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Ethical Aspects of “Clickbait” in Health Communication: An Analysis of Headlines from news.google.com

ABSTRACT

The aim of the study presented in this article was to determine the degree and scope of the use of clickbait in health-related article headlines available on news.google.com. The research was carried out using the method of content analysis between 18 and 25 July 2025. The research material consisted of 99 headlines published in Polish-language national, specialist, local, and institutional media outlets. The analytical tool employed was a categorization key template comprising six categories of clickbait features: information gap, sensationalism, promise, lists and numbers, question, and emotionality. The results indicate that more than half of the analyzed headlines contained at least one clickbait feature. The most frequently used technique was the information gap, while lists and numbers and promise also appeared regularly. The least common were sensationalism and emotionality. Strong clickbait, defined as headlines containing at least three such features, was found mainly in specialist medical portals. In contrast, the highest overall share of clickbait (regardless of the number of features) was observed in national mainstream media (67.9%). The most balanced and neutral, purely informational headlines were characteristic of institutional media. The study demonstrates that clickbait constitutes a significant element of contemporary health communication. Editorial practices appear to combine headline attractiveness (drawing audience attention) with ethical responsibility for information concerning human health. Nevertheless, the findings underscore the ongoing need to monitor the ethics of media content, particularly in the domain of medical information and health communication.

KEYWORDS: journalistic ethics, clickbait, health communication, media headlines

STRESZCZENIE

Etyczne aspekty „clickbaitu” w komunikacji zdrowotnej na przykładzie artykułów z news.google.com

Celem badań zaprezentowanych w niniejszym artykule było określenie stopnia i zakresu zastosowania clickbaitu w nagłówkach artykułów na temat zdrowia dostępnych w news.google.com. Badania te zostały zrealizowane za pomocą metody analizy zawartości w okresie 18–25 lipca 2025 r. Materiał badawczy stanowiło 99 nagłówków w polskojęzycznych mediach ogólnopolskich, specjalistycznych, lokalnych oraz instytucjonalnych. W badaniu zastosowano narzędzie badawcze – szablon klucza kategoryzacyjnego, który składał się z następujących kategorii analitycznych (sześciu cech clickbaitu): „niedopowiedzenie”, „sensacyjność”, „obietnica”, „liczby i listy”, „pytania” oraz „emocje”. Według wyników badań ponad połowa nagłówków zawierała co najmniej jedną cechę clickbaitu. „Niedopowiedzenie” to cecha clickbaitu najczęściej stosowana przez redakcje w nagłówkach artykułów na temat zdrowia. Inne, często stosowane cechy clickbaitu to: „liczby i listy” oraz „obietnica”. Najrzadziej były używane: „sensacyjność” oraz „emocje”. Mocne clickbaity, czyli te zawierające minimum trzy jego cechy, dotyczyły głównie portali specjalistycznych, o tematyce medycznej, natomiast najwięcej clickbaitów (z dowolną liczbą ich cech) zauważono w mediach ogólnopolskich, mainstreamowych (67,9%). Najbardziej wyważone nagłówki, neutralne, typowo informacyjne były w mediach instytucjonalnych. W toku badań wykazano, iż clickbait współcześnie stanowi istotny element informacji zdrowotnej. Dostrzega się, że redakcje łączą atrakcyjność nagłówków (pozyskiwanie uwagi odbiorców) z odpowiedzialnością etyczną za przekaz, który dotyczy tematów związanych z ludzkim zdrowiem. To jednak nie zmienia faktu, iż istnieje stała potrzeba monitorowania etyki przekazu, szczególnie z obszaru informacji medycznej i komunikacji zdrowotnej.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: etyka dziennikarska, clickbait, komunikacja zdrowotna, nagłówki medialne

Introduction

The reader’s attention is something that nearly every writer seeks during the creative process – whether inventing, writing, creating, or editing various types of content. This has been true in every historical era. However, depending on the period and the methods or tools available, the methods to capture the audience’s attention varied. Today, the most common tools include images, topics, attractive, sometimes even sensational headlines, a compelling lead or introduction, and concise, targeted content. In other words, every text today, especially those published online, are often expected to contain some form of “bait.” In digital media, the bait takes the form of “clickbait,” a term and phenomenon

that, for many contemporary editorial offices, has become a primary indicator of “good” writing, understood as content that is effective in terms of audience engagement. This practice applies to texts in every thematic category: entertainment, politics, economics, social issues, and even medicine. Regardless of the subject matter, however, questions about the ethics of communication inevitably arise: Are all methods used to capture the reader’s attention acceptable from the perspective of journalistic ethics? What ethical dilemmas or potential abuses are associated with clickbait? Finally, is an article – particularly its headline – prepared for the purposes of clickbait always a carrier of truthful information, or can it instead become a tool of disinformation and manipulation? These and other questions can be asked to any thematic field. This article will focus on media information regarding medical and health-related issues.

Literature Review

Headlines in journalistic articles have been a staple of journalism since the eighteenth century, when they were first organized thematically in newspapers. In enhancing readability, clarity of texts, and capturing the reader’s interest, titles and subheadings began to hold significant importance, not only in terms of editorial and publishing practice but also in terms of content (Jodłowiec, 2022; Schneider, 2000). Today, headlines perform various functions: from informational and marketing roles to popularization and more profound purposes, such as giving an article and its content a distinct identity, specific identification, or meaning (Dor, 2003).

Research findings indicate that “many readers spend more time scanning headlines (and looking for photos and dropped quotes) than reading full articles, because this strategy maximizes their informational gain relative to cognitive effort invested” (Jodłowiec, 2022; Dor, 2003). This contemporary reading pattern has led to numerous changes in journalism, including clickbait, which has become for many editorial offices a primary determinant in the creation and editing of newspaper headlines.

It is important to note that clickbait is not exclusive to contemporary journalism. From the earliest days of the press – later followed by television, radio, and the internet – more or less sensational headlines, teasers, and spots were used to capture human attention, tailored to the given era. Today, publishers primarily compete in one space – the internet – enhanced by various AI models and capabilities, using clickbait as a key tool (Kuznecova, 2021). Its main goal is to increase the number of clicks and page views, which consequently leads to a rise in the reach of information and, most importantly, advertising revenue (Khater et al., 2018; Bazaco et al., 2019). Its key features include ambiguity, the curiosity gap, and forward-reference (e.g., “Here’s what happened

next...”, “That’s why you should never...”, “This doctor did something no one expected”) (Blom & Hansen, 2015; Le Quéré et al., 2025), sensationalism (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013), the promise of a benefit or solution (Scott, 2021), the presence of numbers or lists in headlines (Molina et al., 2021),¹ questions (“Did you...?”, “Did you know that...?”) (Lai & Farbrot, 2014), and emotions (Berger & Milkman, 2012).²

Clickbait, as a contemporary and integral element of media strategy, effectively increases the popularity of content regardless of its actual substantive or ethical value. In many cases, it results in incomplete, abbreviated, or superficial content that is not aligned with the promise made in the headline and, at times, far from the truth (Patten et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2025). From the perspective of journalistic ethics, the growing use of clickbait to increase the visibility of texts is seen as a significant challenge, but also, in many cases, a threat to the dissemination of reliable and truthful information. In the short term, clickbait effectively engages readers to open or at least click on an article; however, in the long term, it may lead to a loss of trust, thereby undermining the fundamental ethical standards of editorial work (Rahman, 2023; Qorib et al., 2024; Siang & Wilson, 2024). In this way, journalistic and editorial practices are constantly confronted with various ethical dilemmas arising from the tension between the desire to capture the audience’s attention and the commitment to providing accurate information, as well as to uphold the responsibility for delivering the truth to the public (Harte, 2021; Yasundari et al., 2024; Fakhru-roji et al., 2023; Diez-Gracia et al., 2024; Laskowska, 2018, pp. 173–174). In academic literature and in journalistic practice, the term “clickbaiting” is used to refer to a new form of tabloidization (Chen, 2015). Many researchers argue that clickbait should not be regarded as a harmless marketing strategy that can be used freely. Instead, they warn against that it may contribute to a decline in the quality of journalism, including the erosion of ethical standards. This technique often involves making false claims and misinforms the reader (Diez-Gracia et al., 2024).

Clickbait headlines are also widely used in journalistic articles related to health and general medical topics. These often involve fragmented information about medical research, healthy lifestyles, dietary supplementation, new forms of treatment, or updates on diseases. In the case of such topics, which directly relate to human life and are capable of influencing readers’ health decisions,

1 According to Sean R. Sadri, “listicles” have emerged as a new journalistic genre. Their popularity today is so great that they are not used only in headlines but often shape the structure of the article itself (Sadri et al., 2019).

2 It is worth noting the insightful and important research on the evolution of online headlines over the past two decades conducted by Pietro Nickl, Mehdi Moussaïd, and Philipp Lorenz-Spreen (2025). This analysis identifies additional features of contemporary clickbait.

this type of clickbait can be particularly harmful or even dangerous. It can provoke rash reactions among readers, such as panic or misguided self-decisions regarding their health and lifestyle. In other words, this kind of clickbait can contribute to the creation and spread of medical fake news (Bolton & Yaxley, 2017; Jodłowiec, 2022). For this reason, in discussions of journalistic ethics, particularly with regard to health information, there is a strong emphasis on the need to convey messages that are truthful and socially responsible (Kiasalar et al., 2022). Researchers and ethicists call for avoiding emotional manipulation, especially in articles dealing with medical issues, as this field is especially prone to such practices (Hinnant et al., 2013). Scholars focused on the ethics of journalistic communication also highlight the political pressure exerted on journalists and medical professionals writing on socially important topics during so-called health crises (e.g., pandemics or periods of widespread disease). At such times, there is a particular need for reliable medical information and an obligation to refrain, despite political pressures, from any forms of abuse or manipulation (Schwitzer, 2004).

Clickbait, like other techniques used in online journalism to capture the audience attention, regardless of the topic, should be guided not only by the principle of effectiveness but also by one of appropriateness. It is precisely this sense of appropriateness, which is an element of communicative competence, that makes it possible to maintain high ethical standards in journalism (Marcyński, 2020).

Methodology of Research

The aim of the research presented in this article was to determine the extent of clickbait usage in the headlines of articles available on news.google.com for the search term “health.” The following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1: Do media outlets available on news.google.com use clickbait in headlines related to health?
- RQ2: If so, to what extent, how frequently, and what are the most common characteristics of clickbait in these headlines?
- RQ3: Which media outlets use clickbait in the headlines of health-related articles?

The main hypotheses are as follows:

- H1: Headlines of health-related articles in Polish-language media contain clickbait features; H2: The most frequently used clickbait features in health-related headlines are ambiguity (vagueness, mystery, lack of complete information) and the promise of benefits;
- H3: Media outlets using clickbait in health-related headlines exhibit higher levels of sensationalism and emotionality compared to other types of media.

The research method applied was content analysis, and the research tool was a categorization key questionnaire, characterized in Table 1.

Table 1. Categorization Key Questionnaire

Feature of Clickbait	Description	Example
Ambiguity	Lack of key information in the headline. Short, punchy titles that evoke various associations.	“This Medicine Saves Lives, but Doctors Remain Silent...”
Sensationalism	Use of strong emotions and shock words.	“Shocking! Polish Doctors Are Testing an Illegal Substance.”
Promise	Suggesting benefits or a miraculous effect.	“Here Is a Drug that Will Cure Cancer in a Week!”
Lists and numbers	“5 reasons for which...”	“7 Symptoms You’re Ignoring that Could Kill You.”
Questions	Headlines in the form of a question.	“Is Your Doctor Hiding the Truth from You?”
Emotionality	Words such as: drama, tragedy, miracle, or sensation.	“The Drama of a Patient after Visiting a Famous Cardiologist.”

Source: own elaboration.

The research material consisted of 99 article headlines collected over a seven-day period, from 18 to 25 July 2025, retrieved from <https://news.google.com> using the search term “health” (in Polish). These analyzed headlines were published on the websites of the following media outlets or institutions: 300Gospodarka.pl, Białystok Online, Calisia.pl, Cowzdrowiu, Dentonet, *Dziennik Płocki*, Euronews, *Fakt*, *Gazeta Express*, Gov.pl, gra.pl, inowroclaw.info.pl, *Kurier Poranny*, lebork.pl, MamBiznes.pl, MedExpress.pl, Medonet, mzdrowie.pl, *Nasz Dziennik*, Newseria BIZNES, *Newsweek*, Ogólnopolskie Porozumienie Związków Zawodowych, OKO.press, Onet, Plock.eu, PolitykaZdrowotna.com, Polskie Radio Lublin, Pomorskie.eu, Portal Samorządu Województwa Podkarpackiego, PoradnikZdrowie.pl, Powiat Legionowski, Prawo.pl, *Puls Medycyny*, Radio Gra, Radio Łódź, Radio Poznań, Radio Zet Zdrowie, samorzad.gov.pl, Serwis Zdrowie, SportoweFakty, Starostwo Powiatowe w Kielcach, *Super Nowości*, swidnik.pl, Szczeciner.pl, Termedia, Trojmiasto.pl, *Tygodnik Płocki*, TVN24, TVP, TVP Gorzów, Urząd Miasta w Brzegu, Wąbrzeźno.com, Wieruszów Nasze Miasto, WLKP24.info, WP abcZdrowie, Wroclaw.pl, Wyborcza.pl, Wydarzenia w Interia.pl, www.gdynia.pl, www.radioem.pl, Zdrowie Interia, Zespół Parków Krajobrazowych Województwa Łódzkiego, dwakwadrans.pl, *Express Elbląg*, Nasze Miasto (Wieruszów), and Tok FM.

The individual features of clickbait were carefully selected according to analytical categories. Ambiguity most often appears in short, catchy headlines consisting of approximately four words or fewer, or in titles that suggest something without revealing specific information. In other words, these types of headlines contain enigmatic expressions, such as: “there’s no longer any doubt,” “they will be drawn,” “it’s a big problem.” Sensationalism, on the other hand, or emotionality, can be recognized particularly in headlines containing strongly charged words such as: shock, scandal, drama, tragedy, miracle, sensation, breakdown, worst, surprising, or shocking. Promise occurs when phrases such as “the healthiest,” “the best,” “effective,” “all you need is...” are used. The clickbait feature lists and numbers can be identified by the presence of any number or a list format (e.g., “X reasons,” “X ways,” “X steps,” “X symptoms,” “top X best,” “top x worst”). Questions are easily recognizable by the use of a question mark and interrogative forms such as “Did you...?,” “How...?,” or “How many...?”. During the categorization of clickbait features in health-related article headlines, certain limitations and difficulties emerged. One of them concerns the fact that the outcome depends largely on the adopted definition of clickbait. The research presented in this article focuses on selected features most frequently mentioned in the literature. Another challenge involved assigning individual headlines to specific categories within the coding scheme. In some cases, a single headline met the criteria for two or even three clickbait features simultaneously. Despite these difficulties, such research remains valuable, as it can serve as a starting point for further studies on the research issue using larger samples or different search terms, such as “disease,” “cancer,” or “healthy lifestyle.”

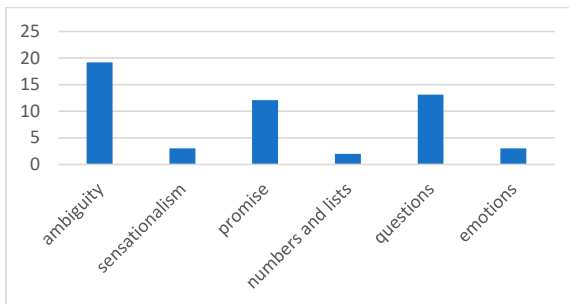
Research Results

The study analyzed 99 article headlines published between 18 and 25 July 2025, retrieved from news.google.com using the Polish keyword “zdrowie” (“health”). As noted above, there some headlines contained more than one clickbait feature. An example is the headline: “Do You Need to Take a Break from Hybrid Nails? It’s not Just about the Risk of Cancer” (Żurek, 2025). This headline contains the clickbait features question and ambiguity. In cases of headlines with two or more features, the phenomenon can be described as strong or very strong clickbait. Examples of headlines with strong clickbait (containing at least three features) include: “10,000 Steps a Day? Less Is Enough to Take Care of Your Health” (Bielecka, 2025), which contains the features question, lists and numbers, and promise. “The Worst Products for People over 45. They Destroy Health and Physique” (Redakcja SN, 2025), which include emotionality, sensationalism, and lists and numbers. Another example is “500 Scientific papers

and no More Doubt. Surprising Information about the Human Heart” (PAP, 2025), which combines features emotionality, sensationalism, and lists and numbers.

The study showed that at least one clickbait feature appeared in more than half of the headlines (54.5%). Strong clickbait was identified in 11.1% of the headlines, while very strong clickbait in 3.0%. Among individual features, lists and numbers appeared in 19.2% of the headlines, ambiguity also in 19.2%, question in 13.1%, promise in 12.1%, emotionality in 3.0%, and sensationalism in 3.0%. The percentages illustrating these results are shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1. Frequency of clickbait in headlines (N = 99)



Source: own elaboration.

Examples of the use of lists and numbers in headlines include: “Polish Femtech Gaining Strength. A Review of 15 Innovative Startups Transforming Women’s Health” (Kieszek, 2025), “More than 50,000 People from Greater Poland Have Signed Up for the ‘My Health’ Program” (NFZ Wielkopolska, 2025), “Dietitian Pointed Out the 33 Best Products from Biedronka. We Have the Shopping List” (Skalik, 2025), “How Many Steps Should You Take Daily? Definitely not 10,000” (Galvin, 2025). Examples of ambiguity appeared in headlines such as: “Crisis-Inducing Health” (Stęпка, 2025), “Health of Płock” (Płock.eu, 2025) “August Noble Health” (*Nasz Dziennik*, 2025), “How Much Does the Average Pole Drink?” (Torchała, 2025), “Cheers” (Radio Poznań, 2025). The question format was used in headlines such as: “How ChatGPT Answered Questions about Oral Health?” (Dentonet, 2025), “How Space Missions Affect the Human Body?” (Żmudziak, 2025), “Gastrointestinal Cancers. Does Our Diet Have an Impact?” (Polskie Radio, 2025), “Will the Ban on Disposable E-Cigarettes Be Effective?” (Prawo.pl, 2025). Examples of the promise feature can be found in the following headlines: “Here’s How Your Health and Life Will Change When You Start Working 4 Days a Week” (Ważna, 2025), “10,000 Steps a Day? Less Is Enough to Take Care of Your Health” (Bielecka, 2025), “Coffee Healthiest in the Morning? Latest Studies Show When to Drink it to

Protect Your Heart” (Willmoth, 2025), and “Dietitian Pointed Out the 33 Best Products from Biedronka. We Have the Shopping List” (Skalik, 2025). Meanwhile, clickbait features such as emotionality and sensationalism appeared in such headlines as: “Saving the Health of Children with Obesity. A Historic Operation at UDSK” (MZ, 2025), “The Worst Products for People Over 45. They Destroy Health and Physique” (Redakcja SN, 2025), and “500 Scientific Papers and No More Doubts. Surprising Information about the Human Heart” (PAP, 2025).

Table 1 below presents the percentages for the media outlets using clickbait in the headlines of their articles.

Table 1. Clickbait by outlet

Source Category	Number of headlines	≥1 Clickbait feature (%)	Average number of features	Strong (≥3 features) (%)
National/Mainstream	28	67.9	0.27	0.0
Specialized	28	50.0	0.71	3.6
Local	18	38.9	0.44	0.0
Institutional	11	27.3	0.27	0.0
Other	14	28.6	0.29	0.0

Source: own elaboration.

Based on the obtained data, it can be observed that national, mainstream media (including TVN, TVP, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Polskie Radio, TOK FM, Euronews, Onet, WP, *Fakt*, *Newsweek*, Interia, and MamBiznes) constitute the category with the highest level of clickbait in health-related topics. The analysis showed that nearly 68% of the headlines from these outlets contained at least one clickbait feature. This suggests that general-interest media frequently use clickbait language and techniques to attract and maintain audience attention. A moderate level clickbait usage was observed on specialized or thematic portals, such as Medonet, MedExpress, *Puls Medycyny*, Serwis Zdrowie, Termedia, and *Rynek Zdrowia*. In this group, 50% of the headlines contained at least one clickbait feature. Importantly and interestingly, these outlets also demonstrated the strongest clickbait features (≥3 features), such as combining ambiguity, lists and numbers, and promise. Local and regional media, such as Plock.eu, Wabrzezno.com, Trojmiasto.pl, Białystok Online, *Express Elbląg*, and *Super Nowości*, also showed a moderate level of clickbait usage, with around 40% of headlines containing at least one feature. In these cases, the forms were generally milder, most often involving questions and numbers, while sensationalism and emotionality appeared less frequently. The group of sources with the lowest level of clickbait consisted of institutional media (gov.pl, samorząd.gov.pl, city

offices, OPZZ, county offices, and provincial government portals). About 27% of their headlines contained a single clickbait feature. However, even in these cases, the headlines tended to be neutral and informational, without emotional or sensational framing. Examples include: “Health Check-Up for Adults – the New ‘My Health’ Program Now Available at GOZ in Kobile Wielkie!” (samorząd.gov.pl, 2025), and “Jolanta Sobierańska-Grenda Is the New Minister of Health” (pomorskie.eu, 2025). These differences in the use of clickbait across the media types indicate that institutional media tend to primarily focus on facts and neutral headline formulation. In contrast, national mainstream media use rhetoric of emotional language, numbers, and questions more frequently to increase the appeal of their messages.

Summary and Conclusions

The aim of the research presented in this article was to determine the extent of clickbait usage in the headlines of articles available on news.google.com for the search term “health” in Polish language. Based on the obtained data, it was found that the media available on news.google.com do indeed use clickbait in health-related headlines, but to a moderate degree. Approximately 54% of the analyzed headlines contained at least one clickbait feature, as outlined in the categorization key. Therefore, the first hypothesis was fully confirmed.

The most frequently used features in the analyzed headlines were lists and numbers, ambiguity, questions, and promise of benefits. Consequently the second hypothesis was partially confirmed. Ambiguity appeared relatively often – in 19.2% of the headlines – while promise of benefits occurred in fewer headlines (12.1%), which still represents a significant proportion.

The third hypothesis was fully confirmed, particularly with regard to national (mainstream) media. These outlets indeed demonstrated a significantly higher level of clickbait usage than specialized or institutional media. Nearly 70% of the headlines in media such as TVP, TVN, Onet, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and Interia contained at least one clickbait feature. Among these, elements such as *e m o t i o n a l i t y* and *s e n s a t i o n a l i s m* were particularly noticeable. Such headlines are not insignificant for readers, as they may provoke emotional reactions and, as a result, hasty decisions. Institutional media, by contrast, showed a lower tendency to use these techniques compared to other sources of health-related information. The strongest forms of clickbait, i.e., those containing 1 to 3 features in a single headline, were most often found in specialized (thematic) media.

The research presented in this article also carries an interesting ethical dimension. It highlights the difficult balance that the media must maintain between journalistic ethics and the use of clickbait as an effective technique for

capturing audience attention. In the case of information about human health, providing reliable information is particularly important, while it is equally crucial that such information reaches as wide an audience as possible.

From the perspective of journalistic ethics, attention should be paid to the clickbait feature ambiguity, which involves high ethical risks. Headlines that employ this technique can lead to misunderstanding and, consequently, to incorrect medical interpretations and decisions. Similarly, the promise of benefits carries a high ethical risk. Such headlines and articles may create illusory or false expectations among audiences, fostering manipulation in health-related decision-making. The question format does not necessarily lead to ethical abuses, but depending on the way the question is formulated, it may do so. In this problematic form, it is important to note that this technique can lead to suggestive interpretations, which can heighten uncertainty in the audience or even provoke fear and anxiety. The use of emotionality and sensationalism in headlines is also associated with high ethical risk, as it can provoke disproportionate reactions to the actual state of the situation being described. Furthermore, such techniques are a classic and frequent source of social panic. By contrast, lists and numbers, if accurate and properly verified, do indeed often simplify a given topic, but overall, they are associated with a moderate ethical risk. They can provide a distorted picture of an issue and lead to decisions based on a brief summary of data.

The analyzed headlines revealed relatively subtle attempts to engage the reader’s interest, while strongly sensational or tabloid-style titles were rare. However, this does not mean that high ethical standards are consistently maintained within “medical journalism.” In fact, especially in this area, there is a continuing need for monitoring and education regarding the ethics of journalistic communication about health. This need becomes even more pressing in the evolving environment of automated information production, increasingly supported by AI-based models.

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