FEATURE ARTICLE

Examining Cadets' Beliefs about Meditation Using the Reasoned Action Approach

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ABSTRACT

Meditation has been shown to be a character and virtue formation tool due to its emotion regulation capabilities. Training academies can help their students better develop their character by enabling meditation behavior acquisition. This study examines United States Military cadets' beliefs about meditation as a means of informing education and intervention programming to maximize the likelihood of cadets adopting the behavior. Implications and suggestions for character education programs are provided.

Keywords: Meditation, Mindfulness, Character Formation, Behavior Theory

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Introduction

At the core of our armed forces military academies' missions, to include the United States Naval Academy, the United States Military Academy, and the United States Air Force Academy, is to develop leaders of character. Development suggests an intentional training regiment, leader entails someone who will go first and be willing to stand alone, and character is the core of a person comprised of his or her dispositions and traits (Lamb et al., 2021). Promoting such development is no small task for our military academies given the pressure and demands placed on commissioned officers. The development of our future military leaders requires intention and effort in providing these young men and women with proven means by which their character can be formed.

Virtues, or excellences of character, are constellations of positive psychological constructs that motivate moral behavior (Berkowitz, 2012). While scholars once minimized the importance of emotions for character, today it is believed that emotions are the main driver of many character-related behaviors (Haidt, 2003). Consequently, effective emotion regulation strategies are essential for forming virtue.

Meditation is a behavior whose origin dates back thousands of years in various religious traditions and has become increasingly popular in modern society (Clarke et al., 2018) and in scientific inquiry (Baminiwatta & Solangaarachchi, 2021). Defined as a variety of complex mental activities aimed at attention and emotion regulation for the purpose of well-being promotion (Lutz et al., 2008), in its original form within some religious contexts, the practice was intended to shape the soul or character of the individual (Willard, 1998).

Recent work suggests that meditation enables character and virtue cultivation by down-regulating negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger) that often underlie viscous behavior and upregulating positive emotions (e.g., courage, compassion) that lead to virtuous behavior;

this is done through cultivating states of mind that are foundational for virtue (Upton, 2017). There is growing empirical evidence for this assertion in meta-analyses and systematic reviews of meditation interventions. A meta-analysis of meditation studies for health and well-being concluded that meditation reduces stress, anxiety, and depression (Goyal et al., 2014). A review of Mindfulness Meditation (a type of meditation that trains present moment awareness) conducted by RAND for the United States Army found support for meditation's ability to increase attention control and emotion regulation, and reduce stress (Hepner et al., 2022). Finally, a recent systematic review of Mindfulness Meditation neuroscience studies identified the neurobiological underpinnings of meditation's ability to promote self-regulation by improving brain networks and regions associated with attention control, emotion regulation, and self-awareness (Tang et al., 2015).

Researchers have also found evidence for meditation's ability to impact different aspects of prosociality including interpersonal connectedness, empathy, and compassion (Kreplin et al., 2018; Luberto et al., 2018). It was noted in one meta-analysis of the impact of meditation on prosociality that the emotional mechanisms enhanced through meditation that lead to more prosociality include increased positive affect, decreased stress and negative affect, and greater trait mindfulness (Luberto et al., 2018). These findings provide empirical support for the idea that meditation enables individuals to develop the mental states, specifically attention control, emotion regulation, and social connectedness, that are central to many of the virtues (Upton, 2017).

Taken together, the evidence suggests meditation can be an important character and virtue cultivating tool that can help our nation's training academies more effectively accomplish the core of their mission to develop leaders of character. But, a challenge perhaps unique to helping future officers adopt meditation as a practice is the perception that meditation is "soft" and has no place

in the military or leadership training (Richtel, 2019). How can this be overcome? A starting point is to better understand future officers' beliefs about meditation.

The Reasoned Action Approach (RAA), a decision-making and behavior theory, suggests that an individual's beliefs about a behavior must be captured and examined prior to attempting to change or adopt the behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). The theory identifies a person's intention to engage the behavior as the primary behavioral determinant, which is influenced by three constructs: Attitude toward the behavior, perceived norms regarding the behavior, and a person's perceived behavioral control (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). Underlying each of these factors is a set of beliefs about the consequences of engaging in the behavior, social referents, and circumstances that facilitate or create barriers for performing the behavior. However, according to the theory, not all beliefs influence intention, only the top-of-the-mind beliefs do. By understanding these commonly held beliefs, intervention designers can create programs that reinforce positive beliefs about a behavior to support its acquisition. Negative beliefs that can prevent adoption of the behavior can be combatted. Interventions aimed at helping individuals change or adopt a variety of behaviors that have used the RAA as a guiding framework have been successful (Steinmetz et al., 2016).

Only two studies to date have been used to explore meditation beliefs using the RAA. One study examined a university population consisting of both students and faculty and found advantages of meditation (such as reducing stress and feeling calmer) and disadvantages including the amount of time it takes. The study also identified facilitators of meditation usage such as having time and a quiet space (Lederer & Middlestadt, 2014). A second study examined a high school student population and found similar advantages to the first study of reducing stress and enhancing relaxation and the disadvantage of taking time. Participants identified

family members and friends as approvers of meditation, but a larger number said their friends would disapprove. Finally, similar to the first study, the main facilitator participants pointed to was having time and a space to meditate (Erbe et al., 2020).

The current study used the RAA as the theoretical framework as it has been successfully used to both change and predict a variety of behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Steinmetz et al., 2016). Our first aim was to explore the relationship between mindfulness and character in a cadet population. The second and primary aim of this study was to elicit the most frequently mentioned meditation beliefs of cadets at the United States Military Academy. The essential first step in this process, according to the RAA, was to specify the behavior in terms of action, target, context, and time (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). The chosen action and target were United States Military Academy cadets meditating. The context was "anywhere" as to not limit responses, and the "time" was most days over the next week as it was assumed that a fair number of cadets would have tried meditating before or would have a somewhat regular practice.

Methods

Cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point were recruited for the current study through the SONA psychology pool in the fall semester of 2021 (IRB# 22-017). Participants received extra credit for their participation. Approximately 200 cadets enrolled in the study, while 191 successfully completed the elicitation items along with the demographic questions. We first provided participants with a definition of meditation as consisting of a focus of attention (a chosen word, the breath or present moment) and a non-judgmental attitude (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, 2022). Participants then completed a 23-item survey. After viewing the study information sheet and the provided definition, participants were able to complete the Qualtrics survey.

To examine the relationship between mindfulness and character in our cadet population, we used the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale consisting of 10-items (Feldman et al., 2007) (sample item: *I can tolerate emotional pain* rated from 1-Rarely/Not at All to 4-Almost Always) and a two-item measure of character (*I always act to promote the good in all circumstances, even in difficult and challenging situations* and *I am always able to give up some happiness now for greater happiness later* rated from 0-Not True of Me to 10-Completely True of Me) (VanderWeele, 2017).

The RAA items for the present study were developed consistent with RAA specifications (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) and prior meditation elicitation studies (Erbe et al., 2020; Lederer & Middlestadt, 2014). Six open-ended items were used to elicit beliefs regarding "meditating almost every day for the next 7 days." Two questions were related to consequences "what one good thing might happen to you if you meditate almost every day for the next 7 days?" and "What one bad thing might happen ...?" Two questions asked about those who might approve or disapprove of their attempts to meditate: "Who is one person or group that might support you meditating almost every day for the next 7 days" and "Who is the one person or group that might disapprove of you meditating?" Two questions were related to facilitators and barriers of meditating: "What is the one thing that might make it easier for you to meditate almost every day for the next 7 days" and "What is the one thing that might make it harder...?" Instructions were provided for responding to the elicitation items: "Please tell us the things that come to your mind for each of the following questions. List 1 top-of-the-mind response. There are no right or wrong answers; just write what comes to your mind first." Demographic information (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, year in school, and parent/caregiver military experience) was also solicited.

We conducted an inductive content analysis of the six open-ended item responses to create "themes" consisting of similar responses. Verbatim text responses from Qualtrics were downloaded to a separate Excel file for each of the six questions. Entire responses were reviewed and grouped together with similar responses in each category (advantage, disadvantage, those who approve, those who disapprove, facilitator, barrier). Once a group of responses was established (consisting of at least a few responses) it became a theme. Theme labels (taken directly from responses) became names for each code. After codes were established for each category, coding procedures were created to identify approximately 15 codes of the most common responses for each open-ended question. A team of two researchers with experience using the RAA analyzed each theme and recommended theme merging or differentiation. Themes were then re-created and reviewed by the research team.

After each theme was reviewed and agreed upon by the research team, independent data coding was conducted to establish reliability. First, a subset of responses (20% of the data for each of the categories: advantages, disadvantages, approve, disapprove, facilitator, barrier) was randomly selected and coded by two team members. Interrater reliability was then calculated and established using the kappa statistic. Kappas for five of the categories demonstrated a high level of reliability: 0.875 for advantages; 0.971 for approvers; 0.901 for disapprovers; 0.822 for facilitators; and 0.794 for barriers. A lower reliability initially was found for disadvantages (0.623), so the two raters discussed coding discrepancies, came to agreement on the discrepancies, and recoded a different random set of responses for the disadvantages category. After recoding, a Kappa of 1.000 was established and accepted for disadvantages (Landis & Koch, 1977).

After the codes were established, the primary investigator coded each response. Next, a frequency analysis was conducted to determine totals for each code and which code was mentioned most often. These were then reviewed, and codes were placed together with similar

codes to create larger themes as noted in each of the following tables.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the study sample are represented in Table 1. The final study sample (N = 191) included a much larger percentage of males than females and white/Caucasian than minority participants which is representative of the total cadet population at the United States Military Academy.[1] There was a slightly larger number of upperclassman participants (56%) than lowerclassman participants (43%) and most participants did not have a parent or caregiver with current or former military experience (70.7%; Table 1).

As a preliminary analysis, we investigated whether mindfulness and character were related in this population. When we examined the relationship, we found a statistically significant correlation of r = 0.402; p < 0.001. Given that mindfulness is related to character in cadets, we then investigated what might contribute to a practice known to develop mindfulness; that being meditation.

Results displayed below include the number of participants who mentioned each thematic code within the corresponding category. Some participants listed more than one response and since all responses were coded, some percentages may exceed 100%. Due to only the most common themes being identified, the number of participants who identified each theme will not equal the final analytical sample of 191.

The most common advantage belief of meditating most days of the next 7 days was *will help me relax* (36%, n = 69), which included responses such as "I may be more relaxed," "increase calm," and "increased peace." Another common advantage was *will reduce my stress* (31%, n = 61), which included responses such as "less

stress" and "decrease in stress." A third common advantage was *will improve focus* (9%, n = 19) included responses such as "more focused" and "more focus in daily tasks" (Table 2).

The main disadvantage that emerged in the data involved issues with time including having less time for other things or losing time. The main disadvantage of *having less time for other things* (69%, n = 132) included responses such as "I lose study time" or "I might not get studying or homework done that I need to." This disadvantage also included responses about *losing time* with participants saying "loss of time" and "waste of time" (Table 2).

Roommates/Friends (45%, n = 87), *Family* (20%, n = 40) and *Staff and Faculty* (12%, n = 24) were identified by participants as individuals or groups of people that would approve of them meditating most days over the next 7 days. Most who identified *roommates or friends* responded with "my roommate" or "my friends." Most participants identifying *family* as approvers indicated "my mom" or "my family." Those who indicated *staff and faculty* responded with "my teachers" or "Center for Enhanced Performance" (Table 3).

Although a large percentage of participants identified roommates/friends as those that would approve of them meditating, a large percentage also indicated that *roommates/friends* would disapprove of them meditating. Specifically, 34% (n = 66) of participants responded with "roommate" or "my friends" when asked who would disapprove of them meditating. A large number of participants indicated that *No One* would disapprove of them meditating (28%, n = 55) with responses such as "no one" or "I cannot think of anyone." Finally, a third category of disapprovers included *staff and faculty* with responses such as "teachers/instructors" and "my TAC" (Table 3).

The salient circumstances that would facilitate or provide a barrier to meditating most days over the next 7 days for cadets mostly had to do with issues related to

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Table 1

Participant Characteristics and Descriptive Statistics

Characteristic	n	%
Gender		
Female	57	29
Male	130	68
Prefer not to say	2	1
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	120	62.8
Black or African American	13	6.8
Latino or Hispanic	10	5.2
Asian or Asian American	30	15.7
Multiracial	12	8.5
Year in school		
Freshman (Plebe)	79	41.4
Sophomore (Yearling)	3	1.6
Junior (Cow)	88	46.1
Senior (Firstie)	19	9.9
Parent/Caregivers current/Former military		
Both	9	4.7
Father	42	22
Mother	1	0.5
None	135	70.7
Other	1	0.5
Days meditated past week		
0	112	58.6
1	31	16.2
2	13	6.8
3	11	5.8
4	6	3.1
5	10	5.2
6	2	1.0
7	4	2.1

(*Continued*)

Table 1
Continued

Characteristic	n	%
Meditation past year		
Never	35	18.3
A few times	58	30.4
Only for class at school or program	42	22.0
Once per month	8	4.2
A few times a month	27	14.1
Weekly	19	9.9

Table 2

Salient Perceived Consequences Meditating Most Days in the Next Seven Days

Consequence	n	%
Advantages		
Meditating most days in the next 7 days … (N = 191)		
Might help me relax	69	36
Might help me relax	33	17
Might make me calmer	26	13
Might give me more peace	13	6
Might reduce my stress	61	31
Might reduce my stress	52	27
Might make me less anxious	10	5
Might improve my focus	19	9
Might make me more self-aware	16	8
Might make me more self-aware	11	5
Might help me control my thoughts	3	1
Might make me more mindful	2	1
Might improve my mood	15	7
Might improve my mood	6	3
Might help me feel happier	4	2
Might help me have a more positive outlook	4	2
Might increase my gratitude	2	1
Might improve my mental and physical health	11	5
Might improve my mental health	5	2

(*Continued*)

Table 2
Continued

Consequence	n	%
Might lower my heart rate	3	1
Might lower my blood pressure	2	1
Might improve my brain function	1	0.5
Disadvantages		
Meditating most days in the next 7 days … (N = 191)		
Might mean I have less time for other things	132	69
Might mean I have less time for other things	64	33
Might take time/time loss	31	16
Might be a waste of time	27	14
Might disrupt time management	5	2
Might lead to no benefits	3	1
Might not have enough time	2	1
Might make me frustrated	16	8
Might make me frustrated	6	3
Might make me overwhelmed/overthink	6	3
Might give me stress	4	2
Might make me tired/Too relaxed	14	7
Nothing	9	4

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100%, since participants could list multiple answers.

Table 3
Salient Referents for Meditating Most Days in the Next Seven Days

Salient referents	n	%	Salient referents	n	%
Approving referents			**Disapproving referents**		
… might approve of me meditating most days in the next 7 days (N = 191)			… might disapprove of me meditating most days in the next 7 days (N = 191)		
Roommates/Friends	87	45	Roommates/Friends	66	34
Roommate	36	18	Roommate	41	21
Friend	31	16	Friend	15	7
Teammate	10	5	Teammate	–	–
Girlfriend	8	4	Girlfriend	–	–
Boyfriend	4	2	Boyfriend	–	–

(Continued)
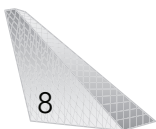
Table 3
Continued

Salient referents	n	%	Salient referents	n	%
Approving referents			**Disapproving referents**		
… might approve of me meditating most days in the next 7 days (N = 191)			… might disapprove of me meditating most days in the next 7 days (N = 191)		
Peers	–	–	Peers	8	4
Cadets	–	–	Cadets	4	2
Family	40	20	Family	10	5
Family	10	5	Family	2	1
Parents	26	13	Parents	8	4
Parents	9	4	Parents	3	1
Mom/Mother	15	7	Mom/Mother	2	1
Dad/Father	2	1	Dad/Father	3	1
Sister	3	1	Sister	–	–
Brother	1	0.5	Brother	–	–
Faculty	24	12	Faculty	19	9
Teacher/Instructor	12	6	Teacher/Instructor	19	9
Center for enhanced performance	8	4	Center for enhanced performance	–	–
Coach	5	2	Coach	–	–
Spiritual leaders	14	7	Spiritual leaders	–	–
Yoga club/Instructor	8	4	Yoga club/Instruct	–	–
Religious leader	6	3	Religious leader	–	–
Military leader	5	2	Military leader	8	4
Team leader	3	1	Team leader	–	–
TAC officer	2	1	TAC officer	5	3
Officers	–	–	Officers	3	1
No one	–	–	No one	55	28

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100%, since participants could list multiple answers.

time. Facilitators included either *Having Time/Less To Do* (31%, n = 61) or *Scheduling Time For It* (38%, n = 73) which included responses such as "having more free time" and "deliberate scheduling of it." Conversely, *Having No Time/Having Things To Do* (71%, n = 138) was by far identified as the greatest barrier to meditating with responses such as "lack of time" and "homework requirements" (Table 4).

Table 4

Salient Circumstances for Meditating Most Days in the Next Seven Days

Salient circumstances	n	%	Salient circumstances	n	%
Facilitators			**Barriers**		
… might make it easier to meditate most days in the next 7 days (N = 191)			… might make it more difficult to meditate most days in the next 7 days (N = 191)		
Having time	35	18	Not having time	56	29
Having free/spare time	35	18	Having no time/free time	33	16
Not being busy	0	–	Being busy	23	12
Having less to do	26	13	Having things to do	82	42
Having less homework	20	10	Having homework	27	14
Having less tasks/obligations	6	3	Having tasks/obligations	13	6
			Having schoolwork	25	13
			Having school	11	5
			Having tests/WPR's	9	4
			Having sports	5	2
			Having papers	4	2
			Having a Thayer Week	4	2
Scheduling time/resources	73	38			
Scheduling it	28	14			
Setting aside time for it	26	13			
Having a reminder	11	5			
Waking up earlier/doing it in the morning	3	1			
Doing it before bed	2	1			
Adding it to a class or having designated times	3	1			
Having a conducive space	35	18	Not having a conducive space	28	14
Having a quiet space	24	12	Not having a quiet space	12	6
Having alone space	14	7	Not having an alone space	7	3
Having a space	4	2	Not having a space	0	–
Not having people around	1	0.5	Being around people	10	5
Having a support or accountability group	9	4			
Being able to ignore social media	2	1	Having distractions	11	5
			Being tired	5	2

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100%, since participants could list multiple answers.

Discussion

This study was the first to examine future officers' beliefs about meditation. Because meditation has been shown to be an effective character and virtue cultivating behavior (Kreplin et al., 2018; Luberto et al., 2018; Upton, 2017) and training academies share a common mission of developing leaders of character, understanding the beliefs these future officers hold about meditation should inform character education and program planning so as to increase the likelihood of behavior acquisition. Using the RAA as a guiding framework, beliefs related attitudes, norms, and behavioral control associated with meditating most days over the next 7 days were elicited. Because our study used a proven theory-based approach, education and intervention efforts based on these findings are likely to be effective (Steinmetz et al., 2016).

Our quantitative analysis of mindfulness' relationship with character revealed a strong and statistically significant correlation. This finding provides support for the suggestion that meditation is character and virtue forming by way of emotion regulation and mindfulness (Luberto et al., 2018). Because meditation enhances mindfulness, it can be an effective way to create the mental states that underlie moral character traits (Upton, 2017).

Our salient belief elicitation uncovered several top-of-the-mind consequences, referents, and circumstances that could influence future officers' decision to meditate. Participants identified advantages of meditation including greater relaxation, reduced stress, and improved focus that is consistent with empirical research showing meditation's ability to reduce stress and promote relaxation (Goyal et al., 2014; Hepner et al., 2022), and increase attention control (Hepner et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2007, 2015). Notably absent from participants' responses are the prosocial effects of meditation (Kreplin et al., 2018; Luberto et al., 2018). Advantages and disadvantages (will take time) elicited from the current study are strikingly similar to other meditation belief elicitations with college students (Lederer & Middlestadt, 2014) and high school students (Erbe et al., 2020). It is likely that with increasing numbers of individuals practicing meditation (Black et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2018) and more research being done on the behavior (Baminiwatta & Solangaarachchi, 2021) people are becoming more aware of meditation's benefits.

Many participants considered their roommates or friends as people who would approve of their meditating while the second largest group of "approvers" were family members followed by staff and faculty. Notably, the largest number of identified disapprovers was also roommates or friends along with a third category of disapprovers being staff and faculty who were also identified as approvers. These findings diverge from the meditation belief elicitation study with high school students being that unsurprisingly roommates are never identified as a referent but also a larger percentage considered family as approvers and a smaller percentage identified friends as approvers (Erbe et al., 2020). Our findings were, however, more similar to findings from the study with college students with respect to friends as approvers (although roommates were not identified) and family members (Lederer & Middlestadt, 2014). The divergent findings may be due to high school students' families being a more immediate social context while college students are with their friends much more frequently. Also, cadets are more likely to identify their roommates as either an approver or disapprover than college students due to having roommates all 4 years at the academy. It is noteworthy that cadets in the current study identified staff and faculty as approvers while some also identified staff and faculty as disapprovers given a recent study finding among cadets that their injunctive norms related to meditation or their perception that others think they should or should not meditate is a strong predictor of their meditation intention (Erbe et al., 2022).

Time was the most salient circumstance identified by participants that could either facilitate or create a barrier to their usage of meditation and was also considered the greatest disadvantage. This finding is consistent with meditation belief elicitation studies (Erbe et al., 2020; Lederer & Middlestadt, 2014) and a study investigating barriers to meditation practice (Williams et al., 2012). Participants did, however, offer the strategy of scheduling time to meditate as a means to overcome the time circumstance, which was also a strategy identified in the previous meditation belief elicitation studies (Erbe et al., 2020; Lederer & Middlestadt, 2014). Strategies for overcoming behavioral obstacles have been found in elicitation studies examining other behaviors (Middlestadt, 2012) and can provide solutions that the study population deems feasible. Enabling cadets to schedule time for meditation, adding it to scheduled activities such as classes or training, helping them see that even short doses of meditation consistently can have a positive effect (Kirby et al., 2021) may be helpful ways to overcome the time barrier.

The current study is not without limitations. A small, specific study sample was used and therefore results may not be generalizable to future officers at other training academies. Small sample sizes are, however, appropriate for elicitation studies (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010). The current study does provide a framework and model for researchers at other training academies interested in promoting meditation usage as a character cultivating tool among their future officers. Also, questions used in the present study did not undergo additional validity testing, but they were developed using RAA procedures (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010) and were used in prior research examining meditation beliefs (Erbe et al., 2020; Lederer & Middlestadt, 2014).

Conclusions

Meditation has been shown to be an effective character cultivating behavior (Kreplin et al., 2018; Luberto et al., 2018; Upton, 2017) that training academies whose central mission is to develop leaders of character should help their future officers acquire to better accomplish that mission. Findings from the current study can inform character education and intervention efforts toward that end. Cadets perceive meditation to have benefits such as reduced stress, increased relaxation, and improved focus, which could be strengthened by sharing these benefits with future officers but should also understand that meditation can improve their emotion regulation and can enhance prosocial behavior as well. This information can be shared through character education and psychology courses. Cadets do see meditation as socially acceptable but view some peers and staff and faculty as disapproving of meditation. It is important that cadets perceive important others in their social environment as positive about meditation due to injunctive norms regarding meditation being an important predictor of their intention to meditate (Erbe et al., 2022). This could be accomplished by having meditation education and experiential programs for staff and faculty. For example, the United States Military Academy at West Point hosts a meditation retreat for staff and faculty and offers meditation session throughout the year approximately once per week. Finally, helping cadets see that meditation can have positive effects even in small doses (Kirby et al., 2021), enabling them to schedule time to meditate, and adding it to classes and training may increase the likelihood of cadets meditating. Equipping future officers with the practice of meditation can better enable service academies to accomplish their mission and help them become the leaders of character they are meant to be.

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