FGD, 10th May 2025).

This indicated that lack of trust, communication barriers, and selective listening have made the conflict more entrenched in Doka, Nasarawa State. Past conflicts and violence between the two groups have created a lack of trust among them. The community leader explained how some herders and farmers felt sidelined or misunderstood, making it harder to mediate tensions.

In many of our meetings, one group may feel we are supporting the other side and will mostly disagree with certain conditions. Most times we warn the herders not to move their cows around farms and residential areas, yet they feel we are taking sides. But all we do is for the sake of peace. (Key Person Interview, 10th May 2025).

The leader of the farmers’ association echoed language differences as the cause of communication breakdown between the farmers who predominantly speak Koro, Tiv and Alago and the herdsmen who speak Fulfulde. The farmers’ leader noted that:

Language is a big problem because some herders do not speak our local language well. Many of the nomadic herders are always moving, so we cannot find them easily. Some do not trust us because of past problems. Distance is also an issue because they sometimes camp far from our village. (Key Informant Interview, 10th May 2025).

These cultural and linguistic differences make direct communication challenging, leading to frequent misunderstandings about grazing rights or land usage. The absence of a shared language further complicates negotiations, as agreements or instructions can easily be misinterpreted, fueling frustration and mistrust. In regions where different local languages are spoken, conflicts tend to be more severe and even deadly, especially during droughts. Miscommunications due to language barriers often escalate tensions, making it hard to reach or enforce agreements. The herders also acknowledged that language and cultural differences are major obstacles to effective communication, with one noting, “Yes, language can be a problem at times. Many of us speak Fulfulde fluently, but struggle with Hausa, while farmers are fluent in both Hausa and their local languages. This often leads to misunderstandings during discussions” (FGD, 10th May 2025)

One of the leaders from the herders' association noted that the encroachment of farmland by the herders' cattle routes without consideration of their herding culture is one of the sources of the conflict. As the herders note, “Cultural differences also make it difficult for some people to

understand our cattle-rearing practices and nomadic way of life” (FGD, 10th May 2025). It means that the cultural differences between herders and farmers, along with the differences in their lifestyles, create a rift between these two communities in Doka, making their interaction even more complicated. Indeed, there is a great difference between the herders' nomadic lifestyle and the farmers' settled lifestyle based on crop cultivation. The Fulani's practice of holding sticks and cutlasses while herding cattle is seen by the farmers as a hostile act, and this causes fear and hostility between these communities. Moreover, the religious and ethnic differences between the herders and farmers also play an important role in the escalation of the crisis. The Fulani are mostly Muslims, whereas the farmers are mainly Christians. Such cultural prejudices only exacerbate the crisis, since they lead to the development of mutual distrust between the two communities. The security agencies, though trying to stay neutral, made a strong point on the issue of language barrier: "The issue is a language barrier for somebody like me because I am a Yoruba man. Anywhere I go, I go with an interpreter and with the help of the traditional rulers, communication has been effective and understanding" (Key Person Interview, 10th May 2025).

That blunt statement says a lot about how the security agencies put extra effort into fostering peace between the farmers and herdsman. Even the security agents who are meant to de-escalate violence cannot easily interact without the help of translators who obviously may not report in totality what was said. That alone proves that the message does not travel from heart to heart but through strained channels.

The officer admitted plainly, "Language barrier is the major challenge," but also affirmed that the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) has outposts and representatives in every community and local government, and these are usually manned or mixed with security personnel who are either local or understand the language of the people.

Basically, there is no community that we do not have representatives in every local government in Nasarawa State; we have a division there, and every nook and cranny we have our representatives there. All the outposts have been mandated to cooperate with traditional rulers and stakeholders in the localities; the security agencies are already part of the community, they work with the overseers, Local Government Chairmen. They are Part of the Security Council, so whatever is coming out from the grassroots, we coordinate together to ensure that there is peace at the Grassroots. We do not have a problem with Coordination. (Key Informant Interview, 18th May 2025).

Another reason for the communication breakdown is the ineffectiveness of communication infrastructure, such as the lack of reliable platforms for dialogue and limited opportunities for peaceful resolution. The leader of the Farmers also added that:

Our communication is not very effective, to be honest. We do not have proper phones or internet in many areas. News travels slowly and sometimes the information changes as it moves from person to person. Many times, we hear about problems too late when damage is already done. (Key Informant Interview, 10th May 2025).

This illustrates the problem with traditional forms of communication since there is a risk of misinterpretation. The absence of effective and reliable means of communication between farmers and herders is the reason why they fail to solve their problems peacefully and avoid escalation of tensions. Traditional forms of mediation like community forums and informal dialogue may fail due to bias or lack of authority. In addition, selective listening and communication resistance only

make the matter worse, as each party concentrates on those facts that confirm their own point of view, ignoring all attempts at reaching mutual agreement.

Challenges in Crisis Communication

It becomes more challenging to manage crisis communication due to the unpredictability of crises, which require timely, open, and properly planned responses despite the lack of adequate information. Thus, companies are expected to provide reliable information without delay while receiving close monitoring from the public and media; hence, the room for error regardless of whether the company is ready or not. A major challenge in this case arises from the need to predict the development of the crisis and its possible intensity. As observed by Alifanova (2021), some crises occur abruptly and develop fast, thus preventing organisations from responding quickly and effectively.

According to Coombs (2015), being unprepared or having poor timing in terms of responses causes delays, which, in turn, create opportunities for misinformation. Moreover, unprepared organisations face challenges in communicating consistent and clear messages about the crisis. As pointed out by Ulmer et'al (2018), these communication gaps confuse part of the audience, thus creating an image of inefficiency.

Another issue that organisations face in crisis communication is that of meeting the demands of various stakeholders. The problem arises because companies are required to address the needs of several stakeholders who have varying priorities, and for which there is a need for varied approaches. In times of crisis, the needs of employees, customers, investors, and the media all vary and need to be addressed. According to Alifanova (2021), to meet the needs of the varied stakeholders, organisations require a flexible communication approach since a one-size-fits-all approach is hardly ever effective in a time of crisis.

Communication Imperatives for Managing Farmer-Herders Conflict

a. Traditional Mediation and Community-Based Communication

In most of the affected communities by the conflict between the two land users, community based and communication approach has played an important role in the management of the conflict. As the community leader Chief Dazhe Amos asserted: "We mostly rely on face-to-face meetings as our primary approach. We gather people for town halls, meet in my palace, or sometimes the *Mai Angwa* holds discussions under a tree. It all depends on the issue at hand." While not elaborate or formal, this approach is very practical, spontaneous, and demonstrates how long-established procedures can be set aside in the interest of promoting peace. The respondent explained that sitting under a tree, speaking directly, and using word of mouth are how many tensions are managed with the first aid approach, before progressing to a more technical level that can proffer solid mediation. The farmers also pointed out how they use both formal and informal ways, but the informal ones seem to work better.

Informal talks happen at the market or religious centres where we meet naturally. For formal ones, we organise meetings at the council office or traditional ruler's palace. We have also attended peace meetings organised by the local government. The most successful ones are when we sit under a tree and talk freely without too much protocol. (Focus Group Discussion, 9th May 2025).

Adeoye (2017) observed that "Town hall meetings, community dialogue, and mediation efforts led by elders have been effective in de-escalating tension between farmers and herders in the locality" The effectiveness of these approaches has been hampered by external criminal influence and an

obvious lack of institutional and government support in achieving lasting peace in the Communities.

b. Institutional Intervention and Government Support

The communication-based intervention implemented by all levels of the government to address the continued conflict between arable farmers and nomadic herdsman, like the public awareness campaigns, workshops, stakeholders' dialogue, and the engagement of the conflicting parties, has been reactive. Olayoku (2019) is of the view that "government communication strategies have been largely reactive rather than proactive, often failing to address the root causes of the conflict between the two land users. Government intervention in Doka has been minimal and restricted to law enforcement in the advent of the outbreak of violence. This reactionary approach can be linked with the 'ungoverned spaces' concept where non-state actors tend to set the often negative agenda for society. It is imperative therefore for the State to have a pro-active policy for peaceful coexistence in rural communities. The provision of social amenities and other development projects can be used as incentives for communities who actively pursue such policies established by Government.

c. Social Media

The emergence of social media in the different societies of the world as a popular means of audiovisual engagement has established a new dimension to conflict communication. Different platforms such as Telegram, Facebook, WeChat, WhatsApp, etc have been severally used to increase and decrease the persistent conflict between the farmers and herdsman. Olayoku (2019) summarised how misinformation on the different social media platforms has fueled the conflict. While digital peace building awareness by different civil society organisations has sought to counter hate speech and promote reconciliation and peaceful coexistence in different communities affected by the conflict. In Doka, social media is used to share images of the aftermath of conflict and can sometimes aggravate conflicts as it is used as evidence of aggression or retaliation. In the conflict mediation process, however, little conversation is had on the role of social media in the conflict. This blind spot may need further research to determine the impact of social engagement in conflicts in rural communities.

Conclusion

Grassroots communication has been used as an early warning system to prevent trivial conflicts from escalating into violent altercations. In Doka, it emerged that community meetings and discussions are vital in solving the problem of farmers and herdsman in Doka because they offered an avenue where stakeholders, as groups in conflict, interacted. The results indicated that the use of informal word-of-mouth communication via credible community members was crucial in maintaining peace in places with inadequate network coverage. As one of the respondents pointed out, because information within the community tends to move slowly through word of mouth, the tendency exists that it gets altered during transmission. The pragmatic approaches recognised the elders and messengers as being accurate sources of information transmission during peace talks and often serve as the voice of reason when there are rising tensions. This pragmatic communication approach aligns with Aina and Ojebode (2022), who argued that the "traditional oral communication process is a reliable method of conflict resolution in rural African communities where trust is established through social relations."

In the case of Doka, this form of communication has sometimes prevented revenge attacks, leading to a precarious but evident coexistence that recognises the need for survival of both parties. The use of this pragmatic approach of stakeholder engagement has guaranteed the effective management of conflict in Doka where military and political intervention may be unavailable or slow in coming.

This is a viable approach that can be replicated with immediate positive results among communities that have farmer-herder conflicts.

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