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ON *TARGET*: THE MIGRATION OF PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS FROM *PEOPLE* TO *THE NEW YORKER*

Introduction

A Case of Genre Migration

On August 22, 2005, for the first time in the 80-year history of *The New Yorker* magazine, a single advertiser – the *Target* discount store chain – sponsored an entire issue of the quintessential magazine of American cultural elites. Although some mainstream magazines, such as *Time* and *Life*, had published single-sponsored issues before, and *Target* had been the sole sponsor of an issue of *People* magazine, the audacity of this advertising/editorial collaboration turned this promotional ploy into a shocking event; and not simply because many readers of *The New Yorker* started to worry that the magazine may be blurring the line between editorial content and commercialism. *Target* and *The New Yorker* is indeed an odd match. Compared to the stylish brands that usually advertise in *The New Yorker* (such as Louis Vuitton, Prada and Burberry), *Target* – born as a low-end department store – looks rather vulgar. The absence of a *Target* store in Manhattan further stresses the oddity of the match. If they want to shop at *Target*, Manhattan's fashionistas and well-heeled New Yorkers have to travel to the boroughs¹, if not the suburbs.

Born as a low-end department store, the *Target* chain is an interesting case of genre migration in itself. It was founded in 1962 by the Dayton brothers, the latest generation of a family of Minnesota department-store magnates who feared that upstart discounters such as Sam Walton, who was founding his *Wal-Mart* empire in

¹ There are five *Target* stores in three New York city boroughs; namely, the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens, and fifty-three *Target* stores in the metropolitan New York area, including Long Island and New Jersey. Moreover, a *Target* store is scheduled to open some time in 2009 in Harlem (Manhattan), an event that could be seen as a first step toward the total “conquest” of the City of New York. With its first Manhattan store still under construction, in September 2008, *Target* teased its prospective Manhattan customers by providing them with “sneak peeks” of its newer designer collections. From September 12th through September 15th *Target* staged “Bullseye Bodegas”, where customers could shop – so its website advertised – for “chic deals” at four different Manhattan locations; Midtown, Union Square, SoHo and West Broadway East Village.

Arkansas, would move into the Twin Cities and undercut them. From the very beginning, in order to cope with the competition, the Daytons strived to make their department store chain stand out in a crowd by giving it the image of an exalted place in the discount realm. By the mid-1980s, *Target* executives began to describe their market niche as “upscale discount” (Rowley, 8) and, with this vision in mind, decided to start creeping into the Northeast of the United States. They did so with two main promotional tools; namely, by launching the “C’est Target” ad campaign², and by having top-name designers design lines of trendy, attractive houseware and furniture. As Marc Gobé maintains (166-67), a clever marketing strategy allowed *Target*, a Midwestern –and hence “by definition” unsophisticated– discount store chain, to claim first place in shepherding American shoppers toward a retailing future that is both fashionable and affordable. *Target*’s “chic and cheap” formula resulted in the successful broadening of its market share as well as, and most importantly, the strata of economic and social classes who shop at its stores.

Target has revealed itself as the most innovative and interesting mass-marketer retailer. It positions itself as a culturally attuned discounter, and its merchandise takes the high road with style while preserving the affordability of its discounting competitors. [...] Target has positioned itself as the hip and creative alternative to discount retail.

The successful “conquest” of the snobbish Northeast – including the metropolitan New York area, where the first store opened in 1997 – induced *Target* into attempting what many think is the impossible. In the last four years, *Target* has focused its efforts on making discount acceptable to the sophisticated urban New York elites and hence socio-cultural elites all over the United States. It has been doing so by using ever new promotional ploys, such as the opening of so-called pop-up stores (which remain in business only a few weeks), the decoration of Manhattan office buildings with oversize *Target* billboards, and last but not least, the single-sponsored issue of *The New Yorker*, object of my analysis³.

The August 22, 2005 issue of *The New Yorker* carried eighteen advertising pages by *Target*, the entire advertising space available in an issue of the magazine,

² The “C’est Target” ad campaign introduced the now-famous “Tar-zhay” nickname of the chain, in the faux French pronunciation preferred by middle and upper-income clients (Mui, 2006).

³ And *Target*’s promotional devices did not end with the August 22, 2005 single-sponsored issue of *The New Yorker*. To give only an example, almost a year later, on July 27, 2006 *Target* staged an impressive fall fashion show at Rockefeller Center featuring its own brand in addition to its popular labels Liz Lange, Mossimo, and Isaac Mizrahi. It was described as “a vertical fashion show” in which acrobats stepped down a runaway on the side of 620 Fifth Avenue, one of the buildings surrounding the ice rink at Rockefeller Center. Simultaneously, at the base of the vertical catwalk, the show featured a more conventional horizontal runaway covered with red and white bull’s-eye logos where regular, upright models showed off fall clothing and accessories. Incidentally, but perhaps not coincidentally, “vertical” also hints at the cross-section of the market that was represented at the fashion show.

including the cover, the table of contents and the credits (where the editor acknowledges the illustrators for their contributions), and also the flap that wraps the cover of the issue to be sold on newsstands. The *Target* ads even supplanted the characteristic mini-ads from mail-order marketers that typically fill small spaces in the back of the magazine. All these ads had the form of illustrations – without any written text – by well-known artists such as Milton Glaser, Robert Risko and Ruben Toledo, to mention only a few. The artists were given specific instructions that they had to follow; their illustrations had to have New York themes, use the *Target* bull's-eye logo and three colors only: red and white (the colors of the logo) and black. Moreover, as mentioned before, the illustrations had to be free of any type of caption, so that they would look different enough from the cartoons that traditionally appear on the pages of *The New Yorker*.

Aims and Methods

Object of my analysis are the print advertisements in the August 22, 2005 sole-advertiser issue of *The New Yorker*, considered as a collection, that is to say as a single commercial message or, in semiotic terms, as a single communicative event. More specifically, I focus on the *representational meaning* of this collection of ads, one of the three fundamental meanings which, from the viewpoint of Kress and van Leeuwen's visual social semiotics (1996, 40), a multimodal text must convey in order to function as a comprehensive system of communication.

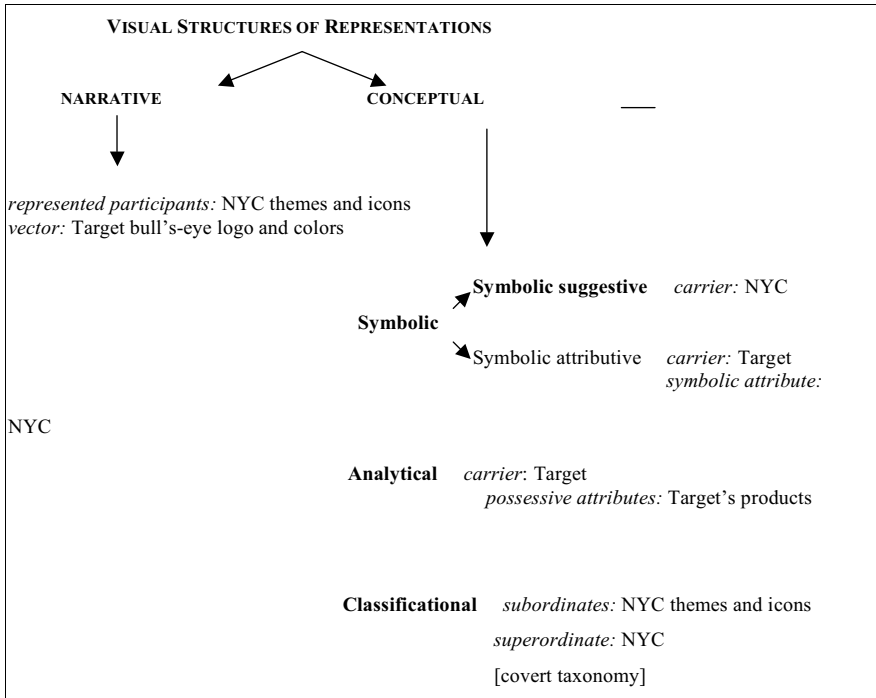
The social semiotics of visual communication centers on the description of images (and other forms of visual communication), the analysis of what can be said and done with images, and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted (Jewitt, Oyama, 134). To do so, visual social semiotics follows the theories of Michael Halliday's functional grammar. Hence, it is functionalist in the sense that it sees visual resources as having being developed to perform simultaneously three specific kinds of semiotic work, or "metafunctions"⁴. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 40-41) extended this idea to images, often opting to use a slightly different terminology: "representational meaning" instead of "ideational metafunction;" "interactive meaning" instead of "interpersonal metafunction;" and "compositional meaning" instead of "textual metafunction." Although there would be a lot to say also about the interactive and compositional meanings – which are also present – I concentrate my attention on the representational meaning because,

⁴ The three specific kinds of semiotic work, or, in Hallidayan terms, "metafunctions," are the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual. Briefly put, the ideational metafunction is the function of creating representations; the interpersonal metafunction is the function of creating interactions between writers and readers, or speakers and listeners, or producers of images and viewers; and the textual metafunction is the function of bringing together the individual fragments of representation and interaction into the kind of wholes we recognize as specific kinds of text, speech, or visual communicative event.

from its perspective, this collection of print ads forms a particularly powerful and multidimensional visual communicative event. The *representational meaning* is mainly conveyed by the (abstract or concrete) *represented participants*, i.e. the people, places and the things depicted in the images (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 46). Thus, I investigate how the visual design of this collection of print ads portrays the interactions and conceptual relations between the represented participants, which, in turn, create a representation of aspects of social constructs in the experiential world.

In its emphasis on the “syntax” of images – rather than their “lexis” – visual social semiotics has contributed new ideas for the visual analysis of representational meaning. From this perspective, what I find particularly compelling is the way in which visual social semiotics applies linguistic syntactical patterns to the analysis of images. As Jewitt and Oyama (141) put it, whereas in time-based semiotic modes such as language, “syntax” is a matter of sequencing order (i.e. word order), in space-based semiotic modes such as images, “syntax” is a matter of spatial relationships, of “where things are” in the semiotic space and of whether or not they are connected through lines, or through colors, shape, and so on. Moving from this assumption, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 43) describe visual syntactic structures in terms of their function of relating the represented participants to each other in meaningful ways. They divide these structures into two distinct types (1996, 79); namely, narrative structures and conceptual structures. *Narrative visual structures of representation* relate participants in terms of “doings” and “happenings,” of the unfolding actions, events, processes of change, or transitory spatial arrangements. *Conceptual visual structures of representation*, on the other hand, present participants in terms of their more generalized, stable or timeless “essence,” in terms of class, or structure, or meaning. In other words, they do not represent participants as doing something but as being something, or meaning something, or belonging to some category, or having certain characteristics or components.

Stemming from these theoretical premises, the aim of my study is twofold. First of all, as mentioned before, I intend to demonstrate the complexity of this collection of print ads at the level of their representational meaning. From this perspective, these ads form a complex and multidimensional visual structure of representation, with coordinated and subordinated narrative and conceptual structures. Because of its complexity and multidimensionality, the visual communicative event created by this collection of ads straddles the two categories of images (narrative and conceptual) that characterize the representational meaning. For this reason, what I propose is a reading of these ads that shows how they form *both* narrative *and* conceptual visual structures of representation. As Graph 1 –which will become clearer in the next section– shows, I believe that here these two types of visual syntactic structures coexist or, rather, they exist in a coordinated relationship.



Graph 1. Main types of representational structure applied to the collection of *Target* print ads from the August 22, 2005 single-sponsored issue of *The New Yorker*

Representational Meaning: The “Syntax” of New York City

In this section I focus on nine selected illustrations from the *Target*-sponsored issue of *The New Yorker*. As anticipated earlier, I will analyze them collectively both as narrative and conceptual representational visual structures, and I will discuss how the two structures coexist, rather than being mutually exclusive. Graph 1 outlines the analysis that follows.

A Narrative Visual Representation

As the representative selection of the eighteen print ads demonstrates (Fig. 1-9)⁵, the illustrations are quite obviously a celebration of New York City and the people who live – and shop – there. As I pointed out in my previous explanation of the theoretical framework that supports my study, each illustration is a *represented participant* within the narrative visual structure it helps create, and displays a New

⁵ The images can be seen in color and in their original format at the following internet address: <http://web.econ.unito.it/gma/cecilia/target.html>

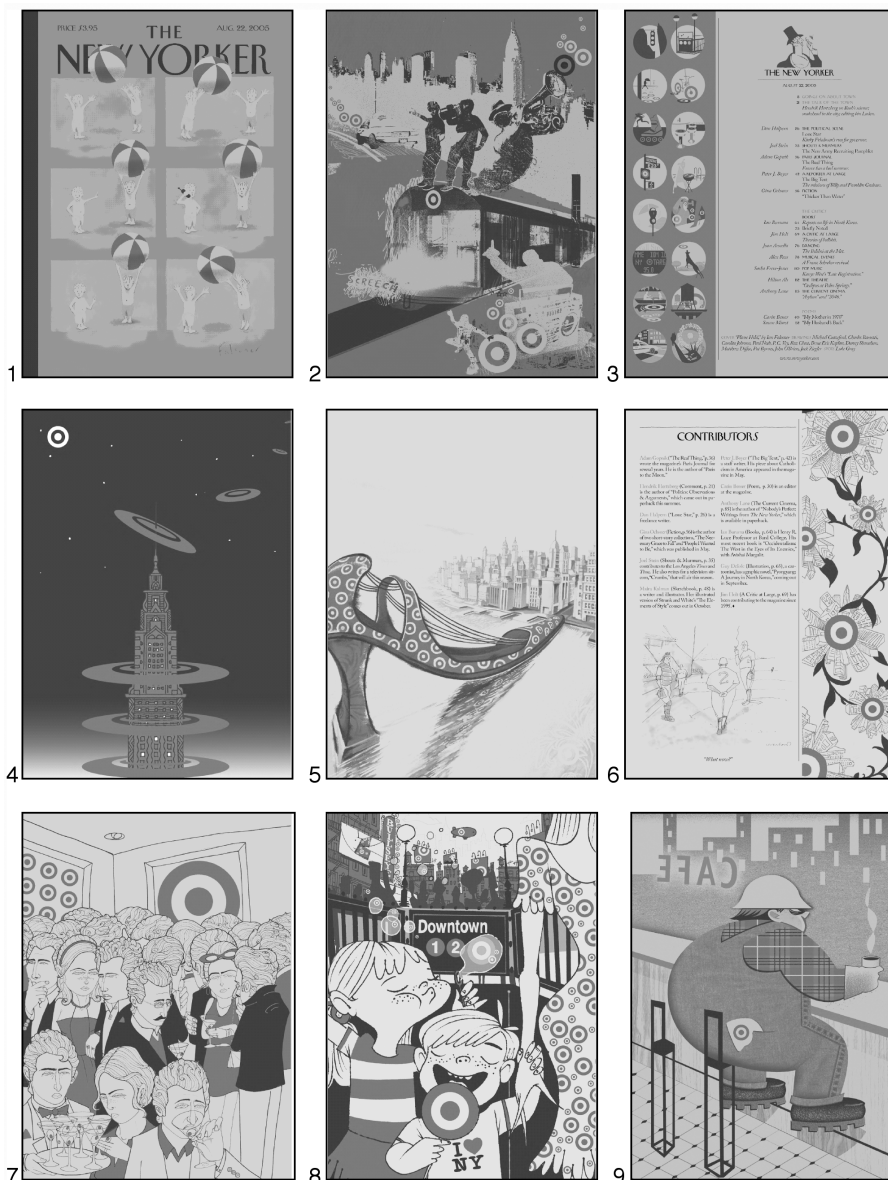
York theme or icon. In addition, from the point of view of social semiotics, a narrative visual structure is recognized by the presence of an element that can be formally defined as *vector*. A vector is a line that connects the represented participants and can be real (as in the case, for instance, of an arrow connecting boxes in a diagram, or the outstretched arms of a person), or imaginary, as in the case of the vector that connects the illustrations object of my analysis. This vector is realized by both *Target* bull's-eye logo and the red and white colors, and it is fused with each represented participant in different ways and to different degrees. When connected by a vector, the represented participants are depicted as *doing* something to or for each other. As a consequence, the vector creates a connection between one illustration and the other, while reinforcing the presentation of each participant – each New York theme or icon – as part of a whole, as part of the same description of New York City and its lifestyle. In doing so, the vector in question also plays the important role of advancing the New York City narrative shown by the illustrations.

Target bull's-eye logo is first introduced, albeit covertly, on the cover of the August 22, 2005 issue of *The New Yorker*, which is illustrated by Ian Falconer and titled “Please Hold” (Fig. 1). Against a yellow background that brings to mind a sandy beach, the illustration portrays a sequence of six different frames in which two young boys are playing with a red and white ball whose shape and colors hint at the vector⁶. Moving on, in order of appearance, selected illustrations (all of them rigorously in red, white and black) are:

- a combination of New York City icons; i.e. the skyline, a cab, the subway, a jazz musician, and street performers with a boom box (Fig. 2);
- a combination of sixteen New York City street and park scenes, each of them seen as if through the lens of a camera; i.e. a traffic light, a subway train, a rainy day, a bicycle secured to a sign post, rollerbladers, the interior of a diner, street signs, a man barbecuing on top of a high-rise building, a street meter, a fashion show catwalk, an electronic road sign, a dog playing in Central Park, a couple rowing on the lake in Central Park, a lifeguard post on a Long Island shore, a cab at a Manhattan intersection, and the Statue of Liberty (Fig. 3);
- a giant game of ring toss, with the *Target* targets piling up around the Empire State Building (Fig. 4);
- a bridge rendered as a shoe (Fig. 5);
- spring blossom in Central Park with *Target*'s logo as pistil and high-rises as petals (Fig. 6);

⁶ Ian Falconer lives in New York City and is a well-known illustrator and set and costume-designer. He is also the author of the popular children's book *Olivia* (New York: Simon&Schuster Children's Publishing, 2000).

- a cocktail party (Fig. 7);
- a mother with two children coming out of a subway station (Fig. 8);
- a construction worker taking a coffee break (Fig. 9)⁷.



⁷ Unlike all the other illustrations, where New York themes or icons are overtly identifiable, as I see it, this illustration comprises two implied intertextual references; namely, Edward Hopper's painting titled "Nighthawks" (1942), and the well-known New York City photograph titled "Construction Workers

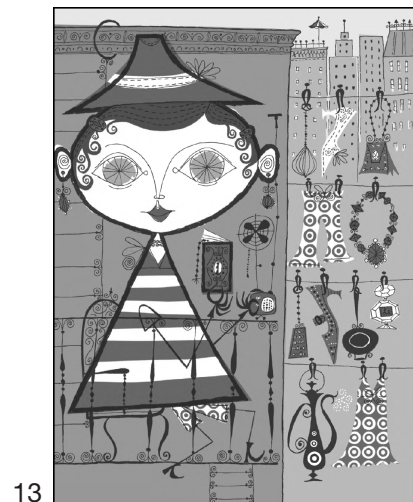
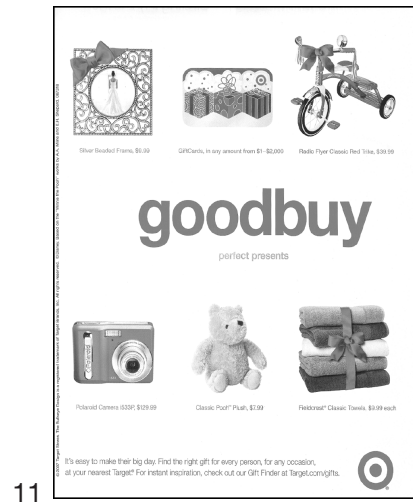
A Conceptual Visual Representation

The narrative visual structure of representation that I have described above combines with conceptual visual structures of representation, structures that do not contain vectors and visually “define” or “analyze” or “classify” people, places, and things. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 79), there are three different types of conceptual visual structures of representation; symbolic, analytical, and classificational. In this complex collection of print ads all three structures are present, even though, as Graph 1 shows, they exist in a subordinate relationship. The *symbolic structures*, which define the meaning or identity of a represented participant (i.e., they reveal what a represented participant *means* or *is*), are without any doubt, dominant. In this type of syntactic visual structures, details tend to be de-emphasized in favor of what could be called “mood” or “atmosphere” of the city of New York. More specifically, here there is a minor *symbolic attributive* structure embedded in a major *symbolic suggestive* structure. Because of its size and conspicuousness, the major structure is the symbolic suggestive one, where there is only one participant, the *carrier*; that is the participant whose meaning or identity emanates from the illustrations (i.e., New York City). Indeed, it is undeniable that even without *Target* as a sponsor these images share the feature of depicting not a specific moment but a generalized essence of the city of New York. In the minor symbolic attributive structure, the identity or meaning of the *carrier* (the *Target* brand) is established by another participant (New York City), which represents the meaning or identity in itself and therefore functions as the *symbolic attribute*.

To go even further in this analysis, one can say that subordinated to these symbolic structures there is an analytical structure as well as a classificational one. Generally speaking, *analytical* structures relate participants to each other in terms of part-whole structures. The analytical process in these ads involves two types of participants; a *carrier* (i.e. the whole, the *Target* brand) and any number of *possessive attributes* (i.e. the parts, the products one can buy from the *Target* store chain), which serve to identify the carrier, and to allow viewers to scrutinize this carrier’s possessive attributes (Kress, van Leeuwen 1996, 90). Finally, even the minor *classificational* structure relates participants to each other in terms of a “kind of”

Lunching on a Crossbeam” (1932). Interestingly enough, *implied* intertextual references (as opposed to either *explicit* or *inferrable* ones) comprise all those passing allusions to other works which seem to have been deliberately contrived by the author of a given work so as to be picked up by the alert and similarly informed reader or viewer (Pope, 246). In other words, this illustration lends itself to two different interpretations. At first blush, the image portrays in the foreground a readily apparent New York icon (perhaps second in popularity only to the firefighter); namely, a construction worker in his workwear (a checkered shirt, a bib overall, work boots, utility gloves, and safety hat), who is drinking a cup of steaming-hot coffee. With more careful scrutiny, one realizes that the image, by referring to the works mentioned above, describes its own intended viewers –members of the sociocultural New York elites.

relation, a taxonomy. In other words, classificational structures bring different people, places, and/or things together to show that they have something in common, that they belong to the same class. In syntactic visual terms, in the classificational structure in question there is a set of participants that play the role of *subordinates* (i.e. the New York themes and icons) with respect to at least one other participant, the *superordinate* (i.e. the city of New York). More specifically, this is an example of *covert taxonomy* (Kress, van Leeuwen 1996, 81) as the overarching category – the *superordinate* – is only inferred from such similarities as the viewer may perceive to exist between the *subordinates*.



Conclusion

Focusing on the representational meaning of this collection of print advertisements (i.e. the representation of the interactions and conceptual relations between the people, places and things depicted), I have attempted to demonstrate the complexity and multidimensionality of the collection, as I believe it combines characteristics of *both* narrative *and* conceptual visual structures of representation. By conducting a social semiotic analysis of the eighteen *Target*-sponsored print ads from the August 22, 2005 issue of *The New Yorker* seen as a single commercial message, I have also tried to shed some light on the transformation of the print advertisement genre when it migrates from a mainstream magazine such as *People* to a magazine that targets socio-cultural elites.

One of the fundamental results of this genre migration is the morphing of the brand *Target* to fit the lifestyle and the worldview of a very specific market segment: the American cultural elites who buy and read *The New Yorker*⁸. Figg. 10-13 further emphasize this point. The present study stemmed from the observation of the oddity of the *Target-The New Yorker* match. Similarly, to conclude, I would like to point out another oddity: the striking difference between the type of *Target* print ads that regularly appear in *People* magazine (Figg. 10-11), and two more *Target* print ads from *The New Yorker* issue. One can observe the low degree of modality – according to the dominant naturalistic criteria – of the female easy rider on a suspension bridge (an embodiment of the quintessential American free spirit; Fig. 12) and, in particular, the low modality of the sophisticated urban female shopper (Fig. 13) as compared to the high degree of modality of both the prospective buyer “Miss Popularity” (Fig. 10) and the photographs of the items – complete with descriptive captions and prices – she will buy from *Target* to give as presents to her friends and acquaintances (Fig. 11).

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⁸ The concept of brands as “cultural sponges” (Klein, 17), capable of soaking up and morphing to different socio-cultural environments, is discussed in Boggio (forthcoming).

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