

Safe Havens and the Exclusion of Trans Bodies within Zimbabwe's LGBTQIA+ Communities



Research Article

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Citation: Rumbidzai Musonza (2025), Safe Havens and the Exclusion of Trans Bodies within Zimbabwe's LGBTQIA+ Communities. IJHRGJS V1 (01)

Received: 04/04/ 2025. **Published:** 14/03/ 2026

Abstract

Introduction: Queer spaces have historically been envisioned as sanctuaries of respite from violence and discrimination for those living outside the heterosexual matrix. However, in Zimbabwe, where the LGBTQIA+ community suffers erasure on structural, cultural, and legal fronts, these spaces reproduce the systems of exclusion they sought to challenge. This research interrogates the concept of queer 'safe' space in Zimbabwe, focusing on how trans and gender-nonconforming individuals are rendered invisible within these spaces that are framed as safe.

Methods: This paper contends that the struggle for LGBTQIA+ rights in Zimbabwe is bound to fail without reframing inclusivity to be fundamentally centred on trans and non-binary identities. By critically addressing the spatial manifestations of identity and power, this paper outlines strategies for transforming those spaces from affirming into liberating realms that challenge oppression from beyond and within.

Results: It is argued that that the struggle for LGBTQIA+ rights in Zimbabwe cannot be achieved without an inclusion framework that focuses on trans and non-binary identities.

Conclusion: The author accounts how borders can be queered through the critical mediation of identity, power, space, and oppression, so that both queer and non-queer spaces become liberatory.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, LGBTQIA+, queer spaces, trans exclusion, heteropatriarchy, African queer theory

Introduction

The word *ngochani* is usually a mark for the LGBTQAI+ community in Zimbabwe, and this is a derogatory term that symbolises a status of “other” in the heteropatriarchal landscape. This is only one of the biggest challenges faced by this population, and the existence of the LGBTQIA+ community in Zimbabwe is silenced politically, socially, and even economically. In the middle of rejection, the queer community has created alternative spaces where the idea is to be liberated and imagine safe spaces of belonging. These spaces, whether physical gatherings or symbolic communities, are intended to resist heteronormative dominance and provide mental and emotional refuge for LGBTQ + individuals.

Despite the efforts to create these safe spaces, trans individuals have faced exclusion in spaces where they should have found refuge. This implies that queer spaces in Zimbabwe are not free from the socio-cultural systems that plague the broader society. While queer spaces are often assumed to be inclusive by opposing mainstream norms, they can become sites of replicated patriarchy and rigid identity politics. Although often rejected in theory, the idea that gender and sexuality should conform to binary structures persists in practice, creating barriers for those whose identities challenge even the LGBTQIA+ norm.

This paper interrogates the internal contradictions of Zimbabwean queer spaces by asking: who are they truly safe for, and who remains on the

margins? Drawing on African feminist and queer theoretical frameworks, this study argues that without a conscious queering of queer spaces that challenge hierarchy and binary thinking, these supposed sanctuaries risk replicating the same systems of exclusion they were meant to dismantle.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design rooted in African feminist and queer theory. It applies an intersectional lens to examine how space, identity, and power are experienced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in Zimbabwe, focusing on trans and gender non-conforming people. This research foregrounds lived experiences through a sociocultural and theoretical approach that challenges heteronormative and mainstream queer narratives. Conceptually, it draws from Davids et al. (2020), Oswin (2008), and Raj (2002), who explored how space is negotiated and resisted within queer geographies. The design aims to surface silenced voices and tensions within so-called "safe" queer spaces.

Data Collection

Data were collected through three interconnected sources: auto-ethnographic reflections which are personal, analytical, and critical thoughts by the researcher and participants during interviews; critical literature; and 20 informal

conversations with queer-identifying individuals. The researcher, deeply embedded in activist circles, used reflective journaling as a form of ethno-autobiography to capture lived experiences of exclusion and solidarity (Davids et al., 2020). Informal interviews with trans and gender non-conforming individuals enriched the findings, allowing for unfiltered perspectives in non-structured, consent-based exchanges. The literature consulted spanned academic texts, grey literature, and activist writings on queerness in Africa (Raj, 2002; Oswin, 2008). These sources collectively provided thick, context-specific data that situate queer identity in Zimbabwe within broader systems of cultural, political, and spatial marginalisation.

Demographic Diversity

The participants in this study reflected a diverse cross-section of Zimbabwe's queer community. Through informal conversations with six trans men, eight trans women, four gay men, and two lesbians, the study engaged with a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations. In addition to these informal engagements, some participants also participated in formal interviews. The sample included both urban and rural queer individuals, allowing for reflection on how geography shapes access to the community, safety, and expression. Urban participants often spoke about navigating visibility and activism in more connected but surveillance-heavy spaces, whereas rural participants highlighted isolation,

resilience, and the need for discretion. The participants' ages ranged from their early 20s to their late 40s, capturing a range of generational experiences, from young queer people still navigating **identity formation to older individuals with years of lived** resistance. This demographic mix allowed for a textured understanding of queer life in Zimbabwe across place, age and identity.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically, guided by African feminist and queer theoretical frameworks. Reflections and informal conversations were coded inductively to highlight the recurring themes of exclusion, power dynamics, and solidarity. Analytical categories emerged around contested spaces, gender nonconformity, and the performative nature of inclusion within queer communities. Literature was used not only as background but also as an analytical tool, with works such as Oswin (2008) and Raj (2002) helping to theorise the spatial politics of queerness. The analysis remained reflexive, centring the positionality of the researcher and foregrounding the emotional and political labour embedded in queer lived realities.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics were central to this study, especially given the vulnerability of the queer and trans communities in Zimbabwe. All informal conversations were conducted with verbal consent, and anonymity was prioritised. No identifying information was recorded or published without the explicit

permission of the patient. The researcher, being part of the community, ensured a harm-reduction approach by respecting the boundaries and maintaining confidentiality. Auto-ethnographic reflections were critically assessed to avoid overexposure or unintentional harm to individuals or spaces described (Davids et al., 2020). This research followed a relational ethic of care rooted in feminist ethics that prioritises responsibility, accountability, and reciprocity over traditional institutional procedures.

Study Limitations

This research does not aim for generalisability but rather for depth and nuance. As a qualitative study grounded in lived experiences, the findings are context-specific and subjective. Although the data collected informally are rich, they limit reproducibility. The researcher's embedded position, while offering deep insights, may introduce bias. Additionally, the focus on Zimbabwean urban queer circles means that rural experiences are less represented. The absence of formal interviews also limits the external validation. Nonetheless, these limitations are acknowledged as part of a methodology that values voice, context, and relational knowledge over universalist claims (Raj, 2002; Oswin, 2008).

Results

While largely underground or through informal networks, Zimbabwean queer spaces are celebrated within activist circles as sanctuaries of expression

and resistance. These spaces include support groups, private events, online forums, and advocacy networks intended to foster safety, solidarity and resistance. However, safety in these spaces is often contingent upon how "palatable" or "legible" one's queerness is to the dominant narratives within the community.

For instance, cisgender gay men and lesbians often take up visible leadership roles or dominate narratives of oppression, while trans and nonbinary people are expected to adapt to an assumed LGBT norm. Trans individuals noted that even within "inclusive" spaces, there were moments of microaggressions, misgendering, or expectations to adhere to binary expressions of sex. One trans activist expressed this frustration:

"It's like, they want to talk about trans rights on the surface, but deep down they are uncomfortable when you walk into a room with a beard and a dress."

This illustrates a recurrent theme: visibility in queer spaces does not always translate to belonging. These environments often fail to address the deeper structural biases inherited from heteropatriarchal conditioning.

Despite being organised around anti-normativity, queer spaces in Zimbabwe sometimes unconsciously replicate patriarchal dynamics. Cisgender gay men are often elevated to symbolic or actual leadership, reproducing gendered power hierarchies in which more "masculine-presenting" individuals are listened to and centred

more than feminine or nonbinary people. Feminine queer men and trans women described being hypersexualized or dismissed as being dramatic. Trans-masculine individuals felt largely invisible or tokenised at community events.

This replication of hierarchy reveals an uncomfortable truth: queerness alone does not absolve individuals or spaces from systemic behaviours. One genderqueer participant described this as *“patriarchy in drag”*, a performance of inclusion that masks deep-seated exclusion.

There were also instances where resources such as healthcare access, leadership opportunities, or media representation were unequally distributed, favouring those whose queerness is seen as more socially “acceptable.” While these inequities mimic the mainstream’s marginalisation, they are often brushed aside within the community in the name of unity or fear of exposing internal conflict.

Spiritual spaces are another contested domain. Participants recalled exclusion not only from churches but also from queer religious spaces that lean into Christian doctrine without questioning gender and sexual binaries. Although alternative queer-friendly spaces of worship exist, they often reflect broader societal hierarchies, prioritising narratives of “tolerance” over radical inclusion.

Many queer individuals described navigating “double rejection” being seen as a sin in religious communities

and as too spiritual or conservative in secular queer spaces. A nonbinary person from Bulawayo shared the following:

“There is no room to talk about God in queer spaces. It’s like you’re selling out by even bringing up faith.”

This speaks to a tension where African spirituality, often reclaimed in queer discourse, is selectively embraced in ways that may continue to exclude queer bodies perceived as “too religious” or “too transgressive.”

Despite these systemic challenges, queer individuals in Zimbabwe have created dynamic and adaptable survival networks. These range from intimate living arrangements to chosen families, WhatsApp support groups, and pop-up art collectives, among others. These spaces often emerge out of necessity, away from public scrutiny, but they offer more than safety; they are also sites of radical creativity and of joy.

One trans woman shared how her apartment became an unofficial drop-in centre for queer youth who had been kicked out of their homes:

“We did not have much, but we had each other. I would cook sadza and soup for seven people with just \$2, and we would talk about our dreams while charging phones off a car battery.”

Such stories illustrate that even under precarity, queer people can reimagine care and kinship. These micro-resistances respond to exclusion and

refuse to let heteropatriarchy define the boundaries of possibility.

Another significant theme is the internalisation of societal norms, which manifests as identity policing in queer circles. Trans and nonbinary individuals, especially those who challenge visual or performative expectations of gender, often report being dismissed or questioned. One gender-nonconforming activist recounted the following:

“I have been asked to tone it down because donors are coming. Suddenly, my queerness became a PR risk. It’s like we’re all equal until money is on the table.”

These dynamics are intensified by external pressures, particularly in advocacy spaces where funding and visibility are at stake. Organizations tend to streamline their representation of the community to appeal to donors, often sidelining identities that don’t “fit the narrative.” This leads to tokenism, erasure, and the reinforcement of respectability politics.

Moreover, language and terminology have become battlegrounds. Some participants felt alienated by academic or Western frameworks of queerness that did not reflect local understandings. As one intersex participant pointed out:

“I do not need to be explained through a Western lens to exist. I just want space to be me without having to justify it.”

This desire to exist without performance or translation highlights

the tension between global queer discourse and the lived realities of Africa.

In conversations across the community, there is a collective yearning for spaces that do not just tolerate but actively celebrate multiplicity. The idea of “*queering queer spaces*” emerged repeatedly not just as a critique but as an aspiration. Participants imagined communities that could hold contradictions and complexities without resorting to hierarchy.

Several young queer people spoke of wanting to start their organisations, ones that prioritise intersectionality and include people with disabilities, sex workers, undocumented migrants, and others often left out of the mainstream LGBTIQ+ narrative. There were also calls for more cultural work, film, literature, and dance as means of self-representation and healing for Indigenous peoples.

One participant stated, “We need joy, too”. *“Not just surviving or fighting. I want a queer festival with music and food, where I can just be.”*

There is an emerging recognition that safety is not just the absence of harm but the presence of care, recognition, and freedom. These reimaginations are already happening in small pockets through communal gardens, open mic nights, poetry spaces, and collaborative art exhibitions. These sites, however temporary or fragile, offer glimpses into what radically inclusive queer spaces could look like in Zimbabwe.

Finally, the results point to a complex relationship between the community and institutions (NGOs, churches, embassies, etc.) that position themselves as allies. While support from these spaces often brings resources and visibility, it can also reproduce the colonial dynamics of saviourism, set rigid funding priorities, and demand conformity.

Some activists described feeling as though they had to perform trauma to access support or that their activism had become tied to grant cycles rather than real transformation. One person remarked:

"I shouldn't have to bleed in public for you to see my humanity."

Others noted that allyship sometimes feels conditional, like "progressive" institutions that fly the rainbow flag during Pride month but remain silent when members of the community are arrested or violated. These contradictions reinforce the need for queer-led, queer-centred spaces that are not beholden to external validation.

Discussion: Queering the Frame – Rethinking Safe Spaces in Zimbabwe's Queer Landscape (1058 words)

These findings highlight the urgent need to rethink what constitutes a "safe space" for LGBTIQ+ individuals in Zimbabwe. While "queer spaces" are often framed as sites of refuge and affirmation, this research shows that they can also become arenas of exclusion and replication of dominant systems, particularly heteropatriarchy and cisnormativity. The contradiction

lies in the performance of inclusivity while perpetuating boundaries that alienate the very people these spaces claim to serve. This discussion explores these tensions in light of the existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Oswin (2008) dispels the notion of queer spaces as natural, encouraging us to view them as sites of struggle influenced by power dynamics. This is similar to how trans and nonbinary people in Zimbabwe experience community spaces, which are regularly policed for not being in line with a narrow and palatable form of queerness. Although queer spaces ought to be fluid, expansive, and transgressive, they are often characterised by respectability politics and institutional gatekeeping. In Zimbabwe, queer geography is disciplined through surveillance, criminalisation, and precarity. The idea that queer individuals need to hide or condense to fit into "safer" forms of queerness is like what Cork, (2005) has described as the "spatial disciplining of sexuality." Rather than subverting heteronormative power, these internal disciplining strategies often reproduce it, unknowingly affirming the same violence they intend to subvert. This failure to arrive at the radical potential of queerness, specifically with regard to inclusivity, raises a fundamental question: Is queer space queer if it marginalises or erases trans voices? To examine this, we are forced to call

upon the ontological ground of queerness as disruption and refusal of fixed identity categories, binaries, and hierarchies.

The idea of “queering queer spaces” becomes necessary when patriarchy, and particularly toxic masculinity, finds its way into LGBTIQ+ circles. This research illustrates that exclusion is not always imposed externally; it is often reinforced internally through performance-based belonging, gender-policing, and classism. The notion that one must “look queer enough” or “tone down” their queerness to protect the organisation’s image reflects how deeply embedded heteropatriarchal standards are, even in alternative communities.

As Raj (2002) notes, heteropatriarchy does not vanish within queer communities; it morphs. Masculine-presenting bodies, even when queer, may still be granted more space and authority than feminine or trans bodies. This reinforces a hierarchy in which trans women, feminine gay men, and gender-nonconforming individuals must fight for visibility and legitimacy, even within movements that claim to fight for their rights.

This layered marginalization points to what Hooks (1984) described as “the enemy within.” Without radical self-interrogation, even marginalised groups can reproduce the oppressions they resist. If queer space is to remain radical, it must be intentionally inclusive, not simply of identities, but of lived experiences, intersectionality, and differing modes of resistance.

Zimbabwe’s socio-political environment makes safety an ongoing issue. Participants’ accounts of creating informal support structures, such as shared housing, mutual aid, and social media networks, demonstrate how queer people cultivate safety through relationships, not just physical locations. These “found spaces” represent what Massey (1994) calls “progressive sense of place” defined not by boundaries but by connections, movement, and transformation.

However, even in these organic spaces, safety is conditional. Visibility can invite violence, but invisibility breeds isolation. For many trans and intersex individuals, the price of belonging in queer spaces is silence or compromise. This paradox challenges the static notion of a safe space, proposing it as dynamic, shifting, and situational.

This speaks to José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “queer utopia” (2009), which views queerness not just as identity but as a horizontal way of imagining a world not yet realised. Participants’ dreams of joy, festivals, art, and spiritual inclusion provide glimpses of such utopias. Though fragile and fleeting, they signal possibilities beyond survival, towards flourishing.

The presence of donor funding in queer organisations introduces both opportunities and constraints. On the one hand, external support can amplify voices, fund urgent work, and legitimise marginalised identities. However, as participants noted, this

support often comes with strings attached, such as rigid expectations, predefined success metrics, and a preference for “palatable” narratives.

This results in curated visibility, where trauma is commodified and diversity is sanitised. Queer organisations may prioritise middle-class, urban, cisgender gay, and lesbian individuals because they fit donor frameworks, leaving out those whose lives are “messier” or less legible to Western funders, such as trans sex workers, rural queer youth, or nonbinary migrants.

This dynamic echoes Spivak’s (1988) caution about “speaking for the subaltern.” Even within the community, representation is skewed towards those with institutional access and linguistic capital. If queerness is truly about disrupting hierarchy, then representation must move beyond inclusion and toward the redistribution of resources, power, and narrative authority.

This research also complicates the relationship between queerness and faith. While mainstream churches often position queer bodies as sinful or abominable, alternative faith spaces are emerging that reimagine inclusivity. Although these spaces are still limited, they allow queer people to engage with spirituality without erasure or shame.

However, even within these spaces, participants noted the persistence of patriarchal structures. Masculine-presenting individuals often dominate leadership, and women and trans

people may still be expected to defer. This highlights a broader issue: liberation must be holistic in nature. Reclaiming queer spirituality requires not only space but also the deconstruction of hierarchies within that space.

As Davids et al. (2020) argue, faith spaces can be sites of healing and harm. The challenge lies in creating liturgies, rituals, and theological discourses that affirm queer lives not as exceptions or “others”, but as integral to the divine.

Many participants pushed back against the idea that queerness is a Western import, a narrative often weaponised by political and religious leaders to justify exclusion. By rooting their experiences in African realities, family structures, spiritual beliefs, and communal survival strategies, queer Zimbabweans are actively constructing a *decolonial* queerness.

This is critical. African queerness cannot simply adopt Western frameworks to understand it. It must emerge from lived histories, collective memories, and the languages of the continent. Whether through Shona and Ndebele terms reclaimed from derogatory use or through new idioms that name queer experience on its terms, there is a movement toward self-definition.

This effort also involves creating space for ambiguity. Not all participants identified with the LGBTIQ+ acronym. Some preferred local metaphors or simply “being different.” Respecting these expressions without imposing

rigid labels is part of queering the idea of queerness.

Recommendations

This research provides insights into the multifaceted and contradictory manner in which queer and trans people in Zimbabwe negotiate the inclusion, exclusion, and contestation within spaces that are constructed as "safe." Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made to inform future practice and research that aims to enhance understanding and give voice to more inclusive and liberatory queer imaginaries in the Zimbabwean and African contexts at large.

1. Centre Trans and Gender Non-conforming Voices in Queer Research

Future research must actively centre the voices and lived experiences of trans and gender non-conforming people, not at the periphery or symbolically, but as central knowledge producers. This entails developing research that disrupts tokenism and instead structures methods around trans positionality, bodies, and language. Scholars need to explore how gender non-conforming individuals negotiate the everyday geographies of visibility, safety, and belonging. This will also dismantle hierarchies within queer spaces that reinstate heteropatriarchal logics under new terms.

2. Utilize creative and decolonial methodologies

Scholars on African queer lives must depart from stifling academic conventions and embrace community-engaged, creative, and locally embedded epistemological approaches. Ethno-autobiographic reflection, storytelling, oral histories, visual ethnography, and participatory arts-based methods can grant depth of understanding while facilitating autonomy and self-representation. Scholars and researchers must resist Western academic traditions' extractive practices by co-creating knowledge with communities rather than studying them as "subjects." This also allows room for healing-centred research practice that honours both trauma and joy in queer lived realities.

Research on African queer lives must move beyond rigid academic norms and adopt methods rooted in community, creativity, and local ways of knowing. Approaches such as ethno-autobiographic reflection (where researchers draw from their own lived experiences), storytelling, oral histories, visual ethnography, and participatory arts-based practices provide richer and more authentic insights into queer realities. These methods not only deepen understanding but also prioritize the agency and voices of queer individuals, allowing them to represent themselves rather than be spoken about. Importantly, this shift challenges the extractive nature of traditional Western academic practices by

encouraging researchers to co-create knowledge in collaboration with the communities. This makes space for research that is not only informative but also healing, honouring both the trauma and the joy that shape queer lived experiences in African contexts.

3. Reimagining the idea of a safe space.

Practitioners, especially in LGBTQIA+ activism, must critically consider what is meant by "safe spaces" and for whom they are safe. The research illustrates that safety is too frequently conditional, politicised, and unevenly distributed, especially along the lines of gender identity.

Organisations must move toward more reflexive models of community engagement, in which safety is not presumed but negotiated. Trans inclusion, accountability for harm, and intersectional programming must be the cornerstones of any safe space model, not afterthoughts.

4. Intersectional policy advocacy

Advocacy and activism efforts must be intersectional in their approach, understanding how queerness intersects with class, race, geography, disability, and religion. Research can support this by mapping how such intersections play out in terms of access to services, legal protection, healthcare, and mobility. For example, trans people in rural areas or informal

settlements face compounded marginalisation. Therefore, policy development must be informed by intersectional, detailed data and not by general LGBTQIA+ models that deny differences.

5. Document intra-community dynamics

There is a gap in the literature on tensions, exclusions, and power struggles within queer African activist communities.

Future researchers must focus on these internal dynamics without fear of weakening solidarity. Instead, this can make movements more robust because it creates room for accountability and more authentic solidarity. Scholars

who critically explore micro-aggressions, gatekeeping, colorism, classism, and performative allyship within activist spaces can spark dialogue on how to enact solidarity in more ethical and radical ways.

6. Build queer African knowledge archives

A recurring limitation of African LGBTQIA+ research is the under-documentation of localised knowledge, especially if it is not in English or disseminated through academic avenues. One agenda for future research is to build queer African archives that include zines, WhatsApp messages, love letters, community manifestos, and performance art. These can be both historical archives and tools for future generations of activists

and researchers seeking culturally specific knowledge.

This study explored the contradictions within queer spaces in Zimbabwe, particularly how they simultaneously function as sanctuaries and sites of exclusion. By centring the lived realities of trans, intersex, and gender-nonconforming individuals, the research reveals the limitations of current conceptualisations of "safe spaces" and highlights the urgent need to queer these frameworks. Rather than assuming inherent safety in LGBTIQ+ spaces, this study underscores how heteropatriarchal norms, class stratification, and donor-driven narratives continue to shape access, legitimacy, and visibility within these spaces.

The notion of queerness, at its most radical, is about the refusal of binaries, hierarchies, and the politics of assimilation. However, many queer spaces in Zimbabwe mirror the structures they seek to resist, privileging those who conform to normative expectations of identity, appearance, or activism. This reveals a crucial gap between the imagined utopia of queer inclusion and the complex lived experiences on the ground. Trans individuals are not simply left behind; they are often actively excluded, policed, or made hyper-visible in ways that commodify their pain while ignoring their agency and joy.

Simultaneously, the research reveals powerful forms of resistance and resilience. Queer individuals continue to forge safety through kinship

networks, shared resources and creative expression. From pop-up safe houses to WhatsApp prayer groups, and from art collectives to informal support systems, these everyday acts of care challenge static notions of space and position safety as relational and dynamic.

This study calls for a reimagination of queer liberation in the Zimbabwean context. It must be decolonial, intersectional, and led by those most marginalised in the community. It must reject performative inclusion in favour of structural transformation and the redistribution of power, resources, and representation. Crucially, it must center joy, not just trauma, imagination, not just survival.

As queer activism on the continent evolves, it is vital to shift from visibility for its own sake to visibility that is accountable, grounded and collectively transformative. "Queering queer spaces" is not simply a critique; it is an invitation. An invitation to reflect, reconfigure, and rebuild spaces where all queer lives are not just tolerated or protected but celebrated and nurtured.

Acknowledgements

No human or animal studies have been conducted in this study. This is a conceptual paper that discusses existing literature on Safe Havens and the Exclusion of Trans Bodies within Zimbabwe's LGBTIQ+ Communities

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that

may have inappropriately influenced the writing of this paper.

Funding

No financial support was received for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Data Availability

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No new data were created or analysed in this study; therefore, data sharing was not applicable to this article.

Disclaimer

This article reflects the author's own opinion, and not that of any institution or funder

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