

Partnership Competences and Barriers in Destination Offer Development

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Abstract: This paper explores perspectives of regional DMOs (Destination management organizations) from selected regions of the Czech Republic on competencies, collaboration, and barriers in selected Czech destinations, linking empirical evidence with contemporary literature in destination management. The study aims to identify the most critical factors that enable or hinder cooperation with an emphasis on destination offer development. By combining recent theoretical insights with data from the questionnaire among DMOs, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of collaborative governance in tourism. It provides practical implications for DMOs, policymakers, and practitioners.

Keywords: Tourism management, destination management, partnership, stakeholder collaboration, destination management organization

JEL Classification: Z30, Z32, Z39

1 Introduction

Tourism destinations represent complex and dynamic systems where multiple stakeholders, including public authorities, private sector entities, local communities, and visitors, interact and influence each other's decisions. The management of such systems, therefore, requires coordination that transcends the capacities of individual organizations. Collaborative governance has become a key concept in this regard, as it allows diverse actors to jointly plan, implement, and evaluate tourism development in a transparent and participatory way (Wan et al., 2022; Sentanu et al., 2023). The absence of such cooperation often leads to fragmented decision-making, duplication of efforts, and unsustainable use of resources (Humsona et al., 2023; Vermeulen-Miltz et al., 2023).

In the literature, a clear distinction is made between destination governance and destination management. *Destination governance* refers to the institutional structures, rules, and processes that define how decisions are made and how various stakeholders interact in the destination (Bichler & Lösch, 2019). It emphasizes the distribution of power, participation, transparency, and accountability. *Destination management*, on the other hand, focuses on the operational coordination and implementation of strategies, policies, and actions that result from governance processes (Laesser et al., 2025). In practice, both dimensions are closely interlinked: governance provides the framework for collaboration and legitimacy, while management ensures the effective realization of shared objectives.

Within this system, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) play a pivotal role. Originally established primarily as marketing agencies, DMOs have evolved into facilitators of governance processes and coordinators of destination management (Erneker et al., 2024; Laesser et al., 2025). Their mission now extends beyond promotion to include strategic planning, partnership development, and balancing diverse stakeholder interests to ensure the sustainable prosperity of the destination (Romão et al., 2021). By linking governance and management functions, DMOs serve as intermediaries that translate strategic visions into coordinated actions.

Effective destination management and governance rely on a set of key competencies. These include strategic leadership, communication and negotiation skills, the ability to facilitate partnerships, and the capacity for innovation and digital transformation (OECD, 2021; Sentanu et al., 2023; Pham et al., 2023). Modern DMOs must also combine traditional marketing expertise with sustainability-oriented thinking and data-driven decision-making. According to Buhalis (2020) and Laesser et al. (2025), the future of destination management lies in integrating digital fluency, stakeholder co-creation, and collaborative governance to enhance resilience and competitiveness.

Nevertheless, cooperation in destination governance is often hindered by barriers such as a lack of trust, limited resources, political influence, poor communication, or divergent stakeholder priorities (Tichá & Farsari, 2020; Vašaničová

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et al., 2022). These obstacles can be reduced through transparent communication, clearly defined roles, and facilitative leadership that promotes fairness and long-term commitment (Bichler & Lösch, 2019; Pham et al., 2023).

Empirical research shows that well-functioning partnerships contribute to more innovative and competitive tourism offers, more efficient resource use, and higher legitimacy among local stakeholders (Keyim, 2018; Pham et al., 2023). However, the relative importance of individual competencies and barriers may differ between destinations, depending on institutional maturity, local governance culture, and the development stage of the tourism system.

The study aims to identify the most critical factors that enable or hinder cooperation with an emphasis on destination offer development. Based on the theoretical insights presented above, the research addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Which competences and partnership factors are perceived as most important by DMOs in selected regions?

RQ2: What are the main barriers to collaboration identified by DMOs?

RQ3: How can the defined competences and barriers be clustered according to their perceived importance?

2 Methods

The empirical part of this study is based on a questionnaire survey conducted among representatives of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in three Czech regions: South Bohemia, the Pilsen Region, and the Vysočina Region. These regions were selected for their geographical proximity, similar tourism structures, and established cooperation in destination development. In total, 18 DMOs participated in the survey. This pilot study focused only on three mentioned regions to test the questionnaire and verify the analytical approach. Future research will extend the survey to include the remaining DMOs in the Czech Republic, allowing for a broader generalization of findings.

The questionnaire was designed to capture perceptions of DMOs regarding key competences and barriers affecting partnership collaboration in destination offer development. It consisted of three sections: evaluation of competences relevant to partnership collaboration, evaluation of barriers that limit cooperation, and one open-ended question allowing respondents to describe additional or underestimated barriers.

Both competences and barriers were assessed on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = not important and 5 = crucial. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate weighted mean values for each item.

To explore the underlying patterns in the data, a k-means cluster analysis was applied separately to competences and barriers. The clustering aimed to identify groups of items that respondents perceived with similar levels of importance. Because all variables were measured on the same 1–5 Likert scale, data standardization was not performed. The analysis was conducted using the Statistica software package (TIBCO Software Inc.).

3 Research results

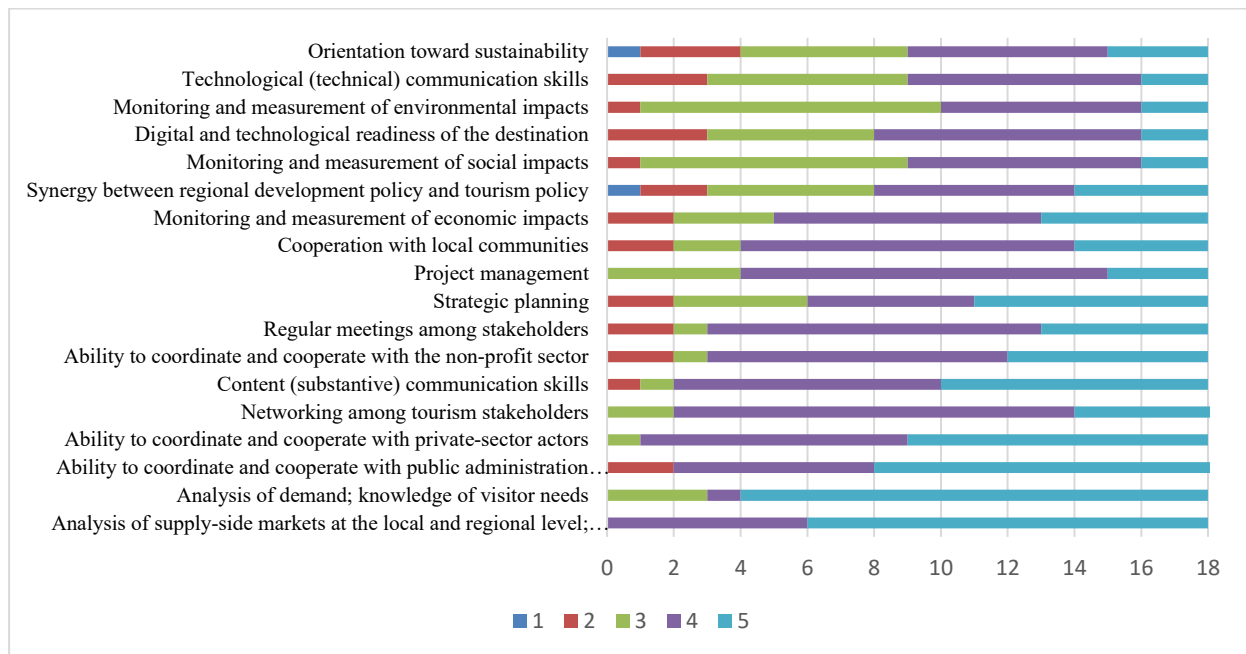
Respondents rated most competences as highly important, with weighted mean values ranging from 3.4 to 4.7. The most essential competences included analysis of supply-side and demand markets, knowledge of local specificities, and coordination with public administration ($M \approx 4.6$ – 4.7). These results highlight the importance of analytical insight and institutional collaboration as the foundation of effective destination governance.

High average ratings were also recorded for cooperation with private and non-profit sectors, networking among tourism stakeholders, and communication skills ($M \approx 4.1$ – 4.4). These findings underline the need for continuous cooperation, stakeholder engagement, and effective communication across institutional boundaries.

Competences such as strategic planning, project management, community collaboration, and monitoring of economic impacts ($M \approx 3.9$) were rated moderately. This suggests that while they are relevant, they are viewed as supporting competences rather than key drivers of partnership success.

Competences associated with sustainability, innovation, and digital readiness including monitoring of social and environmental impacts, technological communication skills, and orientation toward sustainability ($M \approx 3.4$ – 3.6), received the lowest scores. This indicates that although these areas are recognized as emerging priorities, they have not yet reached the same level of strategic importance as analytical or collaborative skills. The distribution of rating of individual competences and factors is visualized in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Rating of Individual Competences and Factors



Source: Elaborated by authors based on conducted questionnaire

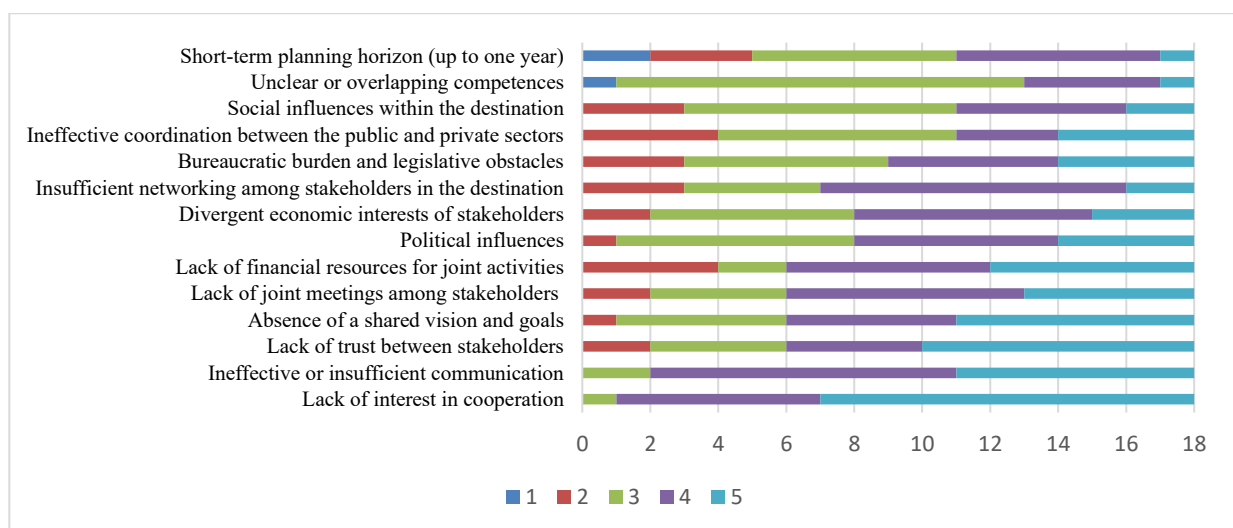
Barriers were generally rated as moderately to highly important, with mean values between 3.1 and 4.6. The most critical barriers were lack of interest in cooperation ($M = 4.56$) and ineffective or insufficient communication ($M = 4.28$), emphasizing that soft factors, such as motivation, trust, and communication, represent the main challenges to partnership collaboration.

Lack of trust and absence of shared vision and goals ($M = 4.00$) were also rated highly, pointing to persistent difficulties in building mutual confidence and shared strategic direction. Moderately significant barriers, including insufficient stakeholder meetings, lack of financial resources, and political influences ($M \approx 3.7$ – 3.8), indicate that organizational and resource constraints further limit the effectiveness of collaboration.

Lower-rated items, such as bureaucratic burdens, unclear competences, and short-term planning horizons ($M \approx 3.1$ – 3.5), reflect systemic and procedural barriers that, while less immediate, undermine long-term coordination and strategic stability.

Overall, the results suggest that the greatest barriers arise not from formal structures or legislation but from relational and communicative gaps among stakeholders. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of ratings for barriers

Figure 2 Rating of Individual Barriers



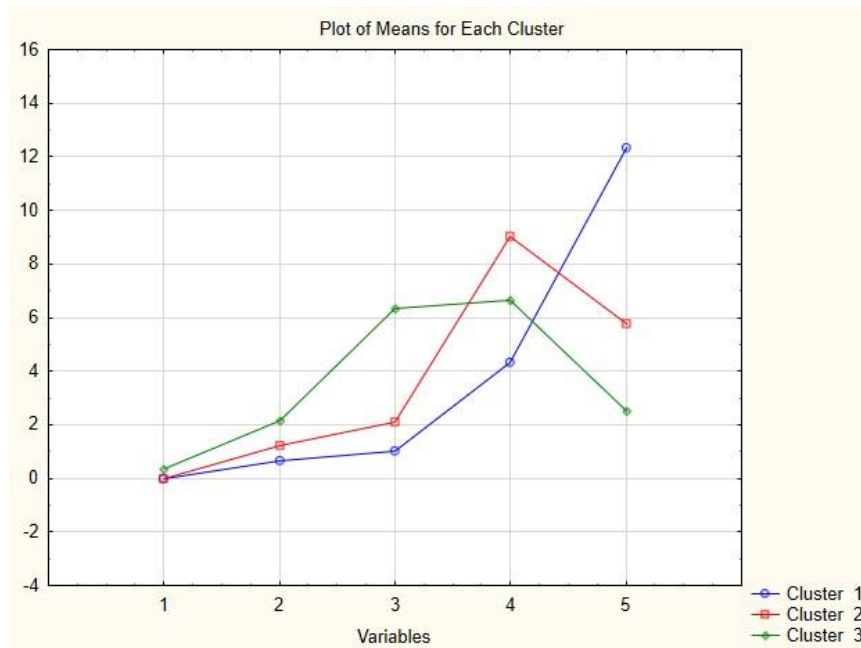
Source: Elaborated by authors based on conducted questionnaire

Next a k-means cluster analysis was conducted to identify groups of competences and barriers with similar perceived levels of importance. Respondents rated each item on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not important, 5 = crucial). The clustering thus reflects shared evaluation patterns rather than predefined thematic categories.

Competence Clusters

The analysis revealed three groups of competences that differ in their rating by the DMOs and thematic focus. The identified clusters and the distribution of ratings within each of them are displayed in the plot of means in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Distribution of Ratings in Revealed Clusters - Competences



Source: Elaborated by authors based

Cluster 1 – Core Analytical and Administrative Competences

This cluster includes analysis of supply and demand markets, knowledge of local specificities, and coordination with public administration.

These competences achieved the highest proportion of “5” ratings, indicating strong consensus among respondents regarding their crucial importance for destination management. They represent the analytical and institutional foundation upon which effective destination governance is built ensuring data-driven planning and alignment with public policy.

Cluster 2 – Collaborative and Managerial Competences

This cluster comprises competences such as networking among tourism stakeholders, communication skills, cooperation with private and non-profit sectors, strategic planning, and project management.

These items were most frequently rated between 4 (“important”) and 5 (“crucial”), suggesting that respondents perceive them as essential for the operational and relational functioning of destination partnerships. The cluster highlights that continuous cooperation, coordination, and mutual understanding among stakeholders are key drivers of destination success.

Cluster 3 – Strategic and Innovative Competences

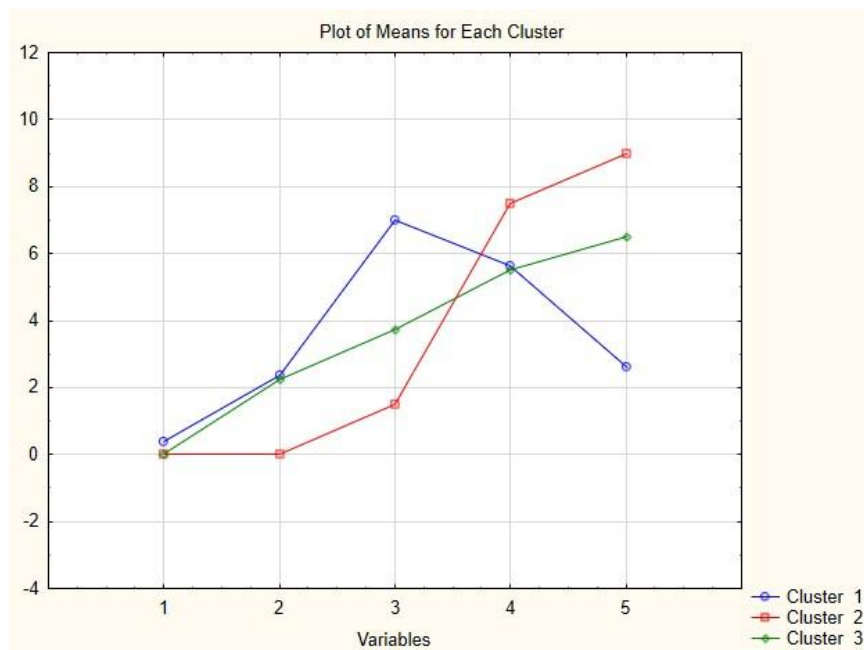
The third cluster includes policy synergy between regional development and tourism, digital readiness, monitoring of social and environmental impacts, and orientation toward sustainability.

These competences received a higher frequency of ratings in the middle of the scale (3–4), indicating that while respondents recognize their relevance, they are not yet seen as critical in everyday practice. This suggests that innovation, technology, and sustainability are viewed as emerging rather than fully established competences in destination management.

Barrier Clusters

Similarly, three clusters of barriers were identified based on perceived importance. Figure 4 presents the plot of means, illustrating the identified clusters and the distribution of ratings across them.

Figure 4 Distribution of Ratings in Revealed Clusters - Barriers



Source: Elaborated by authors

Cluster 1 – Structural and Systemic Barriers

This cluster consists of political influences, bureaucratic burdens, unclear division of competences, and ineffective coordination between public and private sectors.

These barriers were most often rated 3 or 4, indicating that respondents view institutional and governance-related problems as persistent and highly influential factors, limiting effective cooperation.

Cluster 2 – Communication and Engagement Barriers

Due to a lack of interest in cooperation and ineffective communication, this cluster showed the strongest concentration of maximum ratings (“5”), indicating that these two barriers are perceived as the most critical and immediately relevant to partnership functioning. Respondents clearly identified the absence of motivation and poor communication as the most pressing collaboration challenges.

Cluster 3 – Relational and Resource Barriers

This cluster includes lack of trust, absence of shared vision and goals, insufficient stakeholder meetings, and limited financial resources.

Ratings in this cluster were most frequently between 4 and 5, suggesting that trust, shared commitment, and resource availability play a substantial role in shaping cooperation quality, even if their urgency is perceived as slightly lower than direct communication failures.

Underestimated Barriers

Lastly, the respondents were asked in an open question, “Which barriers to cooperation do you consider underestimated?” Three main thematic areas emerged from the respondents’ answers:

Cooperation, Communication, and Trust among Actors – respondents frequently mentioned poor communication, lack of trust, and insufficient understanding of stakeholder roles as persistent yet underestimated obstacles. Personal relations and competitive attitudes were also highlighted as issues that reduce the effectiveness of collaboration.

External and Political-Administrative Influences – answers emphasized the impact of political interference, short-term planning cycles, and bureaucratic complexity, which hinder strategic continuity and the establishment of stable governance frameworks.

Functional Management and Organizational Synergies – respondents noted problems such as unclear competences, weak coordination between public and private sectors, and absence of a unified vision. These issues illustrate that organizational fragmentation and lack of clear leadership remain significant challenges in destination governance.

Overall, the open-ended responses underscore that relational and organizational factors are often underestimated, even though they strongly influence the effectiveness and sustainability of partnership collaboration.

4 Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this pilot study provide a deeper understanding of how Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in the Czech Republic perceive competences and barriers that influence partnership collaboration in destination offer development. In addressing the first research question concerning the competences perceived as most important for partnership collaboration, the results show that DMOs attribute the highest importance to analytical and coordination competences, particularly market analysis, knowledge of local specificities, and cooperation with public administration. These competences represent the analytical and institutional foundations of effective governance, confirming earlier theoretical assumptions about the importance of data-driven and coordinated management practices (Laesser et al., 2025; Pham et al., 2023). In addition, competences related to stakeholder networking, communication, and strategic planning were also viewed as highly relevant, emphasizing the growing role of collaborative and managerial skills in building effective destination partnerships.

At the same time, competences associated with sustainability, innovation, and digital transformation were evaluated as less important, suggesting that these areas, though increasingly discussed in the literature (Buhalis, 2020; OECD, 2021), are still in the early stages of integration into everyday DMO practice. While many organizations have already begun incorporating digital tools and data-driven approaches into their daily operations, digital transformation does not yet receive the same strategic attention as traditional management or coordination competences. This indicates a gap between the theoretical direction of destination governance, which highlights smart and sustainable management approaches, and the operational priorities perceived by practitioners.

The analysis of the data also revealed that the greatest challenges in destination partnerships are not institutional but relational. In line with the second research question, which focused on identifying the main barriers to collaboration, the most critical issues rated by respondents were lack of interest in cooperation, ineffective communication, and limited trust, followed by absence of a shared vision and inconsistent coordination between sectors. These findings suggest that communication and motivation play a more decisive role in shaping collaboration than formal structures or regulations. This confirms that successful destination governance depends on transparent communication, mutual trust, and shared strategic commitment among stakeholders (Bichler & Lösch, 2019; Sentanu et al., 2023). Open-ended responses further revealed that many obstacles, such as political influences, unclear roles, and short-term planning horizons, are often underestimated, even though they significantly affect long-term collaboration.

The k-means cluster analysis provided additional insight into how DMOs group competences and barriers according to their perceived importance thus addressing the third research question. Among competences, three distinct clusters emerged: core analytical and administrative competences, which achieved the highest proportion of maximum ratings; collaborative and managerial competences, characterized by strong agreement on their operational importance; and strategic and innovative competences, which respondents considered moderately significant. A similar pattern was observed among barriers, where communication and engagement barriers (particularly lack of cooperation and communication) were perceived as the most pressing, followed by structural and resource-related barriers. These results illustrate that DMOs differentiate between interpersonal challenges and systemic obstacles, mirroring the dual nature of destination governance, which connects human relationships with institutional coordination (Romão et al., 2021; Laesser et al., 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to the growing discussion on the interrelation between destination governance and destination management. It empirically supports the argument that governance provides legitimacy, participation, and coordination structures, while management translates shared objectives into concrete actions through collaboration, innovation, and communication among stakeholders.

From a managerial point of view, the findings underline the need to strengthen communication, trust-building, and stakeholder engagement mechanisms as essential preconditions for overcoming cooperation barriers. DMOs should also invest in the development of digital, analytical, and sustainability-oriented competences to align operational practice with

modern governance frameworks that emphasize innovation, resilience, and long-term destination competitiveness (Buhalis, 2020; OECD, 2021).

Nevertheless, the research has several limitations. It represents only a pilot phase involving DMOs from three Czech regions: South Bohemia, the Pilsen Region, and the Vysočina Region, also this paper includes only a limited set of questions from the questionnaire focusing on competences and barriers. The results should therefore be interpreted as exploratory, providing initial insights rather than general conclusions. However, the study successfully validated the questionnaire and confirmed its analytical potential.

Future research will expand the survey to include DMOs from all regions of the Czech Republic, which will allow for a more comprehensive analysis of regional variations, governance maturity, and partnership structures. A larger dataset will also enable the use of more advanced statistical methods and a stronger empirical foundation for theoretical generalization.

In summary, the results of this pilot study demonstrate that the effectiveness of destination governance depends on both managerial competencies and the quality of stakeholder relationships. The findings clearly show that the most crucial factors are relational aspects, motivation to cooperate, and the willingness to engage in genuine collaboration among stakeholders. Strengthening mutual trust, improving communication, and fostering innovation and sustainability-oriented skills will therefore be essential for building resilient and collaborative destination management systems in the Czech tourism context.

At the same time, there is a need to develop practical tools and measures to encourage stakeholders to recognize that, even in a competitive market environment, cooperation within the destination can enhance their collective performance and long-term competitiveness. Creating supportive frameworks, joint initiatives, and incentive mechanisms could help shift perceptions from competition toward coopetition, enabling more effective and sustainable destination governance.

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