

# AN INVESTIGATION INTO CONCEPTUAL METAPHORS DENOTING PRESSURE IN THE US FEDERAL RESERVE'S DISCOURSE

## ÂN DỤ Ý NIỆM BIỂU ĐẠT “ÁP LỰC” TRONG DIỄN NGÔN CỦA CỤC DỰ TRỮ LIÊN BANG HOA KỲ

Vu Phuong Quynh\*, Vo Thi Kim Anh

*The University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies, Vietnam*

\*Corresponding author: phuongquynh120@gmail.com

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**Abstract** - Metaphor plays an important role in shaping how abstract economic phenomena are communicated in institutional discourse. Although metaphor use in economic language has been widely studied, metaphors denoting pressure in central bank communication remain underexplored. This study investigates how conceptual metaphors of pressure are used in the US Federal Reserve's Monetary Policy Reports to frame economic conditions and convey institutional evaluation. The data comprise Part 1 of 10 reports published between 2020 and 2024. Adopting a qualitative approach, the study draws on Conceptual Metaphor Theory and applies the MIPVU to identify metaphorical expressions and examine their conceptual mappings. The findings show that, conceptual metaphor denoting pressure are systematically employed to conceptualize economic imbalance or constraint, shaping the interpretation of economic conditions in central bank discourse.

**Key words** - Conceptual metaphors; structural metaphor; ontological metaphor and orientational metaphor; central banking discourse; US Federal Reserve.

### 1. Introduction

The US Federal Reserve is a key institution shaping monetary policy and economic communication. Monetary Policy Reports are therefore not merely technical documents but discursive strategic instruments through which economic realities are interpreted and institutionally positioned.

Within cognitive linguistics, metaphor is regarded as a fundamental mechanism of thought rather than a stylistic ornament. Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), proposed by Lakoff and Johnson [1], argues that abstract domains are systematically structured through embodied experiences derived from more concrete source domains. Economic phenomena are inherently abstract and complex, making metaphor central to their conceptualization. Boers [2] demonstrates how embodied schemas facilitate economic understanding, while Kövecses [3] highlights the role of force and containment in structuring abstract reasoning.

In the Vietnamese research context, CMT has been applied to media and economic discourse. Nguyen [4] and Le and Vo [5] demonstrate the applicability of conceptual metaphor analysis to institutional texts, yet focused investigations of pressure metaphors in central bank discourse remain limited. Moreover, few studies integrate

**Tóm tắt** - Ẩn dụ đóng vai trò quan trọng trong việc định hình cách diễn đạt các hiện tượng kinh tế trừu tượng trong diễn ngôn thể chế. Mặc dù ẩn dụ trong ngôn ngữ kinh tế đã được nghiên cứu rộng rãi, các ẩn dụ biểu đạt “áp lực” trong truyền thông ngân hàng trung ương vẫn chưa được quan tâm đầy đủ. Nghiên cứu này khảo sát cách các ẩn dụ ý niệm về “áp lực” được sử dụng trong Báo cáo Chính sách tiền tệ của Cục Dự trữ Liên bang Hoa Kỳ nhằm định hình điều kiện kinh tế và thể hiện đánh giá thể chế. Dữ liệu gồm Phần 1 của 10 báo cáo giai đoạn 2020–2024. Nghiên cứu áp dụng phương pháp định tính, dựa trên Lý thuyết Ẩn dụ Ý niệm và quy trình MIPVU để nhận diện và phân tích biểu thức ẩn dụ. Kết quả cho thấy các ẩn dụ “áp lực” được sử dụng có hệ thống để khái niệm hóa các trạng thái như mất cân bằng hay ràng buộc kinh tế, qua đó định hình cách diễn giải điều kiện kinh tế trong diễn ngôn Ngân hàng trung ương.

**Từ khóa** - Ẩn dụ ý niệm; ẩn dụ cấu trúc; ẩn dụ bản thể và ẩn dụ định hướng; diễn ngôn ngân hàng trung ương; Cục Dự trữ Liên bang Hoa Kỳ.

metaphor identification, conceptual mapping, and communicative function analysis within one analytical framework.

Against this background, the present study investigates conceptual metaphors denoting pressure in selected US Federal Reserve Monetary Policy Reports published between 2020 and 2024, focusing on Part 1, “Recent Economic and Financial Developments.”

The study is guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What metaphorical expressions denoting pressure are used in the US Federal Reserve's discourse?

**RQ2:** What conceptual mappings can be identified in these metaphorical expressions?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to existing literature on conceptual metaphors in institutional economic discourse and provides a focused analysis of pressure as a structured metaphor domain in central bank communication.

### 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

#### 2.1. Review of previous studies

Research on economic discourse shows that metaphor plays a key role in structuring the interpretation of

complex economic phenomena. Studies by Boers [2] and Koller [6] demonstrate that metaphor facilitates understanding and shapes economic reasoning. Pressure-related metaphors are particularly salient in representing economic instability and adjustment, especially in crisis contexts ([7]; [8]).

In the Vietnamese context, Nguyen [4] and Le and Vo [5] confirm the applicability of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to institutional and economic discourse. However, research has not specifically examined pressure metaphors in central bank discourse or integrated identification, conceptual mapping, and functional analysis. This study addresses these gaps in the US Federal Reserve's discourse.

## 2.2. Conceptual Metaphor Theory

This study is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson [1], which views metaphor as a cognitive mechanism structuring abstract domains through embodied experience. Economic phenomena such as inflation and instability are inherently abstract, making them suitable for metaphorical conceptualization.

CMT distinguishes three types of metaphor: structural, ontological, and orientational [1], [3], which respectively map domains, conceptualize entities, and organize concepts spatially. Previous studies (Rasmussen [7]; Bielenia-Grajewska [8]) show that pressure-related metaphors form coherent systems in economic discourse.

This study adopts CMT to analyze pressure metaphors as systematic cognitive structures in the US Federal Reserve's discourse.

## 2.3. Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU)

While CMT provides a theoretical account of metaphor, empirical analysis requires a transparent identification procedure. This study employs the Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije Universiteit (MIPVU), developed by Steen et al. [9] as an extension of the original MIP proposed by the Pragglejaz Group [10]. This procedure has also been adopted in conceptual metaphor research in the Vietnamese context (e.g., "Conceptual Metaphors for Images of Lovers in English and Vietnamese Poems and Songs" [11]).

These refinements allow for more precise coding of metaphorical variation in institutional texts, where metaphorical expressions may be conventionalized and embedded within technical terminology.

By applying MIPVU systematically, this study establishes a reliable empirical basis for reconstructing conceptual mappings in US Federal Reserve's reports. Importantly, identification is only the first stage of analysis. Once metaphorical expressions are coded, they are grouped according to shared source domains. This grouping enables reconstruction of higher-level conceptual structures consistent with CMT. Therefore, this study adopts Conceptual Metaphor Theory as the theoretical framework and MIPVU as the analytical procedure.

## 3. Research Methodology

### 3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative design grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to investigate metaphors denoting pressure in the US Federal Reserve's discourse. The analysis focuses on identifying metaphorical expressions, reconstructing their conceptual mappings, and examining their communicative functions.

### 3.2. Sampling

The data are drawn from Part 1, "Recent Economic and Financial Developments," of the US Federal Reserve's *Monetary Policy Reports* submitted to Congress. This section is selected because it presents core economic assessments, including inflation, labor markets, and financial conditions, where pressure-related metaphors are most salient.

A purposive sampling strategy is employed. The dataset consists of ten reports published semi-annually between 2020 and 2024, a period characterized by significant economic disruption and inflationary pressure. Only Part 1 of each report (approximately 10–15 pages) is analyzed to ensure consistency and comparability across documents.

### 3.3. Data collection and coding

Reports are retrieved from the official website of the US Federal Reserve in PDF format. Selected sections are converted into editable text for analysis while preserving original wording. The texts are compiled into a chronological corpus for systematic examination.

These texts are available in public domain and can be accessible online via the institutional websites, so there are no such problems as copyright or authorship.

Metaphorical expressions are identified using MIPVU, as outlined in Section 2.3. To ensure systematic analysis, a coding table is employed to record each expression along with its contextual meaning, basic meaning, source domain, and target domain. This coding procedure facilitates consistent classification and comparison across texts.

### 3.4. Data analysis

Data analysis proceeds in three stages:

- **Identification** – Pressure-related metaphorical expressions are identified using MIPVU.
- **Classification** – Expressions are grouped according to shared source domains and reconstructed as conceptual metaphors in line with CMT.
- **Interpretation** – A discourse-level analysis examines how pressure metaphors function communicatively within the reports.

This stepwise procedure ensures analytical consistency from lexical identification to functional interpretation.

To illustrate the coding procedure, Table 1 presents a sample of how metaphorical expressions are identified and classified in the dataset.

As shown in Table 1, the expression is analyzed by comparing its contextual meaning with its basic meaning and then mapped from a source domain to a target domain, resulting in a corresponding conceptual metaphor.

**Table 1.** Sample coding of a metaphorical expression

Expression	Sentence	Basic meaning	Source domain	Target domain	Conceptual metaphor
downward pressure	“The economic downturn is putting downward pressure on wages.”	physical force applied downward	force	economic conditions (wages)	PRESSURE IS FORCE

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1. Metaphorical expressions denoting pressure in the U.S. Federal Reserve’s reports

#### 4.1.1. Force expressions

Pressure is frequently conceptualized as directional force acting on economic variables, especially wages, prices, and profits.

(1) “The economic downturn is *putting downward pressure on wage*.” (June 2020).

(2) “Supply chain bottlenecks, hiring difficulties, and other capacity constraints amid strong demand *exerted pervasive upward pressure on prices*” (February 2022).

Force expressions conceptualize pressure as directional physical force acting upon economic variables. In (1), *putting downward pressure on wages frames* wage decline as displacement caused by external force, with *downward* encoding vertical movement along an implicit scale. Wages are positioned as passive entities acted upon by systemic conditions. In (2), *exerted pervasive upward pressure on prices* intensifies this force schema: exerted implies sustained application, while *upward* maps inflation onto vertical rise. Force expressions thus represent economic change as impersonal, mechanically driven movement rather than deliberate action.

#### 4.1.2. Stress and strain expressions

Pressure is also realized through stress-related language, emphasizing endurance under load rather than movement.

(3) “Financial markets *experienced acute stress in March*” (June 2023).

(4) “Some banks *came under considerable strain* following rapid deposit outflows” (July 2023).

In (3), *experienced acute stress* presents financial markets as structures subjected to intense tension, with *acute* calibrating severity without implying collapse. In (4), *came under considerable strain* positions banks beneath a burden, as the preposition *under* reinforces load-bearing imagery. Stress expressions therefore frame pressure as sustained vulnerability within systems that remain structurally intact.

#### 4.1.3. Tightness expressions

Tightness expressions conceptualize pressure as spatial constriction and limited flexibility.

(5) “The labor market remains *very tight*, with job openings exceeding available workers” (February 2022).

(6) “Households continue to face *tight financial*

*conditions amid higher interest rates*” (March 2024).

In (5), *very tight labor market* signals pronounced imbalance between demand and supply, compressing complex labor indicators into a concise spatial image. In (6), *tight financial conditions* frame pressure as restricted maneuverability within the financial environment rather than intentional restriction. Tightness expressions thus construct pressure as limited room for adjustment within economic systems.

#### 4.1.4. Blockage expressions

Blockage metaphors are particularly salient in discussions of supply chains and logistics, where pressure is framed as obstruction within flow systems.

(7) “Strong demand coupled with supply chain *bottlenecks* continued to *weigh on production*” (July 2021).

(8) “Shipping delays and *strained logistics networks* added to *price pressures*” (February 2022).

In (7), *bottlenecks* evokes restricted flow through a narrow passage, conceptualizing production as circulation slowed by congestion. The phrase *weigh on* reinforces impediment, presenting pressure as accumulated obstruction rather than system failure. In (8), *shipping delays* and *strained logistics networks* highlight disruption and limited capacity within transport infrastructure. The clause *added to price pressures* links blocked flow directly to inflation, framing price increases as consequences of congestion.

#### 4.1.5. Constraint expressions

Constraint expressions frame pressure as structural limitation embedded within the economic system, emphasizing bounded capacity rather than temporary obstruction.

(9) “*Capacity constraints* have limited the pace of the economic recovery” (July 2021).

(10) “*Persistent supply constraints* have contributed to elevated inflation” (June 2022).

In (9), *capacity constraints* foreground fixed limits on productive ability, while the verb *limited* reinforces the notion of a ceiling on economic expansion. Slower recovery is thus framed as the consequence of structural boundaries rather than short-term disruption. In (10), the adjective *persistent* emphasizes duration, presenting supply limits as enduring. The phrase *contributed to elevated inflation* links these structural constraints directly to price outcomes, construing inflation as an emergent effect of bounded supply.

#### 4.1.6. Release expressions

Finally, release expressions describe the easing or partial dissipation of pressure over time. Release expressions describe the gradual reduction of previously identified pressures, shifting focus from accumulation to change in degree.

(11) “Labor market tightness *eased modestly* over the year” (June 2022).

(12) “Inflation pressures have eased, though they *remain elevated*” (March 2023).

In (11), the verb *eased* signals partial decompression, while the adverb *modestly* tempers the extent of improvement. Adjustment is framed as limited rather than complete. In (10), *have eased* is immediately qualified by *remain elevated*, balancing decline with persistence. This construction presents pressure as diminishing but still operative, maintaining institutional caution.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that metaphorical expressions denoting pressure are systematically embedded in the US Federal Reserve's discourse. Through force, stress, tightness, blockage, constraint, and release, economic developments are framed as the outcome of impersonal pressures operating within a dynamic yet fundamentally stable system.

#### 4.2. Conceptual mappings of metaphor denoting pressure in the US Federal Reserve's reports

In order to provide a more comprehensive overview of conceptual patterns, Table 2 presents the frequency distribution of pressure-related metaphors identified in the dataset.

**Table 2.** Frequency of conceptual metaphors denoting pressure

Conceptual metaphor denoting pressure	Frequency
<i>Pressure is force</i>	28
<i>Pressure is stress</i>	26
<i>Pressure is tightness</i>	22
<i>Pressure is constraint</i>	15
<i>Pressure is blockage</i>	10
<i>Pressure is release</i>	8
<i>Pressure is contained entity</i>	4

The frequency distribution indicates that pressure is force, pressure is stress, and pressure is tightness are the most dominant conceptual metaphors in the dataset. This suggests that economic pressure in the US Federal Reserve's discourse is primarily conceptualized in terms of force, tension, and spatial constriction. Less frequent mappings such as pressure is blockage, pressure is constraint, and pressure is release provide additional nuances in representing specific economic conditions.

The following section presents a detailed analysis of selected representative examples to illustrate how these conceptual metaphors are linguistically realized in the data.

##### 4.2.1. Structural conceptual metaphor

###### a. Pressure is force

(13) "Labor supply is likely to continue to be *restrained* by *downward pressure* of about ¼ percentage point per year associated with the aging of the population." (February 2020)

In (13), the phrase *downward pressure* directly activates the source domain of physical force, where pressure refers to force applied to an object, often producing displacement. The adjective *downward* encodes vertical orientation, mapping reduced labor supply growth onto downward movement along a scale. The verb *restrained* further reinforces resistance against motion, suggesting that labor supply is being mechanically held

back. Labor supply is thus positioned as a passive entity acted upon by external demographic conditions rather than as an agent of change.

(14) "Supply chain bottlenecks, hiring difficulties, and other capacity constraints amid strong demand *exerted pervasive upward pressure* on prices." (February 2022)

In (14), the verb *exerted* explicitly invokes force application, emphasizing sustained and active pressure. The modifier *pervasive* broadens the scope of the force, suggesting widespread impact across sectors. The adjective *upward* again maps price increases onto vertical physical movement. Prices are grammatically positioned as objects receiving force, framing inflation as the mechanical outcome of systemic pressures rather than discretionary pricing behavior.

###### b. Pressure is stress

(15) "Some parts of the banking system *came under severe stress* late in the week of March 6, which led to large deposit outflows and depressed bank stock prices." (June 2023)

In (15), the construction *came under severe stress* draws on embodied experience of bearing excessive weight. The preposition *under* positions the banking system beneath a burden, while *severe* calibrates intensity without implying collapse. The system is framed as structurally vulnerable but still intact, emphasizing endurance rather than breakdown.

(16) "At the same time, some businesses and households *remain under considerable strain*." (July 2021)

In (16), *under considerable strain* similarly activates load-bearing imagery. The verb *remain* highlights persistence over time, suggesting prolonged tension rather than episodic shock. Businesses and households are represented as continuing to carry weight, reinforcing the idea of sustained pressure within functioning structures.

###### c. Pressure is constraint

(17) "Hiring difficulties, and other *capacity constraints* have *damped* the economic rebound." (July 2021)

In (17), *capacity constraints* activates the source domain of physical limitation, where constraints mark boundaries that restrict expansion. This mapping frames productive capacity as operating within fixed limits. The verb *damped* reinforces restriction by suggesting reduced momentum rather than collapse. Economic recovery is thus conceptualized as being held back by structural ceilings rather than by applied force or deliberate restraint.

(18) "Supply chain *bottlenecks*, hiring difficulties, and other *capacity constraints* amid strong demand." (February 2022)

In (18), the coordination of *bottlenecks* and *capacity constraints* constructs a cluster of limiting factors, framing pressure as the result of restricted supply under strong demand. The absence of an explicit agent reinforces a structural interpretation: pressure arises when demand exceeds bounded capacity. Inflationary pressure is therefore presented as a technical consequence of operating near systemic limits.

#### d. Pressure is blockage

(19) “Strong demand coupled with supply chain *bottlenecks*.” (July 2021)

The metaphor *bottlenecks* draws on embodied experience of a narrow passage restricting flow. In physical terms, a bottleneck causes material to accumulate behind the obstruction, increasing pressure upstream. This source-domain experience is mapped onto supply chains, which are conceptualized as flow systems through which goods move. Pressure arises not because production ceases, but because movement through the system is restricted.

(20) “The surge in demand for imports has *strained* shipping networks worldwide, and U.S. ports have been particularly *congested*.” (February 2022)

In this formulation, *congested* reinforces the blockage schema by portraying logistics networks as overcrowded pathways where movement slows or stops. Shipping networks are conceptualized as channels that can become clogged when demand surges. The adjective *strained* further suggests that these systems are operating near their limits, intensifying the sense of obstruction. Pressure is thus framed as the result of excessive flow attempting to pass through limited channels.

#### e. Pressure is tightness

(21) “A wide range of indicators have been pointing to a very *tight* labor market.” (February 2022)

In (21), the adjective *tight* activates the source domain of physical constriction, where limited space restricts movement and flexibility. The labor market is conceptualized as a compressed space in which labor supply and demand are closely packed, leaving minimal slack for adjustment. The intensifier *very* strengthens this sense of constriction, positioning the market near its structural limits. Rather than emphasizing directional force or sudden disruption, the formulation frames pressure as reduced maneuverability within a constrained environment, suggesting limited capacity for further expansion without generating imbalance.

(22) “Labor markets *remained extremely tight*.” (June 2022)

In (22), the verb *remained* foregrounds temporal persistence, indicating that constriction continues across reporting periods rather than representing a temporary fluctuation. The adverb *extremely* intensifies the degree of spatial compression, reinforcing the perception that the market operates with virtually no slack. By sustaining the tightness imagery over time, the discourse frames labor-market pressure as enduring and structural, thereby emphasizing sustained imbalance rather than short-lived volatility.

#### 4.2.2. Ontological conceptual metaphor

##### Pressure is a contained entity

(23) “*Acute stress in the banking system* has *receded* since last spring.” (March 2024)

In (23), *stress in the banking system* activates an ontological conceptualization in which stress is treated as

an entity located within a bounded domain. The preposition *in* invokes the container schema, positioning the banking system as a space that can hold stress. The verb *receded* reinforces this framing by suggesting withdrawal from that space. Mapped onto the economic domain, stress is conceptualized as something that diminishes within a container over time. Unlike force or stress mappings, which describe how pressure acts, this metaphor specifies where pressure exists.

(24) “A related risk, the *reemergence* of banking-sector stress *at some institutions*, might further constrain credit supply.” (March 2024)

In (24), *at some institutions* further localizes stress within specific units of the financial system, presenting it as spatially confined rather than system-wide. The noun *reemergence* implies that stress can disappear and return, reinforcing its status as a discrete, trackable entity. Through this mapping, pressure is conceptualized as distributed across bounded locations, allowing risk to be acknowledged while delimiting its scope.

The pressure as a contained entity mapping enables temporal reasoning about risk. Because pressure is construed as an entity, it can recede, reemerge, or remain confined to specific areas. This aligns with the US Federal Reserve’s supervisory role, where vulnerabilities are identified, localized, and managed before spreading. Unlike structural metaphors that explain how pressure operates, the ontological mapping specifies where it exists and how it is distributed.

#### 4.2.3. Orientational conceptual metaphor

##### a. Pressure is up-down movement

(25) “Anecdotal evidence suggests that the economic downturn is putting *downward pressure* on wages.” (June 2020)

In this example, the adjective *downward* directly activates the vertical orientation schema. In embodied experience, downward movement is associated with reduction, loss, or decrease. This basic physical orientation is mapped onto the economic domain by conceptualizing wages as quantities that can move vertically along a scale. The noun *pressure* retains its force-based meaning, but the orientational metaphor specifies the direction in which this force operates. As a result, declining wages are not merely described numerically; they are conceptualized as being pushed downward within a vertical space. This orientational framing allows wage decline to be immediately interpretable as negative movement without elaborating on precise magnitudes.

(26) “Supply chain bottlenecks, hiring difficulties, and other capacity constraints amid strong demand exerted pervasive *upward pressure* on prices.” (February 2022)

The orientational mapping is even more salient in this formulation. The adjective *upward* explicitly situates price movement along the vertical axis. Prices are conceptualized as entities capable of vertical displacement, with increases understood as upward motion. While the structural metaphor pressure is force

explains how pressure acts on prices, the orientational metaphor specifies the evaluative direction of that action. The combination of *upward* and *pressure* allows the discourse to represent inflation as movement toward a higher position on an implicit scale, reinforcing the interpretation of rising prices as escalation rather than fluctuation.

#### b. Pressure is release

(27) “As *supply constraints ease* and production picks up, *price pressures* are expected to *ease* as well.” (July 2021)

In this example, the repeated use of the verb *ease* is central to orientational mapping. In embodied experience, ‘easing’ involves a reduction in tension or tightness without complete removal. This physical experience is mapped onto economic pressure, which is conceptualized as diminishing in intensity rather than disappearing. Importantly, pressure is not described as being eliminated; instead, it is expected to ease, suggesting partial and gradual relief. The parallel construction linking *supply constraints* and *price pressures* reinforces the idea that pressure operates across interconnected domains and that its release unfolds incrementally. Through this orientation, economic adjustment is framed as controlled and progressive, aligning with the US Federal Reserve’s preference for cautious assessment.

(28) “*Softer* core goods prices reflect *easing supply bottlenecks* and declines in import prices.” (March 2023)

In this formulation, the adjective *softer* works in conjunction with *easing* to reinforce the release orientation. *Softer* evokes reduced resistance or hardness in physical experience, while *easing bottlenecks* suggests the loosening of previously obstructed flow. Pressure is therefore conceptualized as withdrawing from points of congestion, allowing economic processes to normalize. Rather than presenting improvement as a sharp break from prior conditions, the metaphor frames it as the outcome of gradual relaxation. This orientational mapping enables the discourse to register improvement while maintaining continuity with earlier diagnoses of pressure.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examines metaphors denoting pressure in the US Federal Reserve’s Monetary Policy Reports, an underexplored area in central bank communication. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and MIPVU, the findings show that pressure metaphors form a systematic framework rather than isolated expressions.

These metaphors cluster into domains such as force, stress, tightness, blockage, constraint, and release, through which economic conditions are conceptualized. Structural mappings dominate, while ontological and orientational metaphors provide additional coherence.

The study contributes to research on economic discourse by showing how pressure metaphors structure economic reasoning and highlighting the value of integrating metaphor identification with conceptual analysis.

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