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## **The Importance of Events as an Integral Part of the Tourism Offer and the Creative Industry: Zlatibor Case Study**

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### ABSTRACT

Events are no longer supplementary experiences in tourism—they are central to attracting visitors, enriching local culture, and boosting the creative economy. The tourism offer, within the context of modern tourism development, is both quantitatively and qualitatively diverse, aiming to develop in a sustainable way, highlighting tourism's essential contribution to sustainable development. Tourism events represent an essential component of the tourism sector, offering opportunities to attract visitors and foster the growth of the creative industries. Tourism destinations experiencing high levels of visitation should adopt a responsible approach to event planning and development strategies, ensuring these events positively contribute to the local environment and community. This paper utilizes a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods to examine the role and potential of tourism events in the framework of sustainable tourism development, based on a case study of Zlatibor, Serbia's most visited mountain destination. The research findings indicate that the favorable tourism-geographical positioning of mountain destinations – illustrated by the case example of Zlatibor as the most visited destination in Serbia – enables the diversification of sustainable tourism forms beyond winter tourism. Furthermore, the potential of cultural heritage and traditional festivals is shown to significantly contribute to the sustainable and high-quality development of destinations. These events serve not only as attractions but, also, as catalysts for

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## 1. Introduction

Tourism experienced a swift post-war recovery, followed by an annual growth rate of approximately 10%, surpassing most other economic sectors. Although this growth has gradually slowed over time, the tourism industry has maintained a steady annual increase of approximately 3% for more than two decades. According to United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the growth in the number of tourists by 2030 will be around 3.3% per year, reaching 1.8 billion tourists (UNWTO, 2011). Alongside the rapid growth of tourism traffic, there is a need to protect the planet from degradation, particularly through the sustainable management of natural resources and immediate action on climate change (UN, 2015).

Moreover, contemporary trends in the global tourism market emphasize destination authenticity, personalized experiences, and extended stays, all of which serve as key drivers for the accelerated development of mountain destinations (Kim & Jamal, 2007).

In response to the environmental and infrastructural challenges posed by mass tourism, theoretical models such as Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) have emerged to explain destination evolution and the associated pressures (Butler, 1980). Also, tourism has great potential to accelerate progress across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (World Tourism Organization and United Nations Development Programme, 2017). Tourism development is increasingly centered on innovative and adaptive models that support the achievement of the SDGs including the organization of events that promote tradition, authenticity, and sustainability (Seraphin & Gowreesunkar, 2021).

According to Getz and Page (2016), all events can be classified into four main categories: business, festivals and culture, entertainment, and sports. Tourist events in Serbia, based on the Calendar of Events, can be categorized by structure into the following types: sports and recreational events, festivals, events that promote tradition and folk heritage, gastronomic events, and business-promotional events (National Tourism Organisation of Serbia, n.d., for 2013). The organization of such events is, also, closely linked to tourism seasonality (Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005).

Culture and cultural-historical heritage also play a significant role in tourism development, enriching the tourism offer. Moreover, traditional events contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and support sustainable development (Stankova & Vasenska, 2015).

In this context, events-especially those rooted in local culture and creative expression-are increasingly recognized as tools to reinforce sustainable tourism development.

## **2. Literature Review**

In academic literature, events are widely recognized for their contribution to the development of the tourism industry, the attraction of investments, and the stimulation of local economies (Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2014; Frost & Frost, 2020; Dong, 2023; Alsiehemy, 2023). In addition, they are explored as entrepreneurial opportunities supporting destination branding (Asero & Tomaselli, 2020; Kumar & Nazir, 2023). Other studies emphasize their competitive role in urban tourism (Cibinskiene, 2012), as well as, their impact on hotel performance (Piga & Melis, 2021).

Building on this theoretical foundation, the present study examines the Serbian context, with particular emphasis on Zlatibor. According to the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, mountain destinations in Serbia are an important element of the country's tourism offer and Zlatibor is designated as one of the key drivers of mountain tourism (Ministry of Trade, Tourism, and Telecommunications, 2016; RZS, 2013, 2024). This study relies on official data regarding past events, sourced from publicly available information on official websites of the Tourism Organization of Serbia and the Tourism Organization of Zlatibor (National Tourism Organisation of Serbia, n.d., for 2013 and 2024).

The literature has, also, contributed to the study of how traditional events are adapted to local needs and development through the concept of glocalization (Park, 2010), the impact of cultural events on tourism sustainability (Yongguang et al., 2021), the evaluation of festivals from the perspective of cultural sustainability (Ön et al., 2022), and festival sustainability (Zhang & Dai, 2023), as well as, the potential for integrating cultural tourism as a strategy for rural tourism development (Tunde et al., 2022). These perspectives highlight the growing academic interest in event-based tourism as both a cultural asset and a strategic instrument for enhancing sustainability and rural development.

## **3. Methodology**

The methodological framework of the analysis is based on a combined and integrated approach grounded in quantitative and qualitative analysis. Such a holistic perspective is crucial for shaping tourism policies that are sustainable, effective, and inclusive. Quantitative analysis includes statistical data which was collected from

official tourism reports, event calendars, and cultural institution databases. The number and structure of traditional events, especially, those promoting local heritage and folk creativity, were analyzed over a selected time period. Comparative analysis was conducted to observe trends in event frequency and visitor numbers, with a focus on destinations such as Zlatibor. The qualitative component is structured as a case study on Zlatibor, focusing on the intersection between events, tourism, and sustainability. Document analysis (e.g., strategic plans, promotional materials, media coverage) was used to evaluate the sustainability orientation of events and for the future sustainable development of a destination.

This paper examines the relationship between tourist arrivals during peak months and the number of events held, using statistical data. Special emphasis is placed on recognizing the growing importance of traditional events, which contribute to the preservation of authenticity and cultural heritage.

## **4. Results and Discussions**

### ***4.1. Tourism events as a component of tourism product development***

Tourism events are an essential component of the tourism industry, providing opportunities to attract visitors and generate various economic benefits. In Serbia, over 650 events are held annually, with approximately 10% taking place in the Southwestern region. In Zlatibor, the most visited destination in the country, 12 events were held between January and September 2024. This represents a modest increase compared to 2013, when nine events were organized in the same area (National Tourism Organisation of Serbia, n.d., for 2013 and 2024).

In 2013, three events of authentic folk creativity were held in Zlatibor: “The Heart of a Licider”, the “Trumpet Festival and folk creativity showcase”, and the “Rural Pentathlon” in Jablanica. The children's folklore festival “The Heart of a Licider” fosters cultural exchange among young communities from different countries and actively promotes the preservation of tradition and cultural heritage. The “Trumpet Festival and the folk creativity showcase” is a music event based on ethnographic themes of folk music. The “Rural Pentathlon” in Jablanica includes competitions in traditional crafts, skills, and sports (standing long jump, hand sawing with a bow saw, stone throwing, tug of war, log pulling with oxen, and high jump).

In addition to events focused on traditional folk creativity, two sports and recreational events were also held: the “Hunters' Gathering of Serbia” and the “Winter Festival of Children's Recreation.” The Hunters' Gathering has been organized since 1982 by the Zlatibor Hunting Association, with the aim of bringing together hunters from across the country and abroad. The event features

competitions in various disciplines, including: moving wolf target, stationary roe deer target, clay pigeon shooting, a 300-meter circular stationary target with specialized rifles, driven wolf hunting, and a contest for the best traditional hunting stew. The event also includes scientific conferences in the field of hunting, along with numerous accompanying cultural and entertainment programs.

The Serbian New Year's Eve celebrations in Zlatibor and Jablanica, as well as, the “Zlatibor Summer” festival, fall under the category of theater, literary, music, and film performances/cultural festivals/art colonies. The New Year's celebration takes place at King's Square in Zlatibor and in front of the Church of the Holy Theotokos in Jablanica. The program begins with the ceremonial burning of the traditional yule log, followed by children's performances. A cultural program for adults is also traditionally held, featuring trumpet music, the traditional Uzice circle dance, and singing, creating a festive atmosphere rooted in local heritage.

Zlatibor Cultural Summer is a prominent cultural and entertainment event held on the open-air summer stage at King's Square and across various villages in the Zlatibor region. The program features a diverse array of performances, including cultural and artistic society concerts, choir and classical music performances, trumpet orchestras, open-air theater productions, children's shows, animations for both children and adults, recordings of popular entertainment and music TV shows, music festivals and competitions, as well as sporting events featuring professional athletes.

The Sljivovica homemade Brandy Fair is an economic and promotional event dedicated to showcasing traditional products. The healthy includes live brandy distillation demonstrations, an exhibition of organic food, local household products, and handmade crafts. As part of the event, expert lectures are organized on the topics of rural tourism development and fruit cultivation. The cultural segment of the event highlights traditional music performances and trumpet orchestras, emphasizing the region's folk heritage.

In 2013, one gastronomic event was also held: the “Prsutijada” dry-cured meat products fair. The “Prsutijada” fair is a competitive event held in the village of Mackat, where the finest Serbian dry-cured meats are evaluated and awarded. In addition, visitors can taste and purchase delicacies such as beef and pork prosciutto, bacon, sausage, and other products. Visitors have the opportunity to sample and purchase various delicacies such as beef and pork prosciutto, bacon, sausages, and other traditionally prepared products. The fair also includes a cultural program with music and folklore performances (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Calendar of events in Zlatibor in 2013

Date	Event location	Event name	Type of event
January 11–13	Zlatibor, Mackat	Dry-cured meat Fair “Prsutijada”	Gastronomic event
January 13	Zlatibor, Jablanica	Celebration of the Serbian New Year in Zlatibor and Jablanica	Theatrical, literary, musical, and film performances/ cultural festival/ art colonies
February 22–24	Zlatibor	Gathering of Hunters of Serbia	Sports and recreational event
February 22 – March 1	Zlatibor	Zlatibor Winter Festival of Children's Recreation 2013	Sports and recreational event
May 2–3	Zlatibor, Sljivovica	Sljivovica Homemade Brandy Fair	Business-promotional event
June 13–16	Zlatibor, Jablanica	Village Pentathlon in Jablanica	Event promoting tradition and folk heritage
July 5–August 30	Zlatibor, Sirogojno	Zlatibor Cultural Summer	Art festival
July 20–21	Zlatibor	Trumpet Gathering and Folk Heritage Festival	Event promoting tradition and folk heritage
August 19–24	Uzice, Zlatibor, Kosjeric	The Heart of Licider International Children's Festival	Event promoting tradition and folk heritage theatrical, literary, musical, and film performances/ cultural festival/ art colonies

Source: Author's elaboration

Primary data: <https://www.serbia.travel/kalendar>

In 2024, a total of 12 events were held in Zlatibor (as of the end of September). Compared to the event calendar from 2013 (National Tourism Organisation of Serbia, n.d.), the following changes can be observed:

- an increase in the number of events;
- a change in the category of events;
- greater involvement of surrounding Zlatibor villages in event organization (such as Trnava, Rozanstvo, and Sirogojno).

The increase in the number of events can be linked to the growth in tourist visits. The change in event categories reflects a new structure, which now includes: cultural and traditional events, sports events, food and wine festivals, and an art festival. Cultural and traditional events today encompass the manifestations of authentic folk heritage that were present in 2013. In addition, they now include

theatrical, literary, musical, and film performances, cultural festivals, and art colonies from the previous classification. Food and wine festivals incorporate what were formerly known as gastronomic events (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Calendar of events in Zlatibor in 2024

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event location</b>	<b>Event name</b>	<b>Type of event</b>
January 13	Zlatibor	Celebration of the Serbian New Year in Zlatibor	Cultural and Traditional Events
February	Zlatibor	Gathering of Hunters of Serbia	Sports and recreational event
March 1–3	Zlatibor, Mackat	Dry-cured meat Fair “Prsutijada”	Food and Wine Festivals
April 26–29	Zlatibor	Zlatibor Cup – International Football Tournament	Sports Events
June 14–16	Zlatibor, Jablanica	Village Pentathlon in Jablanica	Cultural and Traditional Events
July 5 –August 30	Zlatibor, Sirogojno	Zlatibor Cultural Summer	Art Festival
July 12	Zlatibor, Kosjeric	St. Peter's Day Festivities	Cultural and Traditional Events
July 28	Zlatibor	Summer Street “Erski” cabaret	Art Festival
August	Zlatibor, Trnava	Trnava Art Colony	Art Festival
August 19	Zlatibor, Rozanstvo	Festival of Traditional Folk Song “No Water Without a Spring”	Cultural and Traditional Events
August 22–25	Zlatibor	International Sports Film Festival	Art Festival
September	Zlatibor	Poetic Fires of Zlatibor	Art Festival

Source: Author's elaboration

Primary data: <https://www.serbia.travel/kalendar>

The 2024 Zlatibor Event Calendar introduces several new events across various categories:

#### *Sports events*

International Football Tournament “Zlatibor Cup 2024”: This major sporting event attracts over 2,500 young football players from the region and abroad, including teams from Spain, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Austria, Slovenia, and other countries.

The Zlatibor Winter Festival of Children's Recreation, first held in 2013, continues under the same category—Sports Events—although the event period has been adjusted.

### *Art festivals*

Four new art festivals will be held:

Summer Street “Erski” Cabaret: Taking place in Cajetina, Zlatibor, and the mid-station of the Gold Gondola, this event features a vibrant program of cabaret performances, theatrical shows, and satirical acts (aforists).

Trnava Art Colony: Founded in 1998 at the studio of the late Serbian naïve painter and sculptor Vladimir Mitrovic, this art colony is hosted at the artist's home and studio in the village of Trnava.

International Sports Film Festival: A competitive festival showcasing documentary and feature films from around the world, all centered on the theme of sports.

Poetic Fires of Zlatibor: A literary event dedicated to fostering cultural cooperation through poetry, honoring both national and international poets.

### *Cultural and traditional events*

Two new events are organized in this category:

St. Peter's Day Festivities: Held in Sirogojno, in front of the Church of Saints Peter and Paul. The program includes visits to the Open-Air Museum “Old Village”, as well as, performances by local children's cultural groups, singing ensembles, trumpet orchestras, and gusle players.

Festival of Traditional Folk Song “No Water Without a Spring”: Taking place in the village of Rozanstvo, this festival celebrates traditional polyphonic singing with male, female, mixed groups, and duets competing in the art of authentic folk song.

### **4.2. Tourist attendance and tourism events: A cause-and-effect relationship**

The analysis of tourist attendance in Zlatibor in 2013 shows that the highest number of visits was recorded in August, May, and January. However, the peak monthly attendance did not exceed 70,000 visitors. The longest average length of stay was recorded in July (4.9 days), while the shortest was in November (3 days).

The analysis of tourist attendance in Zlatibor for the period January – June 2024 indicates that the destination was most visited in January (175,307 visitors). In all observed months, total attendance exceeded 100,000 tourists, with some fluctuations by month, the lowest being in March (107,019 visitors).

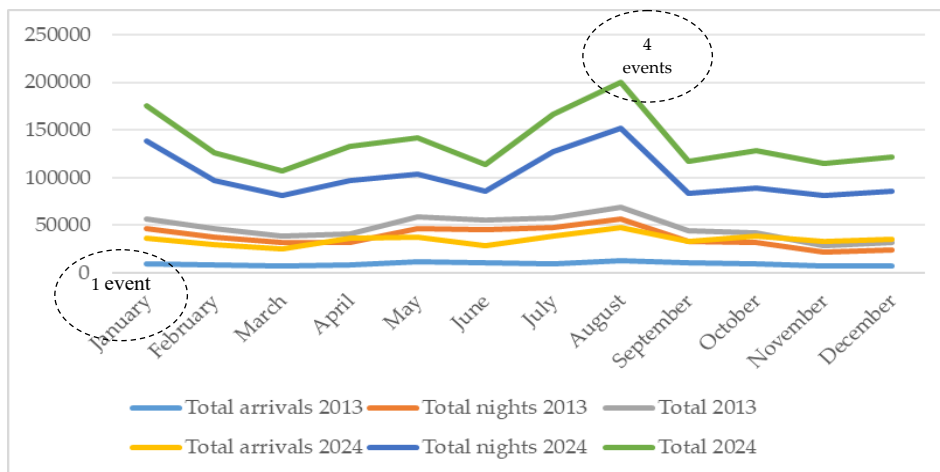
The number of overnight stays by foreign tourists peaked in January (40,228), while the lowest was recorded in March (11,530). Foreign tourists registered the

highest number of arrivals in May (12,503), and the lowest in March (5,724). The overall number of tourist arrivals was also highest in May (37,874) and lowest in March (25,660) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Comparative analysis of tourist visits

2013	Tourist arrivals		Total arrivals	Tourist nights		Total nights	Total	Average length of stay
	Domestic	Foreign		Domestic	Foreign			
January	8091	1988	10079	38040	8249	46289	56368	6
February	7403	823	8226	35610	2532	38142	46368	5.6
March	6335	964	7299	29434	2136	31570	38869	5.3
April	7385	1148	8533	29671	2852	32523	41056	4.8
May	10463	1745	12208	41424	5061	46485	58693	4.8
June	9175	1619	10794	39999	4935	44934	55728	5.2
July	6945	2698	9643	35456	12249	47705	57348	5.9
August	9504	3438	12942	43745	12483	56228	69170	5.3
September	8553	2055	10608	28227	5378	33605	44213	4.2
October	8106	1503	9609	28396	3704	32100	41709	4.3
November	5784	1455	7239	18197	3547	21744	28983	4
December	6114	1682	7796	20145	4289	24434	32230	4.1
2024	Tourist arrivals		Total arrivals	Tourist nights		Total nights	Total	Average length of stay
	Domestic	Foreign		Domestic	Foreign			
January	25516	11479	36995	98084	40228	138312	175307	4.7
February	23697	5962	29659	81140	15451	96591	126250	4.3
March	19936	5724	25660	69829	11530	81359	107019	4.2
April	24610	11675	36285	72446	24523	96969	133254	3.7
May	25371	12503	37874	79268	24239	103507	141381	3.7
June	17236	11263	28499	62319	23093	85412	113911	4
July	22469	16550	39019	80891	46775	127666	166685	4.3
August	28813	19287	48100	100569	51657	152226	200326	4.2
September	19190	14445	33635	54003	29175	83178	116813	3.5
October	24769	14319	39088	64513	24434	88947	128035	3.3
November	22695	10826	33521	60179	21037	81216	114737	3.4
December	22403	12547	34950	57830	28392	86222	121172	3.5

Source: <https://www.stat.gov.rs/sr-cyrl/publikacije/>



**Fig. 2.** Trends in tourist visitation at Zlatibor in 2013 and 2024

Source: Author's calculations

Primary data: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/databas>

Comparison of the number of events and monthly tourist attendance shows that:

In January, only one event was held, yet this month recorded the highest attendance. The traditional New Year's Eve celebration typically attracts a large number of visitors.

In February, one event was also held, despite the fact that February, along with January and May, is among the most visited months.

In March, only one event took place, which coincided with the lowest number of tourist arrivals.

In May, no events were held, even though tourist traffic during this month was very high-second only to January.

The cultural events organized in June did not attract a significant number of tourists.

There are no significant changes in the average length of stay on an annual level (3.96 days in 2013; 3.88 days in 2024). However, the average length of stay decreased by one day in January and August compared to 2013.

Generally, throughout the year, a small number of foreign tourists is observed compared to national tourists, a fact that reflects the cultural importance with a touch of heritage, of preserving traditions for domestic tourists. For foreign tourists, art festivals and cultural and traditional events seem of real interest, thus August dominates the ranking of months with the most foreign tourists. Months with a low number of tourists could be made more attractive through new events, which are not necessarily rooted in existing traditions, but which highlight a local specificity that

has not yet been exploited.

The insufficient impact of events on tourist attendance can be attributed to multiple factors, including the significance and duration of the events, among others. Most events are single-day, seasonal in nature, and primarily attended by the local population. The only structured summer event program is part of the “Cultural Summer” initiative.

This analysis of the relationship between the number of tourist events and visitor attendance highlights the need for the development of a Strategy or Policy for event management, which could help position such events as integral components of mountain destinations and contribute to increased tourist traffic.

The research findings underscore the growing significance of tourism events as strategic instruments in advancing sustainable tourism development, particularly in destinations traditionally characterized by seasonal tourism. While winter tourism has long been a dominant segment of the identity and economy of many mountain destinations, this study emphasizes the potential for diversification through cultural events and festivals. In line with theoretical models of destination development, such as Butler's TALC model, events can be viewed as tools for extending the growth phase and preventing destination stagnation by stimulating the local economy, especially during periods of high visitation. The connection between seasonality and event organization in Zlatibor further confirms the potential of events to distribute tourist flows more evenly throughout the year, thereby reducing pressure on infrastructure and contributing to the overall sustainability of the destination.

An analysis of statistical data from Zlatibor indicates a gradual increase in the number of organized events over the past decade, with a notable rise in events emphasizing traditional and cultural elements. This trend clearly reflects a growing awareness among local stakeholders of the significance of cultural tourism and its role in enhancing the diversity of the tourism offer. A particularly noteworthy example is the children's folklore festival the Heart of a Licider, which fosters intercultural dialogue, encourages the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, and affirms regional identity. Similarly, the Trnava Art Colony and ethno-events in Jablanica provide opportunities to engage with tradition in an authentic setting and in direct contact with experts and tradition bearers.

According to the findings presented, cultural heritage and traditional festivals remain underutilized resources that can significantly contribute to enhancing the year-round attractiveness of a destination. These events not only attract new segments of tourists but also support the preservation of local traditions, strengthen community identity, and stimulate the development of the creative industries sector,

in alignment with the principles of sustainable tourism.

In the forthcoming period, it is essential to develop a complementary link between events, tourist visitation, and projects that promote sustainable development supported by the local actors. One such initiative on Zlatibor is the project “Start the Green Tour,” which enables visitors to explore the mountain using fully eco-friendly electric vehicles and electric-assist bicycles that can also be used manually.

The research also highlights the need for strategic planning and responsible destination management, including the formulation of an event organization strategy aligned with environmental protection standards and involving all relevant stakeholders. These events foster not only cultural sustainability but also the growth of the creative economy through the involvement of artists, artisans, and cultural performers.

### **4.3. Limitations**

The study does not include a qualitative analysis of tourists' motivations and attitudes regarding destination choice and the potential influence of the event on their decision to visit is, also, a limitation of the study. Furthermore, the study is geographically limited to a single area, without a comparative analysis with similar destinations in other countries. Despite these limitations, the value of the study lies in highlighting the importance of events as an integral part of tourism attendance, the structure of the event, and the quantitative analysis of its relationship with tourist visitation. This provides a potential foundation for further theoretical considerations and future research.

### **5. Conclusion**

The continuous development of tourism, reflected in the growth of tourist flows, highlights the need for responsible management of natural and cultural resources. In contemporary tourism development approaches, events are increasingly analyzed as a means for branding and positioning destinations in both national and international markets. Tourism events shape the perception of a destination, stimulate the creative industries, contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage, and strengthen place identity. In this context, the organization of tourism events should not merely serve as a marketing tool but also as a strategic instrument for preserving cultural identity and achieving the SDGs.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the case of Zlatibor, Serbia's most visited mountain destination, there is a noticeable trend of growth in the number of events with a strong emphasis on authenticity and culture, which reflects the

growing awareness among local stakeholders of the importance of diversifying the tourism offer and transitioning toward sustainable tourism models.

The example of Zlatibor demonstrates that well-planned and thematically designed events, rooted in local tradition and aligned with seasonal dynamics, can play a key role in shaping a competitive and sustainable tourism offer.

In the future, it is necessary to create events that engage the local community, promote cultural heritage, and provide tourists with authentic experiences, while simultaneously protecting the natural and social environment. In this way, tourism events become not only attractions but also drivers of the long-term sustainable development of destinations. As demonstrated in the case of Zlatibor, tourism events-when strategically designed and culturally anchored-can function as long-term levers for sustainable destination development, bridging economic imperatives with ecological and sociocultural integrity.

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