


Experiences of Female Athletes in Managing Psychological Pressures from Social and Family Expectations

Khadijeh. Irandoust^{1*} 

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Sport Sciences, Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: irandoust@soc.ikiu.ac.ir

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the psychological pressures faced by female athletes in managing the expectations of family and society, focusing on how they cope with these challenges.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed, using semi-structured interviews to collect data from 29 female athletes. Participants were selected from various sports disciplines in Iran, with ages ranging from 18 to 35 years. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to the athletes' experiences of psychological pressure, social support, and the intersection of personal aspirations with familial and societal expectations. The interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached.

Findings: The findings revealed three primary themes: (1) Social Support: Athletes with strong family and social networks reported better coping mechanisms, though conflicting family expectations sometimes led to increased stress; (2) Mental Toughness: Female athletes with higher mental toughness showed greater resilience to external pressures, which helped them balance athletic and personal responsibilities; (3) Tension Between Personal and Familial Expectations: Many athletes experienced a conflict between pursuing their athletic goals and fulfilling family roles, particularly in contexts where societal norms prioritized family over career ambitions. These pressures were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which added additional stress to already demanding circumstances.

Conclusion: Female athletes face complex psychological pressures from both societal and familial expectations, which can impact their mental well-being and performance. The findings suggest the importance of social support and mental toughness in coping with these pressures. Further interventions and strategies should focus on strengthening social support networks, building mental resilience, and addressing societal norms that hinder female athletes' ability to balance their athletic careers and personal lives.

Keywords: Female athletes, psychological pressures, social support, mental toughness, societal expectations, familial expectations, qualitative study.

1. Introduction

Athletes, particularly women, face unique challenges in managing the psychological pressures of their sport, especially when compounded by societal and family expectations. These pressures often extend beyond the athletic arena, affecting their mental well-being, performance, and overall life satisfaction. The relationship between external expectations and internal coping mechanisms has been the subject of numerous studies, yet the experiences of female athletes in navigating the intersection of sport, family, and societal norms remain underexplored. (Santos-Rocha, 2024; Taheri et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2020)

Research has shown that athletes are often subjected to heightened levels of psychological stress due to expectations from various stakeholders, including coaches, peers, and, importantly, family members (Donohue et al., 2014). For female athletes, these pressures are frequently compounded by societal norms that emphasize gender roles, often dictating how they should balance athletic success with traditional roles in family and society (Oh, 2023). According to Milistedt et al. (2021), young athletes, particularly females, experience pressures to conform to both athletic and social ideals, creating a dual burden of performance and personal expectations (Milistedt et al., 2021). The effects of these pressures are not only seen in performance outcomes but also in the athletes' mental health, where stress and anxiety can negatively affect both social relationships and athletic performance (Brandão et al., 2021).

Social support has been identified as a crucial factor in buffering the negative effects of these psychological pressures. A study by Cao et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of social networks in supporting athletes through distressing situations, with family often playing a central role in providing emotional and practical support (Cao et al., 2021). However, the dynamics of this support can be complex, especially when family expectations create a conflict between personal ambitions and familial duties. This conflict can lead to feelings of guilt and stress, which may, in turn, impact the athlete's performance and overall mental health (Katagami et al., 2020). Female athletes, in particular, often face an additional layer of societal scrutiny regarding their roles as caregivers, partners, and daughters, further intensifying the pressures they experience (Mira et al., 2023).

Moreover, the role of mental toughness in coping with external stressors cannot be understated. Mental toughness,

a trait that encompasses resilience, self-belief, and the ability to thrive under pressure, is a key determinant of how athletes cope with the psychological demands of their sport (Akoğlu, 2024). Athletes with higher levels of mental toughness tend to exhibit better emotional regulation and performance under pressure, making them more likely to successfully manage external expectations (Collins et al., 2022). While male athletes have been the focus of much of this research, there is a growing need to understand how female athletes employ mental toughness to navigate the complex pressures they face, especially within the context of family and societal expectations (Kuok et al., 2021).

In addition to the challenges posed by family and societal pressures, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new layer of stress, disrupting athletes' routines and exacerbating feelings of isolation and uncertainty (Rajabian et al., 2022). The pandemic has highlighted the critical role of social support networks, with athletes relying on family, coaches, and teammates for emotional support and motivation during this difficult time (Collins et al., 2022). For many female athletes, the pandemic underscored the delicate balance they must strike between athletic pursuits and family responsibilities, with some reporting increased anxiety and stress as a result of competing demands (Rahpeyma et al., 2024).

The psychological toll of balancing athletic careers with societal and family expectations is not only a concern for individual well-being but also for long-term career sustainability. Research by Liu (2023) and Eskandarnejhad et al. (2021) suggests that the mental health of athletes, particularly women, is closely linked to their ability to cope with these external pressures (Eskandarnejhad et al., 2021; Liu, 2023). Effective coping mechanisms, such as emotional regulation, social support, and resilience, are critical to managing stress and maintaining a positive mental state. However, the specific coping strategies employed by female athletes in response to familial and societal pressures have not been sufficiently explored, particularly in non-Western contexts (Eskandarnejhad et al., 2021).

Several key factors are considered in this study, including the impact of social support networks, the role of family dynamics, and the ways in which female athletes cope with stress and pressure. The importance of social networks has been emphasized in previous research (Pambudi, 2022), with many athletes relying on family and close friends for emotional and practical support. However, when family expectations conflict with personal goals, these relationships can become sources of stress rather than support (Katagami

et al., 2020). The tension between personal and familial expectations is especially prevalent in collectivist cultures, where family bonds are central to social identity and individual well-being (Liu, 2023).

The study will also explore the role of mental toughness in managing psychological pressure. As Akoğlu (2024) suggests, mental toughness can help athletes maintain focus and resilience in the face of external challenges. For female athletes, who often face additional societal pressure, cultivating mental toughness can be particularly important in preserving mental well-being and achieving athletic success (Akoğlu, 2024). However, this study seeks to understand the nuances of mental toughness in the context of family and societal expectations, particularly in a non-Western setting, where cultural influences may shape how athletes perceive and respond to pressure.

Furthermore, the concept of work-life balance is critical in understanding the experiences of female athletes. Many athletes, particularly in family-oriented cultures, report difficulty balancing the demands of their sport with family obligations, which can contribute to stress and burnout (Rahpeyma et al., 2024). Understanding how female athletes in Iran manage these competing demands can provide valuable insights into the broader challenges faced by women in sports worldwide. In response to these gaps in the literature, this study aims to explore the experiences of female athletes in managing psychological pressures stemming from societal and family expectations.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study design and Participant

This study adopted a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of female athletes in managing the psychological pressures resulting from social and family expectations. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for a rich exploration of personal experiences and the meanings individuals attach to those experiences, which is essential for understanding complex psychological phenomena. The research specifically targeted female athletes, as they are often subject to unique societal and familial expectations, particularly in conservative cultural contexts.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 29 female athletes from Qazvin, Iran. Participants were carefully chosen based on criteria that included active participation in competitive sports at either the amateur or professional level, and the ability to reflect on and articulate

personal experiences regarding the pressures of social and familial expectations. The sample included athletes from various sports disciplines, ranging from individual sports (e.g., tennis, swimming) to team sports (e.g., volleyball, basketball), in order to capture a variety of perspectives. The participants were aged between 18 and 35 years, with varying levels of experience in their respective sports, ranging from 3 to 15 years. Additionally, the sample was selected to represent athletes from different socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels, and family structures, providing a broad understanding of how different types of pressures are experienced and managed.

2.2. Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method chosen for its flexibility and ability to explore the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to guide the conversation with a set of core questions while also permitting participants to share their views freely and in-depth. This approach was particularly valuable for investigating complex psychological phenomena, as it enabled the athletes to express themselves in their own words while providing structure to ensure that all relevant topics were covered.

The interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and reviewed by experts in sports psychology and qualitative research to ensure its validity. The questions focused on key themes such as the perceived social and family expectations placed on the athletes, the psychological impact of these pressures, the coping strategies employed to manage them, and how the athletes balanced the demands of sports with family obligations and personal aspirations.

Interviews were conducted individually in quiet, private settings to maintain confidentiality and create an environment conducive to open communication. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, ensuring an accurate record of the data for subsequent analysis. The data collection process continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews, and the responses began to repeat themselves, indicating that the sample size was adequate for addressing the research questions.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using NVivo software, which is commonly used for managing and analyzing qualitative data. The analysis followed a thematic approach, which involved identifying and interpreting patterns and themes that emerged from the interview transcripts. The first step in the analysis process involved transcribing the interviews verbatim to ensure an accurate representation of the participants' responses. The researcher then familiarized themselves with the data by reading through the transcripts multiple times, gaining a sense of the overall content and meaning.

Initial coding involved identifying meaningful segments of text that related to the research questions. These segments, such as phrases or sentences, were coded to capture key ideas and concepts related to the psychological pressures and coping strategies of the female athletes. NVivo software facilitated this process by allowing the researcher to organize the data into nodes that represented these themes. Once the initial codes were applied, the researcher began developing broader thematic categories by grouping related codes together. These themes were refined as the analysis progressed, and new insights emerged from the data.

Thematic categories were developed based on the frequency and significance of the codes, as well as their relevance to the research questions. Common themes that emerged from the data included the impact of family support, the experience of social stigma, and the use of self-care strategies. Throughout the process, the researcher continued to revisit the data, ensuring that the themes accurately represented the participants' experiences and the research objectives.

Data collection and analysis continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new insights or themes were identified in the final interviews. This indicated that the data collected was sufficient to answer the research questions. NVivo software played a key role in organizing the data and identifying relationships between themes, which enhanced the overall analysis and interpretation of the findings.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 29 female athletes, ranging in age from 18 to 35 years. The majority of the participants (n=17, 58.6%) were between 20 and 25 years old, while 10 participants (34.5%) were aged 26 to 30, and 2 participants (6.9%) were in the 31 to 35 age range. In terms of sport type, the sample was diverse, with 16 athletes (55.2%) participating in individual sports such as tennis, swimming, and athletics, while 13 participants (44.8%) were involved in team sports, including volleyball, basketball, and handball. Regarding educational background, most participants (n=21, 72.4%) had completed at least some level of higher education, with 8 athletes (27.6%) having high school diplomas. The athletes' sporting experience varied, with 14 participants (48.3%) having 3 to 5 years of experience, 10 participants (34.5%) having 6 to 10 years, and 5 participants (17.2%) with more than 10 years of competitive experience. The sample also reflected diversity in family structure: 12 participants (41.4%) lived in nuclear families, while 17 participants (58.6%) lived with extended family members, including parents and/or grandparents.

Table 1

Summary of Qualitative Analysis Results

Category	Subcategory	Concepts
Psychological Pressures	Social Expectations	- Societal standards for success - Gender roles in sports - Media portrayal of female athletes - Social stigma - Public scrutiny
	Family Expectations	- Parental pressure to succeed - Family support in sports - Expectations to balance family duties - Cultural expectations for women - Generational differences in family support
	Self-Expectations	- Personal goals in sports - Internal pressure to perform - Fear of failure - Perfectionism

Coping Mechanisms	Emotional Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Self-criticism- Seeking social support- Emotional regulation- Expressing feelings- Distraction techniques- Self-soothing
	Cognitive Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Reframing negative thoughts- Focusing on intrinsic motivation- Mental rehearsal- Goal setting
	Physical Coping Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Developing positive self-talk- Engaging in relaxation exercises- Physical activity to release stress- Mind-body practices like yoga- Rest and recovery
Impact on Well-Being	Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Deep breathing techniques- Stress levels- Anxiety management- Depression symptoms- Feelings of inadequacy- Burnout
	Social Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Social isolation- Impact on relationships- Balancing social life with sports- Loss of social activities- Support from peers
	Performance in Sport	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Decreased performance under pressure- Performance anxiety- Lack of focus during competition- Motivation levels
Work-Life Balance	Balancing Family and Sports	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Confidence in sports- Time management skills- Family support for training- Pressure to fulfill family roles- Delegating responsibilities- Guilt about neglecting family
	Balancing Personal Life and Sports	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Sacrificing personal time- Managing social obligations- Impact on friendships- Strain on romantic relationships- Need for personal space
	Work Commitments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Managing job alongside sport- Lack of time for both roles- Job flexibility- Employer expectations- Financial stability concerns

3.1. Psychological Pressures

The athletes described multiple forms of psychological pressures stemming from societal and family expectations, as well as internal self-expectations. In terms of social expectations, several athletes reported feeling societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and the media's portrayal of female athletes. As one participant noted, "The media always shows male athletes as heroes, and as a woman, you feel like you're constantly fighting for recognition." This societal pressure was closely linked to the family expectations. Many athletes revealed that their

families had strong expectations regarding their performance and the balance between their athletic careers and family duties. One athlete mentioned, "My parents are proud of my achievements, but they always remind me that family comes first, and I need to take care of everyone." Furthermore, athletes expressed significant self-expectations, with a strong sense of personal responsibility to succeed. As another athlete shared, "I push myself to excel because I have set high goals for myself, but sometimes it feels like too much."

3.2. Coping Mechanisms

In coping with these pressures, athletes identified a range of strategies that they employed to manage stress and maintain their well-being. Emotional coping strategies were frequently mentioned, with many athletes seeking social support from their peers, coaches, or close friends. “Talking to my coach after a tough match really helps me release the tension,” explained one athlete. Many also used emotional regulation techniques, such as mindfulness or keeping a positive attitude, to maintain mental balance. Cognitive coping strategies were also commonly discussed. Athletes talked about using mental techniques like reframing negative thoughts or focusing on intrinsic motivation to counteract the pressure. “I remind myself why I started, not for anyone else, but because I love the sport,” one athlete shared. Another approach involved physical coping strategies, such as engaging in relaxation exercises or yoga. “After a stressful week, I do yoga, it clears my mind and relaxes my body,” another participant noted. These strategies allowed the athletes to better manage their stress and continue their training with a positive mindset.

3.3. Impact on Well-Being

The psychological pressures and coping mechanisms had a significant impact on the athletes’ overall well-being. In terms of mental health, many athletes reported experiencing stress, anxiety, and moments of self-doubt. One athlete reflected, “I feel anxious before competitions, especially when I know my family is watching, I feel like I can’t afford to fail.” Some participants also spoke about the psychological toll of balancing family expectations, which sometimes led to feelings of inadequacy. “When I can’t meet everyone’s expectations, I feel like I’m not good enough, it’s mentally exhausting,” shared another athlete. Athletes also highlighted the social impact of their intense training schedules, often resulting in social isolation or strained relationships. As one participant explained, “I miss out on social events because I have to train, and sometimes I feel disconnected from my friends.” Additionally, the pressures affected their performance in sports. Many athletes mentioned that the psychological load impaired their focus or motivation during competitions. “When I am under pressure from my family or society, I can’t concentrate on the game as I should,” noted one participant.

3.4. Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance emerged as a major challenge for the athletes, particularly in balancing family and sports responsibilities. Several athletes expressed the difficulty of managing their time between intense training sessions and fulfilling family obligations. “I try my best to make time for family, but sometimes it feels like there’s no time left for me,” one participant mentioned. The athletes often felt guilty about not being able to meet family expectations, particularly when they were required to prioritize their sports career over family time. “It’s hard when my family needs me, but I have a competition coming up. I feel torn between my career and my family,” said another athlete. Balancing personal life and sports was also reported as a challenge, with many athletes describing how their athletic careers often meant sacrificing personal time. “I miss seeing my friends because my schedule is always packed with training,” one athlete remarked. The commitment to their sport also sometimes affected their romantic relationships. “It’s difficult to find time for my partner when I’m training so much, and that creates tension,” another participant shared. Some athletes also discussed how work commitments outside of sports complicated their ability to balance both spheres of their lives. One athlete explained, “My job is not flexible, so I have to work extra hours and then rush to training, it’s exhausting.”

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed several critical insights into how female athletes navigate the psychological pressures arising from family and societal expectations. The three primary themes identified—social support, mental toughness, and the tension between personal and familial expectations—provide a detailed understanding of the challenges these athletes face and how they cope with these pressures.

Firstly, the role of social support emerged as a key factor in the participants’ ability to manage stress and pressure. Athletes with strong social support networks, particularly from family members and close friends, reported feeling more resilient in the face of external pressures. This finding aligns with previous studies that emphasize the protective role of social support in reducing stress and enhancing athletes’ psychological well-being (Cao et al., 2021). The importance of family support is particularly notable in collectivist cultures, where family ties are integral to an individual’s sense of identity and well-being (Liu, 2023).

Many participants in the present study noted that while their families provided essential emotional support, they also faced conflicting pressures from their families to prioritize familial duties over athletic careers. This conflict highlights the complexity of social support systems for female athletes, as family expectations can sometimes become sources of stress rather than relief (Katagami et al., 2020).

Moreover, the study found that mental toughness played a critical role in the participants' ability to cope with external pressures. Athletes with higher levels of mental toughness appeared to be more adept at managing the psychological demands of balancing sport and family expectations. These findings support previous research, which underscores the importance of mental toughness in enhancing resilience and emotional regulation under stress (Akoğlu, 2024). Mental toughness has been linked to better performance and well-being among athletes, as it enables them to stay focused and motivated despite challenges (Kuok et al., 2021). For the participants in this study, mental toughness appeared to buffer the emotional impact of societal pressures, helping them remain committed to their athletic goals despite the competing demands of family life.

Another key theme that emerged from the data was the tension between personal aspirations and familial expectations. This theme aligns with findings from other studies that suggest female athletes often experience unique challenges when trying to reconcile their athletic ambitions with societal and familial norms (Oliveira et al., 2022). In many cases, participants reported feelings of guilt or stress when their athletic careers conflicted with familial responsibilities, such as caring for children or fulfilling traditional gender roles. This conflict was especially pronounced in the Iranian cultural context, where gender roles tend to be more rigid and expectations for women's involvement in family life are often prioritized over personal aspirations (Rajabian et al., 2022). Female athletes in this study often expressed a sense of sacrifice, noting that their athletic pursuits were sometimes viewed as secondary to their duties as daughters, wives, and mothers. This finding is consistent with literature on the unique pressures faced by female athletes, who are often required to perform in both public and private spheres (Milistedt et al., 2021).

Additionally, the study found that societal expectations surrounding gender roles often compounded the pressure experienced by female athletes. Participants noted that they were frequently subjected to societal scrutiny regarding their appearance, behavior, and choices, particularly when it came to balancing sport with family life. These pressures reflect

the broader cultural expectations placed on women, which often conflict with the demands of high-level athletic performance. The study's findings support previous research that highlights the societal double standard faced by female athletes, who are expected to be both physically competitive and conform to traditional gender roles (Moustakas & Kalina, 2021). The tension between these conflicting expectations can lead to significant psychological strain, as athletes feel torn between meeting societal standards and pursuing their athletic goals.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of complexity to the athletes' experiences, exacerbating the already existing pressures of balancing sport and family life. As noted in recent studies, the pandemic significantly disrupted athletes' routines, leading to increased stress and anxiety about the future of their careers and health (Rajabian et al., 2022). Participants in this study reported feelings of isolation and heightened stress during the pandemic, particularly as they faced additional familial obligations and limited access to training facilities. This finding aligns with previous research, which has documented the psychological toll of the pandemic on athletes, especially in terms of disrupted training and social isolation (Collins et al., 2022). For female athletes, the pandemic not only disrupted their athletic careers but also intensified the societal and familial expectations they were already grappling with.

According to the findings, it is clear that female athletes face a complex web of psychological pressures from both familial and societal expectations. The importance of social support, mental toughness, and coping strategies in managing these pressures cannot be overstated. However, the conflicting demands of athletic careers and family life create a unique set of challenges that require targeted interventions and support mechanisms.

5. Limitations and Suggestions

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of female athletes in managing psychological pressures, there are several limitations that should be considered. One limitation is the sample size, which consisted of 29 participants from a specific region in Iran, making it difficult to generalize the findings to female athletes from different cultural backgrounds or regions. Future studies could expand the sample size and include athletes from different countries and sports to increase the generalizability of the results. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data through semi-structured

interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias or recall bias. Although the interviews provided rich, qualitative data, there may have been limitations in the participants' ability to fully articulate their experiences due to cultural or personal constraints. Additionally, the study did not explore the impact of other factors, such as financial stress or career transitions, on the athletes' psychological well-being. Future research could investigate these additional factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the pressures faced by female athletes.

Future research should aim to build on the findings of this study by examining the experiences of female athletes across a broader range of cultural contexts. While this study focused on female athletes in Iran, it is important to explore how athletes from different regions and cultures experience the pressures of family and societal expectations. Comparative studies that include athletes from various countries could provide valuable insights into the role of culture in shaping athletes' coping mechanisms and psychological well-being. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of gender and the intersectionality of various factors such as age, race, and socioeconomic status in shaping the experiences of female athletes. Investigating how these multiple factors interact could provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by female athletes and inform targeted interventions.

Another avenue for future research could involve exploring the effectiveness of specific interventions aimed at helping female athletes cope with psychological pressures. Programs focused on enhancing mental toughness, building social support networks, and addressing gender-based societal pressures could be developed and tested in future studies. Longitudinal studies could also explore how these interventions impact athletes' well-being and performance over time. Furthermore, future research could examine the role of coaches, sports organizations, and family members in supporting female athletes and reducing the psychological strain caused by competing demands.

In light of the findings from this study, it is crucial that sports organizations, coaches, and families recognize the unique pressures faced by female athletes. One important practical suggestion is the development of tailored support systems that address the specific needs of female athletes. Sports organizations should provide psychological support services, such as counseling or mental health workshops, to help athletes cope with stress and anxiety. Coaches can play a pivotal role in fostering a supportive environment where athletes feel comfortable discussing their mental health

challenges. Additionally, family members should be educated about the demands of an athletic career and the importance of balancing family responsibilities with personal aspirations. By creating a supportive and understanding environment, both within sports organizations and at home, female athletes may be better equipped to manage the psychological pressures they face.

Furthermore, efforts should be made to address the societal expectations that contribute to the psychological strain on female athletes. Raising awareness about the challenges faced by female athletes, particularly in terms of balancing sport and family life, can help reduce stigma and create a more supportive environment for these athletes. Public campaigns and media representation of female athletes can also help challenge traditional gender roles and promote the idea that women can excel in both their athletic careers and their personal lives. Finally, promoting mental toughness training and resilience-building activities as part of regular athlete development programs could provide female athletes with the tools they need to cope with the pressures of sport, family, and society.

Authors' Contributions

Not applicable.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, I have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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