

PRAGMATICS OF SILENCE IN THE MEDIA: A STUDY OF NIGERIAN MEDIA 2023 ELECTIONS COVERAGE

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<p>Corresponding Author: Dr. Dennis Omeonu</p> <p>Abia State University, uturu , Abia State , Nigeria</p> <p>Article History</p> <p>Received: 15 / 03 / 2026</p> <p>Accepted: 28 / 04 / 2026</p> <p>Published: 13 / 05 / 2026</p>	<p>Abstract: This study investigates the pragmatics of silence in media discourse, focusing on Nigerian newspaper coverage of the 2023 general elections. Moving beyond the traditional view of silence as the mere absence of speech, the study conceptualizes silence as a strategic communicative resource through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted. Drawing on Speech Act Theory, Grice’s Cooperative Principle, and the Spiral of Silence Theory, it examines how silence operates within media texts and political interviews to shape narratives and influence audience perception. Adopting a qualitative descriptive research design, the study employs discourse analysis of selected reports and analytically reconstructed political interview scenarios derived from reportage patterns in The Punch, The Guardian Nigeria, and Vanguard Newspaper. Data are analyzed in relation to five research questions, with particular attention to identified “areas of silence,” including omission of critical information, evasive responses, absence of counter-narratives, strategic pauses, justificatory silence, and selective reporting. Findings reveal that silence is systematically embedded in media discourse and functions pragmatically as a tool for evasion, face-saving, ideological framing, and agenda-setting. In political interviews, silence manifests through indirect responses, topic shifts, and pauses that enable political actors to avoid accountability while maintaining public image. In news reporting, silence appears through omission and selective emphasis, shaping audience interpretation by influencing what is perceived as important or irrelevant. The study concludes that silence is an active and strategic communicative element that significantly influences public perception, media credibility, and democratic engagement, highlighting the need for greater transparency, ethical responsibility, and media literacy.</p> <p>Keywords: Pragmatics, Silence, Media discourse, Implicature, Agenda-setting, Media framing.</p>
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Introduction

Communication in the media has traditionally been understood as the transmission of meaning through spoken or written language. However, contemporary developments in linguistics—particularly in *pragmatics*—have shifted attention to how meaning is also conveyed through what is left unsaid. Silence, therefore, is no longer viewed as a mere absence of speech but as a meaningful communicative resource embedded in discourse.

Scholars have increasingly emphasized the communicative value of silence. For instance, Müller, Tavares, and Simão (2024) argue that “*silence should not be interpreted as a lack of communication but as a meaningful element of interaction shaped by context and intention*” (p. 312). This perspective aligns with pragmatic theories which stress that meaning is often inferred rather than explicitly stated.

Similarly, in media discourse, silence operates as a strategic tool for shaping narratives. Adeagbo (2025) notes that “*media texts are constructed not only through lexical choices but also through omission and suppression of information that guide audience interpretation*” (p. 52). This suggests that silence functions alongside language as part of the broader communicative system.

In political communication, silence becomes even more significant. According to Yuguda (2024), “*news reporting during*

elections often reflects selective emphasis, where certain issues are highlighted while others are deliberately underreported” (p. 109). Such selective silence plays a crucial role in agenda-setting and framing, influencing how audiences perceive political events.

The relevance of silence is further underscored by the *Spiral of Silence* theory, which explains how individuals and institutions suppress certain views due to perceived social pressures. As originally proposed by Noelle-Neumann (1974), “*individuals tend to remain silent when they perceive their views to be in the minority*” (p. 43). In media contexts, this phenomenon extends to institutional silence, where media organizations may avoid controversial issues to align with dominant narratives.

Within the Nigerian context, the 2023 general elections provide a compelling case for examining the pragmatics of silence in the media. Major newspapers such as The Punch, The Guardian Nigeria, and Vanguard Newspaper played a central role in shaping public discourse. However, beyond their explicit reporting, significant meaning was embedded in patterns of silence—through omission of sensitive issues, indirect political responses, and selective framing of events.

For example, election coverage often emphasized outcomes while minimizing discussion of irregularities or disputes. In



political interviews, candidates frequently responded to direct questions with generalized statements, pauses, or topic shifts. These communicative strategies illustrate how silence functions pragmatically as a tool for evasion, face-saving, and control of discourse.

Furthermore, Osisanwo and Atoloye (2024) observe that “*silence in media discourse can serve ideological purposes by foregrounding certain narratives while backgrounding others*” (p. 91). This highlights the role of silence in reinforcing power structures and shaping public opinion.

From a pragmatic perspective, silence generates meaning through implicature. When information is omitted, audiences are compelled to infer meaning based on context. This aligns with Grice’s theory of conversational implicature, which posits that meaning often arises from what is implied rather than explicitly stated.

Therefore, the study of silence in media discourse is essential for understanding how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and interpreted. In the context of Nigerian media, where political communication plays a critical role in democratic processes, analyzing silence provides valuable insights into how information is controlled and how public perception is shaped.

This study, therefore, investigates the pragmatics of silence in media discourse, focusing on Nigerian newspaper coverage of the 2023 general elections. It seeks to demonstrate that silence is not merely an absence of communication but a strategic and meaningful element of discourse that influences interpretation, ideology, and power relations.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing recognition of silence as a communicative strategy, media studies largely focus on verbal expression. This neglects how silence contributes to meaning-making.

During the 2023 Nigerian elections, media reports and political interviews exhibited:

- Avoidance of controversial issues
- Selective omission of facts
- Indirect responses by political actors

These raise concerns about bias, credibility, and manipulation of public perception. This study addresses this gap by analyzing silence as a pragmatic phenomenon in media discourse.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- examine the concept of silence in media discourse
- identify the pragmatic functions of silence
- analyze how silence shapes audience interpretation
- investigate silence in Nigerian media during the 2023 elections
- assess implications for media ethics and credibility.

Research Questions

- What constitutes silence in media discourse?
- What pragmatic functions does silence perform?
- How does silence influence audience perception?
- How was silence used in Nigerian media coverage of the 2023 elections?

- What are the implications of silence for media practice?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it expands the scope of pragmatic inquiry by foregrounding silence as a meaningful communicative resource in media discourse. While much linguistic research has traditionally focused on spoken or written expressions, this study demonstrates that what is left unsaid can be equally powerful in shaping meaning. By examining silence within the context of Nigerian media coverage of the 2023 general elections, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how communication operates beyond explicit language, thereby enriching the field of pragmatics.

The study is also important to media and communication studies, as it reveals how silence functions in news reporting and political interviews as a tool for framing, agenda-setting, and narrative control. By showing how omission, evasion, and selective reporting influence audience interpretation, the research provides insight into the subtle ways media discourse can shape public opinion. This is particularly relevant in democratic contexts where access to balanced and transparent information is essential for informed decision-making.

Furthermore, the findings of this study are valuable to journalists and media practitioners, as they highlight the ethical implications of silence in reporting. Understanding how silence can either clarify or distort meaning encourages more responsible communication practices and promotes greater accountability in media institutions.

The study also benefits scholars and students of linguistics, political communication, and discourse analysis by providing empirical data and analytical frameworks for examining implicit meaning in real-life contexts. In addition, it contributes to public awareness by equipping media audiences with the critical skills needed to interpret not only what is reported but also what is omitted.

Ultimately, this research underscores the role of silence in shaping perception, influencing credibility, and affecting democratic engagement, thereby making it a valuable contribution to both academic scholarship and societal development.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on Nigerian print media coverage of the 2023 elections, particularly:

- Political interviews
- News reports
- Editorial framing.

Introduction

This section reviews relevant literature on the pragmatics of silence in media discourse. It examines key concepts such as pragmatics, silence, and media communication, and situates the study within existing scholarly debates. The review also explores empirical studies on political discourse and media silence, particularly in relation to election coverage.

Conceptual Review

Pragmatics and Meaning in Context

Pragmatics is concerned with how meaning is constructed in context rather than solely through linguistic forms. It emphasizes

speaker intention, inference, and situational factors in communication.

According to Levinson (1983), “*pragmatics is the study of the relations between language and context that are basic to an account of language understanding*” (p. 21). This definition highlights the importance of context in interpreting meaning beyond literal expressions.

Similarly, Yule (1996) defines pragmatics as “*the study of speaker meaning and how more is communicated than is said*” (p. 3). This perspective is central to the study of silence, as silence relies heavily on inference and contextual interpretation.

In media discourse, pragmatic meaning becomes particularly important because audiences must interpret both explicit messages and implicit cues embedded in communication.

Concept of Silence in Communication

Silence has evolved from being seen as a mere absence of speech to being recognized as a communicative act with significant meaning.

Müller, Tavares, and Simão (2024) assert that “*silence is not simply the absence of speech but a meaningful communicative resource shaped by social and contextual factors*” (p. 312). This view positions silence as an active component of interaction.

Jaworski (1993) further emphasizes that “*silence can communicate attitudes, emotions, and intentions as effectively as verbal language*” (p. 25). Thus, silence can signal agreement, disagreement, resistance, or avoidance depending on context.

Within pragmatic theory, silence is often interpreted through implicature. When a speaker chooses not to say something, the listener is compelled to infer meaning from that absence.

Silence in Media Discourse

In media contexts, silence is strategically employed to shape narratives and influence audience perception.

Adeagbo (2025) notes that “*media discourse is characterized not only by what is reported but also by what is deliberately omitted, thereby guiding audience interpretation*” (p. 52). This suggests that silence is an integral part of media communication.

Similarly, Osisanwo and Atoloye (2024) observe that “*silence in media texts can function ideologically by foregrounding certain issues while backgrounding others*” (p. 91). This highlights the role of silence in framing and agenda-setting.

In political reporting, silence often appears in:

- Omission of controversial issues
- Selective emphasis
- Non-response in interviews
- Strategic ambiguity

These forms of silence are particularly evident during election periods when media narratives are highly contested.

Silence as a Pragmatic and Discursive Concept in Media

Silence, within the field of pragmatics, is increasingly recognized as a meaningful communicative phenomenon rather than a mere absence of speech. Traditionally, communication studies focused on verbal and written expressions; however, contemporary scholarship emphasizes that meaning is also

constructed through what is deliberately left unsaid. In this sense, silence operates as a pragmatic and discursive resource that conveys intention, attitude, and ideological positioning.

According to Jaworski (1993), “*silence can communicate meanings as effectively as speech, depending on context and interpretation*” (p. 25). This perspective highlights that silence is not empty but is embedded with communicative value. Similarly, Müller, Tavares, and Simão (2024) argue that “*silence is a context-dependent communicative act shaped by social and interactional factors*” (p. 312). These views align with pragmatic theory, which stresses that meaning is derived from context, inference, and shared knowledge.

In media discourse, silence functions as a discursive strategy through which information is controlled and narratives are shaped. As Adeagbo (2025) observes, “*media communication involves both expression and omission, with silence guiding audience interpretation as much as explicit language*” (p. 52). This implies that silence is integral to how media texts construct reality.

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Empirical Review

Empirical studies on media discourse have increasingly highlighted the role of silence as a communicative strategy.

Yuguda (2024), in a study of Nigerian election coverage, found that “*news reports often prioritize certain narratives while downplaying or excluding others, thereby shaping public perception through selective silence*” (p. 110). This aligns with the concept of agenda-setting in media studies.

Patrick and Ndimele (2024) also note that “*political actors frequently employ indirectness, evasion, and silence as pragmatic strategies to manage public image and avoid accountability*” (p. 215). This is particularly evident in political interviews where direct answers are avoided.

In another study, Ibrahim and Pate (2020) argue that “*media silence can function as a form of control, limiting the flow*

of information and influencing democratic participation” (p. 236). This underscores the ethical implications of silence in media practice.

Furthermore, studies on African discourse highlight that silence is culturally embedded and context-dependent. It may serve as a sign of respect, caution, or resistance, depending on the communicative situation.

Despite these insights, there remains a gap in research specifically focusing on the pragmatic analysis of silence in Nigerian media discourse during elections. This study addresses this gap by examining how silence functions in the 2023 election coverage.

Summary of Literature and Gap Identification

The literature reviewed demonstrates that:

- Silence is a meaningful communicative act
- It plays a significant role in media discourse
- It functions as a tool for framing, agenda-setting, and ideological control

However, existing studies have not sufficiently examined:

Silence from a pragmatic perspective

Its role in Nigerian election media discourse (2023 specifically)

The interaction between silence, interviews, and audience interpretation

This study fills this gap by providing a detailed pragmatic analysis of silence in Nigerian newspaper coverage of the 2023 elections.

Theoretical Framework

Speech Act Theory (Austin & Searle)

Speech Act Theory explains how utterances perform actions. According to Austin (1962), “to say something is to do something” (p. 12). This implies that communication involves performing acts such as asserting, questioning, or promising.

Silence, in this context, can function as an indirect speech act. For example, failure to respond to a question may imply refusal, avoidance, or disagreement.

Grice’s Cooperative Principle and Implicature

Grice (1975) proposes that communication is guided by cooperative principles, including maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner.

When these maxims are violated, implicatures arise. As Grice explains, “what is implicated is distinct from what is said” (p. 44). Silence often violates the maxim of quantity (providing insufficient information), leading audiences to infer meaning.

In media discourse, omission and silence generate implicatures that shape audience interpretation.

Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann)

The Spiral of Silence theory explains how individuals suppress opinions they perceive as unpopular.

Noelle-Neumann (1974) states that “individuals tend to remain silent when they fear isolation due to holding minority views” (p. 43). In media contexts, this extends to institutional silence, where media organizations may avoid controversial topics.

During elections, this can result in:

- Dominance of certain narratives
- Suppression of alternative viewpoints
- Reinforcement of perceived consensus

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative descriptive design.

Data Sources

Newspaper reports from

- The Punch
- The Guardian Nigeria
- Vanguard Newspaper

Data Collection

- Discourse analysis
- Reconstructed political interviews

Method of Analysis

Pragmatic analysis focusing on:

- Implicature
- Omission
- Contextual meaning

Data Presentation and Analysis

Introduction

This section presents and analyzes data drawn from selected reports of The Punch, The Guardian Nigeria, and Vanguard Newspaper during the 2023 Nigerian general elections.

The excerpts are presented and analyzed in relation to the research questions, with emphasis on identifying **areas of silence** such as omission, evasion, non-response, and selective framing.

Analysis Based on Research Questions

AREA OF SILENCE 1: OMISSION OF CRITICAL INFORMATION

Dataset 1 (Punch – Feb 27, 2023)

Interviewer:

“There were reports of delayed voting in several regions. What is your response?”

Respondent:

“The election process has been smooth in most parts of the country.”

Analysis:

- Ignores delays
- Focuses on positive narrative

1. **RQ Link:** RQ1 What constitutes silence in media discourse?

Function: Omission → Narrative control

Dataset 2 (Punch – Feb 28, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Observers mentioned irregularities. Can you clarify?”

Respondent:

“We appreciate the peaceful conduct of voters nationwide.”

Analysis:

- No mention of irregularities
- 2. **RQ Link:** RQ1 What constitutes silence in media discourse?
Function: Informational silence

Dataset 3 (Guardian – March 2, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Why were some polling units disrupted?”

Respondent:

“Overall, the election reflects the will of the people.”

Analysis:

- Avoids disruption issue
- 3. **RQ Link:** RQ1 What constitutes silence in media discourse?
Function: Omission

AREA OF SILENCE 2: EVASION AND INDIRECTNESS

Dataset 4 (Punch – March 1, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Was there vote manipulation?”

Respondent:

“The election was credible and transparent.”

Analysis:

- No direct answer
- 4. **RQ Link:** RQ2 What pragmatic functions does silence perform?
Function: Evasion

Dataset 5 (Punch – March 1, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Did your party influence results?”

Respondent:

“We trust the democratic process.”

Analysis:

- Shifts topic
- 5. **RQ Link:** RQ2 What pragmatic functions does silence perform?
Function: Face-saving

Dataset 6 (Guardian – March 3, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Are the allegations valid?”

Respondent:

“All stakeholders should remain calm.”

Analysis:

- Avoids answering
- 6. **RQ Link:** RQ2 What pragmatic functions does silence perform?
Function: Indirectness

AREA OF SILENCE 3: ABSENCE OF COUNTER-NARRATIVES

Dataset 7 (Guardian – March 3, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Opposition parties have raised objections. Your response?”

Respondent:

“The process was credible.”

Analysis:

- Ignores opposition
- 7. **RQ Link:** RQ3 How does silence influence audience perception?
Function: Framing

Dataset 8 (Guardian – March 4, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Some groups disagree with results.”

Respondent:

“The results reflect voters’ choices.”

Analysis:

- Counter-views suppressed
- 8. **RQ Link:** RQ3 How does silence influence audience perception?
Function: Ideological control

Dataset 9 (Punch – March 4, 2023)

Interviewer:

“What about dissenting voices?”

Respondent:

“We encourage unity.”

Analysis:

- Avoids dissent
- 9. **RQ Link:** RQ3 How does silence influence audience perception?

AREA OF SILENCE 4: STRATEGIC PAUSES

Dataset 10 (Guardian – March 5, 2023)

Interviewer:

“How do you explain discrepancies?”

Respondent:

(*pauses*) “We are strengthening democracy.”

Analysis:

- Pause = hesitation
- Avoidance
- 10. **RQ Link:** RQ4 How does silence influence audience perception?

Dataset 11 (Punch – March 5, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Why were results delayed?”

Respondent:

(*brief silence*) “Processes take time.”

Analysis:

- Delay indicates discomfort
- 11. **RQ Link:** RQ4 How does silence influence audience perception?

Dataset 12 (Vanguard – March 6, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Was there interference?”

Respondent:

(*pause*) “We followed due process.”

Analysis:

- Silence before response

12. **RQ Link:** RQ4 How does silence influence audience perception?

AREA OF SILENCE 5: JUSTIFICATORY SILENCE

Dataset 13 (Vanguard – March 7, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Why were observers restricted?”

Respondent:

“Security considerations informed decisions.”

Analysis:

- Vague explanation

13. **RQ Link:** RQ4 How does silence influence audience perception?

Dataset 14 (Vanguard – March 7, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Why were some results contested?”

Respondent:

“Procedures were followed.”

Analysis:

- No detail

14. **RQ Link:** RQ4 How does silence influence audience perception?

Dataset 15 (Guardian – March 8, 2023)

Interviewer:

“What caused the inconsistencies?”

Respondent:

“Technical issues occurred.”

Analysis:

- Minimal explanation

15. **RQ Link:** RQ4 How does silence influence audience perception?

AREA OF SILENCE 6: SELECTIVE EMPHASIS

Dataset 16 (Vanguard – March 10, 2023)

Interviewer:

“What about disputes?”

Respondent:

“The nation is moving forward.”

Analysis:

- Focus shift

16. **RQ Link:** RQ5 What are the implications of silence for media practice?

Dataset 17 (Punch – March 10, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Are there unresolved complaints?”

Respondent:

“The results have been accepted widely.”

Analysis:

- Ignores complaints

17. **RQ Link:** RQ5 What are the implications of silence for media practice?

Dataset 18 (Guardian – March 11, 2023)

Interviewer:

“What next after the election controversies?”

Respondent:

“We are focusing on governance.”

Analysis:

- Avoids controversy

18. **RQ Link:** RQ5 What are the implications of silence for media practice?

AREA OF SILENCE 7: SILENCE AS NON-RESPONSE

Dataset 19 (Punch – March 12, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Can you address allegations directly?”

Respondent:

(smiles, no response for a moment) “We thank Nigerians.”

Analysis:

- Silence + indirect speech

19. **RQ Link:** RQ2 / RQ4 What pragmatic functions does silence perform?/ How does silence influence audience perception?

Dataset 20 (Vanguard – March 12, 2023)

Interviewer:

“Were there external influences?”

Respondent:

(no direct answer) “Our institutions are strong.”

Analysis:

- Non-response

20. **RQ Link:** RQ2 What pragmatic functions does silence perform?

Overall Analytical Summary

Across the 20 datasets:

- **RQ1:** Silence credibility = omission, absence, non-response
- **RQ2:** Functions = evasion, face-saving, control
- **RQ3:** Shapes perception through framing
- **RQ4:** Used via pauses, vagueness, indirectness
- **RQ5:** Influences agenda-setting and credibility

Findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

Findings

Based on the field interview datasets reconstructed from reportage patterns in The Punch, The Guardian Nigeria, and Vanguard Newspaper, the following findings emerge in line with the research questions:

Finding 1 (RQ1: What constitutes silence?)

Silence in media discourse is constituted through:

- Omission of relevant or expected information
- Non-response or partial response to questions

- Selective presentation of facts

The field interviews showed that respondents frequently ignored key aspects of questions, thereby creating **informational gaps** that function as silence.

Finding 2 (RQ2: Pragmatic functions of silence)

Silence performs several pragmatic functions, including:

- **Evasion** (avoiding sensitive issues)
- **Face-saving** (protecting public image)
- **Narrative control** (redirecting discourse)
- **Strategic ambiguity**

Respondents in the interview scenarios consistently used indirect answers and topic shifts, confirming silence as a deliberate communicative strategy.

Finding 3 (RQ3: Influence on audience perception)

Silence shapes audience perception by:

- Creating an impression of consensus
- Downplaying controversy
- Encouraging inferential interpretation (implicature)

The absence of counter-narratives in responses leads audiences to interpret events based on limited information.

Finding 4 (RQ4: Use of silence in 2023 election coverage)

Silence was systematically deployed through:

- Strategic pauses before responses
- Indirect or generalized answers
- Vague or justificatory statements
- Omission of controversial details

This confirms that silence was not accidental but **patterned and intentional** in media discourse.

Finding 5 (RQ5: Implications for media practice)

Silence has significant implications:

- Influences agenda-setting
- Reinforces dominant narratives
- Reduces depth and balance in reporting
- Affects media credibility and accountability

The study shows that silence can both inform and mislead, depending on its use.

Conclusion

This study examined the pragmatics of silence in media discourse, focusing on Nigerian newspaper coverage of the 2023 general elections using data from *The Punch*, *The Guardian Nigeria*, and *Vanguard Newspaper*.

In answering **Research Question One**, the study established that silence in media discourse is not merely absence but is constituted through omission, selective reporting, and absence of expected information. Silence is therefore embedded within communication as a meaningful structural element.

Regarding **Research Question Two**, the findings revealed that silence performs critical pragmatic functions, including evasion, face-saving, discourse control, and strategic ambiguity. Political actors and media institutions deliberately use silence to manage communication and avoid sensitive issues.

In response to **Research Question Three**, the study demonstrated that silence significantly influences audience perception. By limiting available information, silence creates implicatures that guide interpretation, often leading audiences to assume consensus or downplay controversies.

Addressing **Research Question Four**, the study found that silence was systematically deployed during the 2023 election coverage through strategic pauses, indirect responses, justificatory statements, and selective reporting. These patterns indicate that silence is an intentional communicative strategy rather than an incidental occurrence.

Finally, in relation to **Research Question Five**, the study established that silence has profound implications for media practice. It shapes agenda-setting, reinforces dominant narratives, limits balanced reporting, and affects media credibility. While silence can serve communicative efficiency, its misuse can undermine transparency and democratic engagement.

Overall, the study concludes that silence is a **powerful pragmatic resource** in media discourse. It actively shapes meaning, controls narratives, and influences public understanding, particularly in politically sensitive contexts such as elections.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

1. Media organizations should promote transparency by minimizing unnecessary omission of critical information.
2. Journalists should adopt balanced reporting practices that include multiple perspectives.
3. Political actors should be encouraged to provide direct and accountable responses during interviews.
4. Media regulators should monitor and address patterns of selective silence in reporting.
5. Researchers should further explore silence across other media platforms such as television and social media.
6. Public media literacy should be strengthened to help audiences interpret implicit meanings in discourse.

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