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Article:

Using Mentimeter to Engage First Year Law Students in Wellbeing Awareness

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Abstract

This paper assesses Keele Law School's use of Mentimeter [during an in-person live session](#) to engage first year Law students in wellbeing awareness, through the innovative design and delivery of an interactive, whole-cohort session called *It's OK*

to not be OK. The session represented a new approach to using Student Response Systems (SRS) to help support student wellbeing in the transition to Higher Education. It involved the innovative blending of technology – [Mentimeter, PowerPoint, and video](#) – with panel-style, tutor-led discussion, to support the integration of wellbeing into the teaching and learning of Law. Design was grounded in education research and in evidence highlighting Law students' particular difficulties with wellbeing. [Students were invited to participate in the session on a voluntary basis and with prior information as to the session's aims and content.](#) Mentimeter was used to capture [students'](#) anonymous, real-time responses and to facilitate discussion. The session sought to raise first years' awareness that studying Law can present challenges to their wellbeing; to remove the stigma attached to experiencing these challenges; and to show students how they can look after themselves and each other. Importantly, the blend of Mentimeter [and other media](#) with panel-style discussion helped students to see the Law School as a supportive, collaborative community. [The session was delivered outside of the Level 4 Law modules in November 2018 \(week 6\) and again in October 2019 \(week 3\).](#) It has [since](#) informed practice in the Law School through its new Legal Essentials introductory module, which takes a holistic approach to legal education, involving the "whole student".

(257 words)

Keywords

Law students, wellbeing, Mentimeter

Introduction and Background

This paper assesses Keele Law School's use of Mentimeter to engage first year Law students in wellbeing awareness, through the innovative design and delivery of an interactive, whole-cohort session called *It's OK to not be OK*. The session was innovative in two respects. Firstly, it represented a new approach to using Student Response Systems (SRS); not only in a [Social Science](#) subject (Law), but also in a topic such as wellbeing. Secondly, it involved the blending of technology and panel-style discussion to support the integration of wellbeing into the teaching and learning of Law. Educational innovation involves 'the successful introduction of a new thing or method' (Brewer and Tierney, 2012). Serdyukov (2017) characterised the innovation process as the journey from idea, to implementation, to outcomes that produce change. This paper outlines the process of introducing this 'new thing' and evaluates its outcomes. It begins by setting out the background to the development of the session [and the ethical considerations involved.](#) [It goes on to explain](#) why it was important to introduce a focus on wellbeing, and how the session used technology and collaborative, panel-style discussion [to support the session's aims.](#) [Following discussion of session](#) design and implementation, the paper evaluates the session and explains how it has informed practice in the Law School, [including the introduction of our new Legal Essentials module, which takes a holistic approach to Law School induction and legal skills development.](#)

[Research Ethics](#)

It's OK not to be OK was initially conceived during a joint Law and Psychology research project at Keele, called *Why Not Me?* This project examined the factors that impacted on students' academic identity, sense of belonging, and wellbeing (Skipper and Fay, 2019). The literature review for *Why Not Me?* revealed significant issues affecting Law students in particular (see Law Student Wellbeing section), which prompted a discussion in the Law School about how these might be addressed alongside the *Why Not Me?* research. This discussion led to the design and delivery of *It's OK not to be OK*. This work was supported by the Head of School, the Law School's Learning Development Tutor, and Level 4 module leaders. The session design was led by Law School colleagues with experience in student counselling, pastoral care provision, and mental health research.

The session sought to raise first years' awareness that studying Law can present challenges to their wellbeing; to remove the stigma attached to experiencing these challenges; and to show students how they can look after themselves and each other. In recognition of the difficulties highlighted in the literature, the Law School had *already* introduced the *Look After Your Mate* session (Student Minds, 2016) during Induction Week in 2018. *Look After Your Mate* shows students how they can support each other through emotional or psychological difficulties. The session must be delivered by staff who have undergone the Student Minds training, which has a cost. We wanted to develop a session that would complement the messages of *Look After Your Mate* but would also take it further and integrate wellbeing awareness into student learning and achievement. *We recognised the link between wellbeing, learning and achievement, but at the time the link was not being made explicit to students at School level.*

For session delivery, we had panel members who were willing to share their own experiences with students, to remove stigma and to show students that staff understand their difficulties. Members included Level 4 core module leads; our Level 4 Graduate Teaching Assistant and Keele alumna; and the Learning Development Tutor who also teaches some Law subjects, as well as having a pastoral role. Research indicates that collaboration between subject teachers and learning development staff can impact positively on achievement and retention (Butters et al, 2013), and this is very much the approach taken in the Law School.

The session was delivered in a vacant Level 4 lecture slot, but it was advertised (by email and flyers) to students as being separate from their Level 4 modules. Students were advised beforehand what the session would involve; that participation was voluntary, and attendance would not be recorded; that the session itself would not be recorded; and that their anonymous, whole-cohort responses to the Mentimeter polling would be used as part of an ongoing research project. At the start of the session they were reminded of this and reassured that they were free to decide whether to take part; to answer all, some, or none of the Mentimeter questions; and that they could leave at any time.

The session sought to achieve three main outcomes:

1. To raise first year Law students' awareness that studying Law can be challenging psychologically for everyone;

2. To remove the stigma attached to experiencing difficulties with mental wellbeing; and
3. To show students how they can look after themselves and each other – and to see the Law School as a supportive community.

The post-session support available to students (both internal and external to Keele) was flagged up towards the end of the session, with contacts and weblinks displayed using PowerPoint. We also emphasised the role of the Personal Tutors and the Learning Development Tutor in ongoing academic and pastoral support.

Law Student Wellbeing

There is increasing concern about the mental health of young people, and in particular the mental health of university students, who are reporting ever-greater levels of psychological distress. A HEPI study of more than 14,000 students found that students are more prone to poorer mental wellbeing than young people between 20-24 in general (Neves and Hillman, 2018). Moreover, there are particular concerns regarding the mental health of Law students, when compared to those studying other undergraduate subjects. Research by Duffy, Field and Shirley (2011: 250) revealed that:

35.2 per cent of law students experience high levels of psychological distress. This can be compared with 17.8 per cent of medicine students who experience high levels of psychological distress and 13.3 per cent of people aged between 18 and 34 in the general population.

The research suggests that Law students experience a particular alienation from the personal dimension of their learning experience, that can negatively affect their mental health – and thus their achievement at university and beyond. This is partly due to how Law students are trained to approach legal issues. The LLB degree seeks to develop their logical, analytical, and rational capabilities, as illustrated by programmes such as “Thinking Like a Lawyer” (Jones, 2018). Legal education has traditionally tended to emphasise doctrinal content and linear thinking; worryingly, it also has the effect of promoting ‘personality traits such as defensiveness, perfectionism and pessimism which can lead to unhappiness’ (Duffy, Field and Shirley, 2011: 250). Law students find themselves early on in an adversarial environment, where legal issues are presented as problems, and where students are required to advise or advocate for one side or another.

Tani and Vines’ comparative study (2009) of Law and Medicine students highlighted some telling differences between the cohorts. They found a statistically significant prevalence of characteristics (pp 24-7) amongst Law students. For example, they are more likely to be studying Law for external reasons, such as parental influence; are less likely to find their subject intrinsically interesting; are more likely to believe that employers look at grades rather than personal or social characteristics; tend to dislike group work; are less likely to say that they are at university to learn; and are more likely to view friendships through the prism of networking and career advancement opportunities. Tani and Vines concluded that such traits ‘may indeed have a significant impact on law students’ likelihood of developing depression’, particularly as ‘law students may have feelings of less autonomy and less social

connectedness than may be optimal for mental health' (p 25). Moreover, the competitive nature of Law students is a likely sign of reduced personal autonomy, because it indicates a dependence on external measures for self-evaluation and self-esteem (p 29). Tani and Vines suggest that these factors 'may help to explain the disproportionate rate of depression in law students' (p 30).

Similarly, Kelk et al (2009) found a higher level of distress in Law students, who also experienced barriers to recognising and seeking support for these feelings. More recent research conducted by Bleasdale and Humphries (2018) confirms some key traits found in Law students. Law students were much more likely to compare themselves negatively to others; they expressed concerns about not being as 'smart' as other students, and frequently felt 'lost' because they did not understand as much as everyone else, particularly in the first year. [These particular characteristics of Law students, as revealed in the research, led *It's OK not to be OK* to be part of a suite of provision for Level 4 students, alongside *Look After Your Mate* and the dedicated academic and pastoral support being provided by the Learning Development Tutor.](#)

Session Design

[Session design was grounded in our research ethics \(see above\) and in our desire to give students the experience of a supportive, collaborative, Law School community.](#) We did not want the session to be simply about delivering information; we wanted to engage [our students](#) in wellbeing awareness and to support them in the process. Even the panel discussion was not going to be sufficient to fully engage the students – we wanted them to be able to contribute too. As well as enhancing their engagement, the opportunity for them to contribute would encourage them to connect with and communicate their feelings. From our perspective as staff, it was also important that we gained some insight into how the students were feeling at the mid-point of their first semester. We recognised that students would not wish to share their own experiences openly – particularly in a large group of fellow students whom they had only joined six weeks previously. While we intended to use the panel discussion to model openness as a way of removing stigma and promoting community, we acknowledged that students needed to feel safe and anonymous if they were to share their feelings honestly. This recognition directly informed the use of Mentimeter as the most suitable [Student Response](#) technology, [as part of our ethical design considerations](#). Mentimeter was used as part of a suite of tools during the session, alongside PowerPoint, YouTube video, and a discussion panel comprising Law lecturers, the Law School's Learning Development Tutor, and [our Keele alumna Graduate Teaching Assistant](#).

Why use a Student Response System?

Interestingly, the decision to use technology as part of the session – and the decision to use Mentimeter in particular – arose from discussions as to how we could best engage and encourage student participation in the session. Mayer (2001) identified two approaches to educational technology: the technology-centred approach; and one that is instead centred on the learner and considers how technology can support the learner's cognitive processing. [In our case](#), the session was very much learner-centred, and the decision to integrate technology into the session was driven by how it could aid [student engagement with, and awareness of, Law student wellbeing](#).

Our venue was a large lecture theatre. In one sense, this was an ideal venue; we wanted to use the AV screen, to show slides and play videos, and we also wanted sufficient room “onstage” to seat the panel at a long table facing the students. Yet in another sense, the space presented the challenge of how best to engage the intended audience of first year Law students. **The cohort was approximately 180 students and, while the session was optional, we had to plan for the possibility of a large number of attendees.** Geski (1992) had criticised large lectures; and Ekeler (1994) found that students in large lectures were merely passive learners. On the other hand, Wulff et al (1987) found that anonymity was a key factor in students’ positive evaluation of large classes; **but while** the reduced pressure and feeling of being in the spotlight promoted a safer environment for students, the impersonal nature of large classes remained a factor in their negative evaluation.

However, several studies have suggested that Student Response Systems can be effective in facilitating large group participation and engagement. An SRS is “a wireless response system that provides faculty the means to actively engage students in lecture classes” (Kaleta and Joosten, 2007). There are several types of SRS, such as clickers, Socrative, Kahoot, Poll Everywhere, and Mentimeter. Studies that examined “clicker” technology found that they were regarded positively by students and linked to improved student performance (see eg Patterson et al, 2010; Mayer, 2009; Trees and Jackson, 2007). Heaslip et al (2014) found that “clicker” technology can support student engagement while protecting anonymity, although it is possible that it is the active presentation of questions (rather than the SRS itself) that supports the engagement (see Morling et al, 2008).

SRS ‘compensates for the passive, one-way communication inherent in lecturing and the difficulty students experience in maintaining sustained concentration’ (Caldwell, 2007: 11). Asking students questions every 20 minutes or so enlivens students’ attention and engages them to participate (Kay and LeSage, 2009). Blackburn and Stroud’s research into Socrative (2015) highlighted its potential for more dialogic teaching, which was an important consideration in view of the session’s aims. We wanted to facilitate student participation in discussing topics that they may not feel comfortable discussing openly, and to ensure that more introverted students felt secure (see Braden and Smith, 2006). This was another important factor in choosing SRS for the session, which by its nature involved talking about difficult subjects, such as feelings of failure and inadequacy.

Furthermore, the instant-response feedback system would achieve two things we considered essential for the success of the session: it would help challenge students’ preconceptions that they were alone in feeling like this; and it would enable the panel to respond in real-time to students’ feelings and concerns. Fies and Marshall (2006) identify this capacity for responsiveness as a key advantage of using SRS. However, as Stuart et al (2004) caution, the responses may come as a surprise to both the teacher and the students, with the possibility that students may experience stress. This was an important **practical and ethical** consideration, given the sensitive nature of the discussion, but the team was prepared for it and was individually and collectively experienced in dealing with difficult feelings.

Interestingly, newer students had more positive perceptions of SRS than students of longer standing (Wulff et al, 1987). Draper (2002) highlighted the essential feature of SRS – the immediate and anonymous display of responses. This suggested that

SRS might be the way forward for our audience of first years – combined with an innovative presentation style aimed at fostering in our students a sense that they belonged to a supportive learning community in the Law School.

Why Mentimeter?

Mentimeter offered several benefits that supported what we were trying to achieve with the session. Its visual style is informal and accessible, which complemented the style and tone that we wanted the session to have. Moreover, Mentimeter had already been used as part of the Welcome to Law induction sessions, so students were already familiar with how it worked. The capacity to create “word clouds” was also a considerable bonus; they have strong visual impact and would highlight effectively which feelings were being experienced most commonly. [Again, the session planning had included consideration of the practical and ethical implications of difficult feelings being revealed in the word clouds. The team understood that it was important to let the students know that their feelings were being heard and acknowledged, and that they were in ‘safe hands’. The team’s focus was on empathy combined with positive messaging and signposting to further practical support \(see Session Delivery - Responses\).](#)

Mentimeter is accessed through the internet, requiring students to have a laptop, tablet or smartphone, and the venue to have a reliable wi-fi connection. Participants sign into the poll using a unique number that is displayed on screen. They can be given the option to vote on a set number of choices, or to add free text. To make sure that students came to the session with the necessary technology, we [made it clear, in the flyer and email sent to all first year Law students, that they should bring an internet-enabled device to the session if they wanted to participate in the online polling.](#) 98% of young people between 16 and 24 own a smartphone (Statista, 2020). While this represents most students, there remains a small minority who risk being excluded through lack of internet-enabled technology ([see Limitations](#)).

Session Delivery

The team developed four themes for the session:

- Life and study – getting the balance right;
- Coping when things go wrong;
- Recognising when you’re not OK; and
- Support for your mental health and wellbeing.

The session was designed so that students’ responses to the Mentimeter questions would be used by the panel as a springboard for discussion. Panel members were chosen who were willing to share their own experiences of challenges to wellbeing: of feeling inadequate; of coping with setbacks, including failure. The aim was to normalise these experiences: to show students that they need not be ashamed of them; and to demonstrate that [it was possible to survive the experience of such difficult feelings](#). This would open up the conversation about mental health and wellbeing in a non-judgmental way and would give students an improved sense of belonging and community.

During the session introduction, we spoke about the Why Not Me? project and the Look After Your Mate programme and explained how this session fitted with them. We also explained that mental health and mental wellbeing are not necessarily the same thing and can instead be understood as an axis or a spectrum. We wanted the students to recognise that it is possible to have mental ill-health and yet to have good mental wellbeing (and vice versa) – the key being their self-care and the care they receive from peers, tutors, support services and other professionals. Engaging the students in awareness of their own wellbeing needs was an important part of this process.

Our Mentimeter poll had six questions:

1. Since you started at Keele, has your mental health:
 - a. Stayed the same?
 - b. Got better?
 - c. Got worse?
2. What are the top 3 things affecting your mental health since coming to Keele?
3. How do you feel when things go wrong? Try to sum it up in one word.
4. How do you know when you're not OK? Give up to 3 examples.
5. How do you look after yourself when you're not OK?
6. What one thing will you take away from this session?

Questions 2-6 were designed to generate word clouds.

Out of a cohort of approximately 180, around 55 students attended the session (30%). We did not keep a register so as to preserve anonymity, but we received a maximum of 55 individual responses to the Mentimeter poll, so we assumed that this corresponded roughly to the number of attendees. The responses are discussed below.

Responses

Students' responses to the first question confirmed what the research had suggested: 55% of our audience (30 out of 55 responses) had already experienced a decline in their mental health during their first six weeks at Keele Law School. This gave the panel an opportunity to talk about our own past experiences as Law students, as part of the process of normalisation and de-stigmatisation. It was important to begin this process early in the session, to foster a supportive and inclusive atmosphere. We illustrated this part of the discussion with a PowerPoint slide showing a range of public figures who have suffered mental health problems; we made sure to include a plurality of ethnicities, genders, and sexualities, to show that mental health was an issue for everyone.

The second Mentimeter question elicited 54 responses and revealed a word cloud with "friends", "workload" and "stress" being the most prominent factors affecting student wellbeing. Again, this was expected from the research, and it enabled the discussion to move seamlessly into the issue of life balance, with panel members again sharing their experiences of, and advice on, managing workloads and the associated stress.

The third question illustrated well what Stuart et al (2004) had cautioned about when using SRS. In response to the question, *How do you feel when things go wrong?*, 52

students shared their feelings. the most prominent words were “frustrated”, “suicidal” and “low”. It was a testament to the quality of the panel that they were able to manage these responses and to deal with them in an ethical manner. We recognised that it was vital to show students what we were listening to their distress and were not going to shy away from talking about difficult feelings. At the same time, it was important to give the students a sense of optimism. We did this by sharing our own experiences of when we were at very low ebbs, and how we had got through them. Importantly, we each shared how we had all experienced failure as students and as academics and showed that failure need not be the end of the world; nor was it an indication of our worth or indeed our potential. We stressed how important it was to talk about our feelings and to seek support. We were also able to link the discussion to the *Look After Your Mate* session earlier in the semester, thus scaffolding and reinforcing the messages.

With reference to questions four (53 responses) and five (46 responses), students disclosed that when they were not OK they felt tired, tearful and had difficulty sleeping. A significant proportion of students (according to the word cloud) said they did nothing to take care of themselves when they were feeling low; others indulged in food, alcohol, smoking and shopping to help themselves feel better. The panel empathised with these responses, and we talked a little about how our brain chemistry works – again, as part of the process of normalisation and de-stigmatisation. We also reminded them that it is important to recognise when we are not OK and talked about how we can be kind to ourselves; to treasure the small pleasures and achievements in life; and to be proud of how far we have come.

Session Evaluation

As part of the evaluation, our final Mentimeter question invited students to name one thing they would take away from the session (36 responses). The dominant words and phrases in the resulting word cloud were “help”, “talk to people”, “coping strategies”, “not alone”, “it’s OK not to be OK” and – my personal favourite – “everyone has shit!” I used that final phrase in my summing-up of the session, as I felt it beautifully encapsulated the key message, that we all belonged to a supportive and collaborative community in the Law School. The final part of the session was dedicated to signposting students to sources of support, both internal and external to the Law School and Keele. Our Learning Development Tutor subsequently reported an increase in students’ willingness to disclose difficult feelings as part of their academic skills discussions.

Benefits of the Session

The session was a good demonstration of the benefits of co-created learning. It was designed with a general framework based on legal education research, but it was also driven by students’ responses to the Mentimeter questions. Using SRS worked well – but it worked as part of a session that was all about openness, dialogue, and community. Interestingly, during the session some students raised their hands and asked questions, including some that revealed their concerns about their own wellbeing. By providing anonymity and by showing students that their peers had similar feelings to their own, Mentimeter seemed to give students the confidence to share their concerns aloud. Using Mentimeter as a springboard for open, inclusive

panel discussion gave us the opportunity to signpost students to sources of both learning and emotional support. It also enabled us to highlight the difference between mental health and mental wellbeing; it is possible to have mental health issues but to have good mental wellbeing, if appropriate support is in place.

Limitations of the Session

Despite being held in a regular first year lecture slot, attendance was relatively poor, with approximately 30% of the Level 4 cohort present. This may have been due to several factors: it was a Friday morning; students may have felt that the topic did not apply to them; and some may have opted out because they knew that the session was optional, and the content did not count towards any final assessment. There was a slight fall in responses as the questions progressed: questions 1-4 elicited 50+ responses; question 5 received 46; and question 6, 36. Students may have found it difficult to articulate their feelings “on the spot” and, despite the large size of the lecture theatre compared to the number of attendees, some may have been concerned about privacy and the risk that their peers might catch sight of their answers. In terms of access to the required technology, there may have been a few students who were excluded through lack of internet-enabled devices. In hindsight, we should have recognised this and highlighted the Law School’s laptop loan facility when publicising the session.

The relatively low response to the final question may indicate that some students did not feel that the session had given them anything to take away – in the summing up I expressed the hope that they would reflect on what we had talked about in the coming weeks. There were also some immature comments in the word clouds. For example, a few students cited “women” or responded with gibberish words, when asked what had affected their mental health. A word cloud does not indicate the precise number of students giving a particular response; instead, the size of the word generated indicates its relative popularity. So, while we do not know how many students gave this kind of response, we know it was a small number because the words were small relative to the others. Nor was it possible to know which students did so, as the poll was conducted anonymously so as to preserve students’ privacy.. These immature responses were neither indulged nor criticised by the panel; we recognised that students may have been “acting out” through shyness or embarrassment, but we collectively chose to focus on the meaningful responses.

Further Reflection

It is, of course, important to recognise that the use of SRS does not automatically result in an engaged audience of learners (Murphy and Smark, 2006). A key influence on learner engagement is – unsurprisingly – engaging teaching, of which the use of SRS may be simply an indication (Poirer and Feldman, 2007). The importance of engaging teaching influenced our approach to blending the use of innovative technology with innovative panel-style discussion. Recent research has highlighted the vital role of lecturers themselves in student wellbeing (Eloff et al, 2021). Lecturers who express benevolence and a caring attitude; who communicate regularly; who use technology effectively; and who are enthusiastic and passionate about their work have a strong influence on student wellbeing. This is precisely what

we had aimed to convey through *It's OK not to be OK* – particularly through the panel's discussion of issues arising from students' Mentimeter responses.

Dissemination and Impact

The *It's OK Not To Be OK* project was by its very nature a collaborative exercise. As such, the sharing of ideas and good practice was built into the project from its inception. The outcomes of the session were shared with Keele colleagues in the Law School's Learning and Teaching Forum. They were also shared at the Association of Law Teachers conference and at a Connecting Legal Education event. The session is also referenced in two forthcoming publications: an edited collection on legal education and wellbeing, and a special edition of *The Law Teacher*. The design and delivery of the session has also informed the development of the Law School's new Legal Essentials programme, which will be discussed further in the next section.

Next Steps: Legal Essentials

It's OK not to be OK helped inform the development of our new, innovative Legal Essentials module: an approach to induction and legal skills training that involves the "whole student". *It's OK not to be OK* was delivered again as a standalone session in the first year of Legal Essentials (2019-20), this time in week 3 [instead of week 6](#). Legal Essentials involves an extended 3-week induction, aimed at developing the positive identity and sense of belonging that the *Why Not Me?* and *It's OK not to be OK* projects had recognised as important for student wellbeing. We made the decision to include *It's OK not to be OK* as part of this extended induction but running it later in the semester (as before) would have better captured the impact of studying Law on students' mental health.

Nevertheless, students' responses to the questions were broadly similar, confirming that the challenges to Law student wellbeing at transition are ongoing. We had thought that holding the session earlier in the semester would help us plan more "early intervention" support, but we subsequently realised it was better held later. This is because the new Legal Essentials module is front-loaded, with only Induction and Legal Skills being taught intensively during the first three weeks. Consequently, students hadn't yet had the experience of core, substantive Law modules, so had not yet experienced a lot of the difficulties that come with those.

Delivery in the 2020-21 academic year was of course affected by the move to online teaching during the pandemic. The Law School did not provide for synchronous whole-cohort or large group teaching during that academic year. As the session design required a large group to provide the safety of anonymity, we took the opportunity to integrate wellbeing awareness into our Legal Essentials module instead. The module's holistic approach to student learning and skills development is reflected in its four inter-related streams: *Thinking, Making, Doing, and Being Law*. This latter stream is very different from programmes like *Thinking Like a Lawyer*; instead of emphasising rational, analytic thinking, it acknowledges the personal aspects of belonging to the legal community – academic and professional. *Being*

Law encourages students to reflect on who they are and what they want during their academic journey. One of our Legal Essentials mantras is a Neil Gaiman quote - "Make glorious mistakes!" (Gaiman, 2011). We integrate this message throughout the Legal Essentials module: It's OK to make mistakes, and it's OK not to be OK.

(5075 words)

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