Article

Local Community Experience as an Anchor Sustaining Reorientation Processes during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: In recent months, Italian citizens have alternatively experienced a forced, total or partial, loss of their opportunities to go out and meet their social network or their reduction, according to the restrictions locally needed to contain the spread of the COVID-19 outbreak. The effects of these unprecedented circumstances and restrictions on their local community experience are still to be deepened. Consequently, this study investigated young citizens' experiences of and attitudes towards their local communities of belonging after ten months of alternatively strict and partially eased restrictions. The World Café methodology was used to favor the exchange of ideas and open new viewpoints among participants. What emerged suggests that the communities of belonging may have worked as anchors to which young citizens clung as an attempt not to be overwhelmed by the disorientation brought about by the loss of their daily life (e.g., routines, life places, face-to-face sociability). On the one hand, this suggests that a renewed focus on local communities and a more involved way of living in them may stem from this tough time. On the other hand, these results point out the need for more meaningful and actively engaged people–community relationships as drivers for recovery processes under emergency circumstances.

Keywords: COVID-19; pandemic; urban spaces; urban sociability; neighborhoods; local community experience; social places; World Café

1. Introduction

In the first months of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) to be a global pandemic [1,2]. Several protective measures—such as contact tracing, quarantine, isolation, local or national lockdowns, and limitations to traveling outside the municipality of residence—have been adopted to reduce the threats to individuals' health and the functioning of local healthcare systems [3,4]. In Italy, which is the country where the present study has been carried out, the national lockdown started in the first days of March 2020 and was partially eased on 4 May 2020. After that, the resumption of face-to-face activities was slow until Summer, when the contagion curve shrunk. However, social distancing was always kept as the main preventive measure to be adopted—which means that broad social gatherings were not allowed, and common places should not be crowded or venues for involvement in shared activities anymore. From October on, a second wave of contagion required further restrictions, and partial or total lockdown measures were implemented again, according to the local severity of the contagion—producing what have been defined as "orange zones" and "red zones", respectively [5]. When the local contagion curve allowed it, these measures were gradually eased again at different extents—producing what has been defined as "yellow zones" [5]. Currently, a new wave of contagion is requiring a stricter implementation of these measures for the third time, confirming the cyclical nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. As of yet, there is still no clear indication of how long this pandemic and the restrictions needed to face it will continue. In the face of these unprecedented emergency circumstances, the present study endeavors to shed further light on the inescapable changes

that have derived from local community experience—paying specific attention to young citizens. A better understanding of these issues could represent a reliable starting point for local institutions and stakeholders to detect local resilient processes as well as unmet needs brought about by COVID-19-related restrictions and plan adequate interventions in order to foster a healthy and sustainable community. This would also be consistent with Goal 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, identified by the United Nations among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals for the 2030 agenda, which specifically requires actors to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable" (https://sdgs.un.org/goals accessed on 9 April 2021).

Indeed, it is undeniable that these recurring limitations have not been free from psychological costs, as they have brought about disruptive changes in daily lifestyles, habits, activities, and relationships, as well as in community life [3,6–8]. Due to the long periods of forced confinement and homestay, loneliness and loss of socialization opportunities have been noted among the most common experiences [3,7,9,10], and the difficulties related to not going out and not socializing have been among the most frequent experiences of individuals complying with social distancing measures. That is, by placing limitations on the chances for citizens to experience their neighborhood and relate to their neighbors, COVID-19-related limitations have challenged the meanings that could be traditionally attributed to local communities as relational spaces where everyone can take opportunities for daily face-to-face contact and social interactions with different people (i.e., other community members) [11]. Indeed, the notion of local community (e.g., a neighborhood community) is not only meant as a set of places and spaces with identifiable boundaries their members are aware of; it also refers to the psychological, social, symbolic, and cultural representations and meanings that revolve around these places and the experiences and relationships they host, which make those places meaningful to community members [11–13]. Thus, going out in urban common places, getting involved in serendipitous and planned encounters and interactions, seeing other community members out and about while going around, and taking part in shared activities and social gatherings represent critical components of local community experience [14–20]. That is, the social dimensions that compound community life are tightly intertwined with the chances for community members to hang out in local common places and take advantage of the opportunities they offer, and all these elements contribute to the meanings and representations citizens attach to their communities of belonging [11,21,22]. However, as a consequence of the COVID-19 outbreak and the measures needed to contain it, citizens were able to only partially experience local open-air places, which were available for short, individual walks but not as venues for social gatherings, serendipitous encounters, or shared activities. This has implied substantial changes to how community life and places are lived and how community relationships and interactions may happen, highlighting the need for enhanced urban resilience [23]. Specifically, the need for further open-air places and scheduled access to indoor ones has increased in order to avoid overcrowding risks and respect social distancing [24–26]. Thus, the cyclical nature of the ongoing pandemic and of the restrictions needed to control it have tested the principles and limits of modern urban planning and design, challenging professionals from different fields (e.g., planners, architects, and psychologists) as well as policymakers as to the need to think about how this crisis will change community life as well as the representations, uses, perceptions, and livability of urban public spaces [25–30]. Altogether, complying with the measures needed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and living in urban spaces according to them has produced a forced distance between citizens and their communities as interactive social entities, which may lead to a redefinition of the meanings attached by citizens to common places [31].

While this could suggest a stronger focus on the ongoing issues as individual matters [32] and the loss of the opportunities for citizens to experience their living places and community of belonging [31], the other side of the coin of large-scale disasters and huge emergencies is that they strengthen community members' feelings about sharing common sufferings [33,34]. Indeed, under these circumstances, the sense of belonging

to the community, the identification with it, and the tie to it can rather be strengthened by this perception of a common fate, which can foster stronger social connectedness and higher social cohesion [35–38]. Consistently, under large-scale disaster or emergency circumstances, citizens increase the frequency of their cooperative and helpful behaviors, enhancing neighborhood solidarity and supportive networks [38,39]—a tendency that has been named "communitas" [40], "therapeutic behavior" [41], or more recently "catastrophe compassion" [42]. These broader local social networks may serve as reorientation drivers, that is, elements that could help citizens in reconstructing their identities in a familiar environment after the disorientation that has been brought about by the outburst of the COVID-19 emergency and its unexpected consequences (e.g., the disruption of the meanings attached to home, places, relationships, and identity) [43].

Building on this, the present contribution aims to investigate individuals' experience of and attitudes towards their local community under this alternation of more and less strict lockdown and social distancing measures, which represents a fairly specific and unprecedented emergency circumstance whose impact is still to be deepened. Indeed, under these specific circumstances, citizens have alternatively experienced a forced, total or partial, loss of their opportunities to go out of their house and meet their acquaintances— during the total and partial lockdowns—and their reduction—that is, the loss of those opportunities that extended out of their neighborhood, during periods of partially eased restrictions. Such an alternation represents a new phenomenon, whose effects on citizens' local community experience have been disruptive, especially for younger citizens. Indeed, young adults highly value social opportunities as well as autonomy and independence boosts, which are strongly related to their evolutionary tasks [44]. They frequently drift away from their neighborhoods, managing their daily habits, relationships, and activities far from them [45]. Building on this, it seems evident that their lives have gone through a broad re-organization in which they could have remained distant from their neighborhoods or may rather have adapted their need for sociability, autonomy, and independence to the available opportunities, through a re-discovery of the social and environmental opportunities offered by their neighborhoods. A deeper understanding of the spontaneous strategies adopted by young citizens might be relevant for local stakeholders, socially and civically engaged associations and local groups, and policymakers to manage the changes brought about by the recent pandemic for at least two main reasons. First, it could allow the identification of the lost opportunities and unmet needs underlying these strategies, in order to take actions to implement old and new paths towards them that could comply with the current COVID-19-related measures. Second, it could also highlight elements of these changes to be kept in order to provide young citizens with a better experience of local places building on the old and new (re-)discoveries they have made due to the loss of their ordinariness. That is, these results could also provide precious hints about actions potentially strengthening young citizens' ties to their neighborhoods, which they rather often characterize as dormitories [45]. Furthermore, these results could also inform the current understanding of the short-term and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic—which has represented a new phenomenon as to its cyclical nature, as has been mentioned before—and open further research questions to be deepened.

In order to favor the exchange of ideas among the involved young citizens, which could open new viewpoints and provide social interactions at the same time, the above-mentioned aspects have been deepened using the World Café methodology, which is a participatory research method aimed at producing authentic and collaborative conversations about real-life topics that matter to participants [46–48]. The adoption of this methodology allowed taking advantage of dialogue, perspective sharing, and confrontation among the participants to determine shared feasible paths to improve the current situation in participants' neighborhoods. Indeed, broadening the range of available and thinkable actions through sharing individual viewpoints among participants and learning about alternative possible interpretations enlarges the range of paths towards shared goals that are perceived as feasible [48]. Through this process, a collective engagement in putting

together powers and ideas to step out of the current perceived powerlessness [48], which COVID-19-related measures could have strengthened, is possible.

2. The World Café Methodology

The World Café is a participatory research method that provides opportunities for a group to build community, share perspectives and viewpoints, and develop new ways of thinking about common issues involving all the participants and their communities [48]. That is, it allows building knowledge by relying on the active involvement of the participants in a process of social interaction and co-construction of awareness that is aimed at producing a change. Indeed, such an experience can help people in challenging previously held assumptions [49,50], producing new thoughts, and planning new paths towards newly set goals at last [47,48]. The main feature of the World Café is that all the participants are somehow connected to the topic under examination, which allows deeply informed and contextual specific feedbacks for a meaningful dialogue. Furthermore, it is led by different key principles [46,48]: (1) clarifying the context, (2) creating a welcoming space, (3) exploring questions that matter, (4) encouraging everyone's contribution, (5) cross-pollinating and connecting diverse people and ideas, (6) listening together for insights, patterns, and deeper questions, and (7) making collective knowledge visible.

Each World Café session comprises several rounds, which are led by different questions referring to the same overall topic; these questions are aimed at making participants explore new ideas about the main topic and progressing towards always more concrete issues about it [47]. Furthermore, having different questions is considered a useful way to address more inter-related topics while avoiding participants getting tired [51].

The participants spread around several tables in order to discuss these questions in small groups (which all discuss the same question at the same time). A participant for each table becomes the host and remains at the table, while the others spread around toward other tables at the end of each round to cross-pollinate ideas and produce new connections. At the start of each new round, the hosts share with the newcomers to their tables what has been discussed by the previous group, so that the conversation can continue from where it stopped, advancing toward an always deeper exploration of the topics, building upon previous ideas from other participants. The same procedure, with the same host, is repeated for each round. This procedure allows greater opportunities for the participants to share their ideas as part of a bigger, common process, through expressing their views in the smaller table discussions they take part in [47].

Each table is usually given a paper cloth and requested to remember important conversation points that emerged during the discussion using whatever means they find suitable (e.g., keywords, drawings, paths, memos, etc.); this helps in sharing table discoveries with other groups [52]. At the end of the last round, each group produces five keywords summing up the whole discussion held through the different rounds at that table. Then, the keywords are shared in the wider group using them as dominos: Someone who thinks that one of their keywords is particularly meaningful as to the topic talks first, putting it in the middle of the dominoes. Then, each one can add another keyword from their groups' ones, explaining to the wider group why it is related to what has already been said. This provides further opportunities to debate, produces shared knowledge, and sets common goals among all participants [47].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants

Participants were 78 second-year students attending a Methodologies for Community Psychology course as a part of their bachelor's degree program. They were enrolled in the bachelor's degree course in Psychological Sciences and Techniques at the University of Naples Federico II.

They were aged between 19 and 27 ($M = 20.92$; $SD = 1.11$); most of them (83.3%) were female. Most of them were single (96.2%), while 2.6% were married or in a cohabitant

relationship, and one participant did not disclose this information. Participants had been living in their neighborhoods for a range of years varying between 1 and 22 ($M = 17.29$; $SD = 6.22$). Half (50.1%) lived in a place near a major city, while 24.3% of them lived in a major city and 25.6% in a city.

3.2. Procedure

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychological Research of the Department of Humanities of the University of Naples Federico II with protocol number 19/2020.

Since the World Café is a creative methodology, with a flexible and adaptable format [47], a procedure quite different from the traditional one was adopted for the present study in order to comply with COVID-related social distancing and lockdown measures. That is, the whole process happened online. Two online platforms were simultaneously used in order to allow and foster ideas exchanges among participants: One included a group-calls feature in order to allow participants to discuss, and the other provided participants with a shared board to keep track of the process of thoughts developing in each group, just as if it was paper cloth.

The World Café consisted of two meetings held in December 2020, for a total of five rounds of about 20 min each. Overall, ten groups comprising 7–8 participants each were involved; due to online organizational constraints, no cross-pollination happened. The questions leading the five rounds were:

1. How has the way of living in urban spaces in your neighborhood changed due to COVID-19?
2. How have neighbors in your neighborhood kept in touch since the COVID-19 outbreak?
3. How would you favor the social meanings and dimensions of common spaces in your neighborhood?
4. How would you modify urban spaces in your neighborhood to enhance their livability?
5. Whom would you involve in order to implement these changes?

The graduality of the questions, from the current way of living in urban spaces in their neighborhood to how their social dimensions and meanings could be implemented and who to involve, was aimed at making participants progress towards more concrete intents and plans for actions in their discussion, since the "World Café is not only a process for sharing world views, but also a tool that creates the context for collective action" [48] (p. 3).

For each World Café meeting, each group had a shared online board available to keep track of important conversation points that emerged during the discussion by means of keywords, diagrams, drawings, paths, bullet points, memos, and whatever other means they felt were suitable. All the members of the same group were able to access the group board at the same time in order to visualize and modify it simultaneously. At the end of the last round of each meeting (that is, at the end of the third and fifth rounds), each group produced five keywords summing up the whole discussion held through the different rounds at that table during that World Café session and put them on virtual memos. Then, these keywords were shared with the wider group, using them as dominos by taking advantage of a shared online board (see Figures 1 and 2).
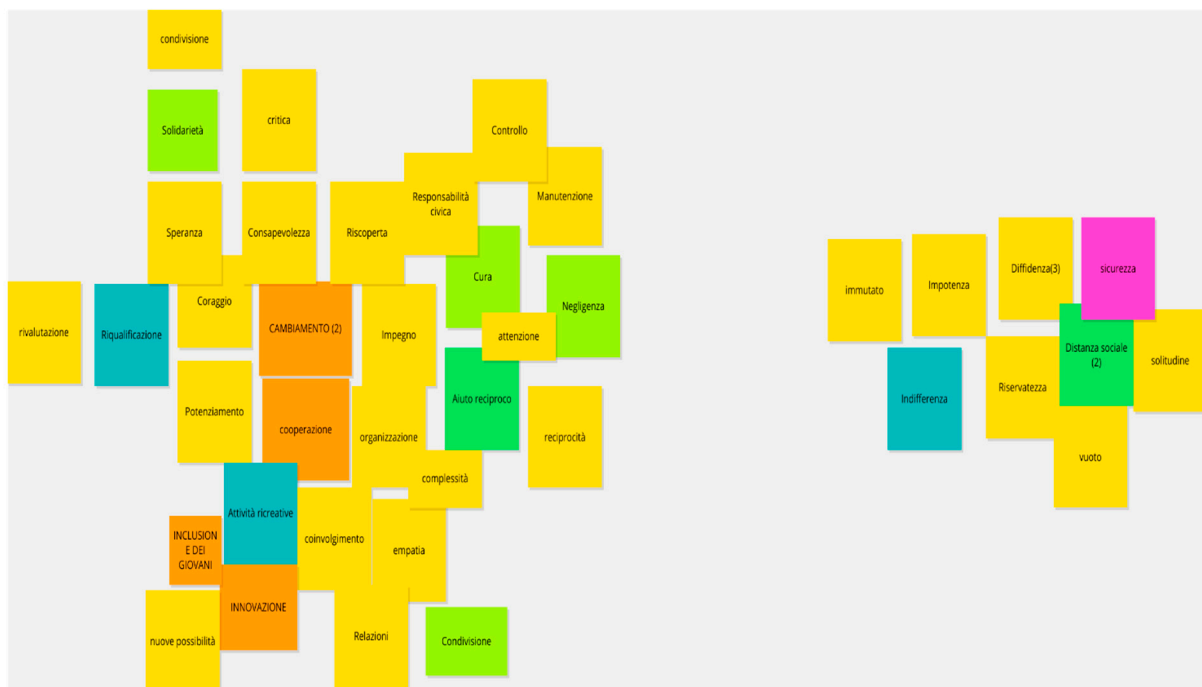
Figure 1. Board with the domino resulted from the keywords shared at the end of the first World Café session (that is, at the end of the first three rounds).
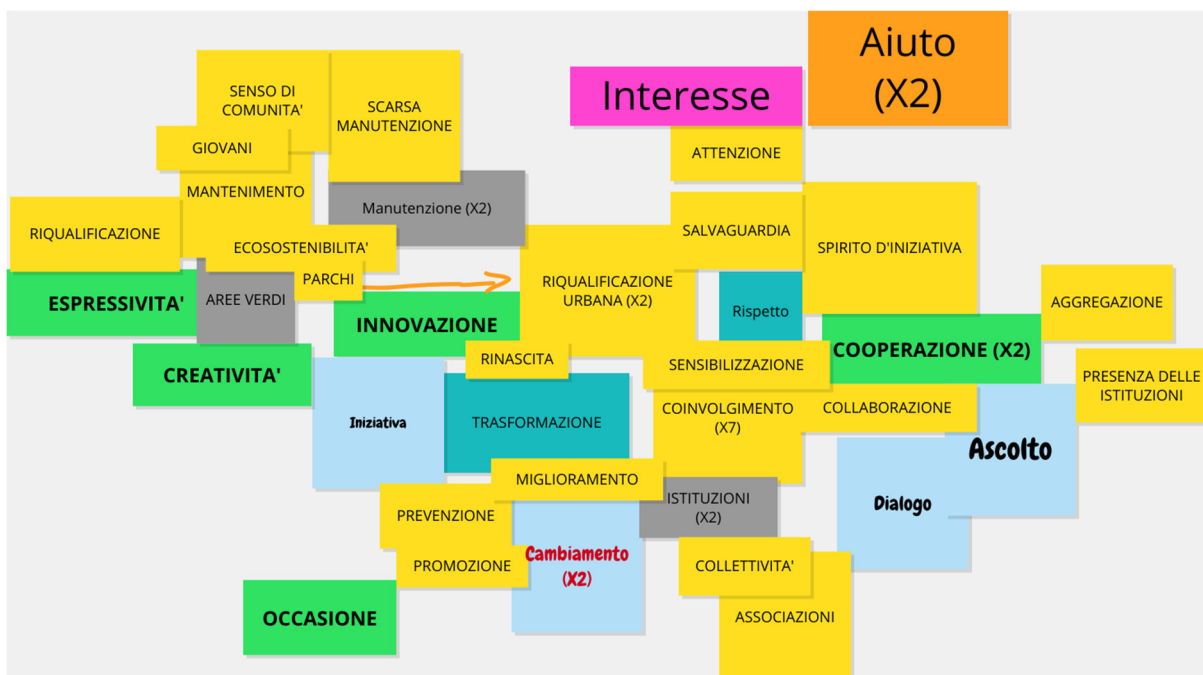

Figure 2. Board with the domino resulted from the keywords shared at the end of the second World Café session (that is, at the end of the fourth and fifth rounds).

Thematic analysis (TA) [53] was used to analyze the contents of the notes and boards each group left at the end of each meeting. It is a qualitative methodology aimed at identifying patterns of manifest and underlying meaning and social representations of the investigated phenomena through exploring how the contents and connections expressed by the participants structure common sense thinking [54]. In order to capture different meanings given to living in the local community of belonging under COVID-19-related

measures and restrictions, the TA was data-driven, so that the themes were strongly linked to the data. The analysis was run by the two authors, according to Braun and Clarke's guidelines [53]. Initially, each author read the materials several times and generated initial codes to label the extracts. Then, each researcher grouped the codes into potential themes and sub-themes, which were defined and labeled to clarify their meanings. The latter were discussed together in order to reach a consensus agreement.

4. Results

From the analysis—and consistently with the keywords dominos (see Figures 1 and 2) and with the related debate—the following four themes and ten subthemes emerged (see Table 1): (1) neighborhood experience under COVID-19-related measures, which included the subthemes about (a) indifference to local dimensions and (b) "forced" rediscovery of local dimensions; (2) COVID-19 effects on local relationships, which included the subthemes about (a) polarization of the relationship with neighbors and (b) distance from other community members and fear of getting infected; (3) desire for reappropriation, which included the subthemes about a) desire to exploit the previously forsaken urban open-air spaces, (b) desire for opportunities for community ties and encounters, and (c) denial of COVID-19 outbreak; (4) and citizens' power to improve their neighborhood, which included the subthemes about (a) sense of powerlessness, (b) delegation, and (c) involvement of citizens and creation of a local network.

Table 1. Summary of the results of the thematic analysis.

Themes	Subthemes
1. Neighborhood experience under COVID-19-related measures	Indifference to local dimensions
	"Forced" rediscovery of local dimensions
2. COVID-19 effects on local relationships	Polarization of the relationship with neighbors
	Distance from other community members and fear of getting infected
3. Desire for reappropriation	Desire to exploit the previously forsaken urban open-air spaces
	Desire for opportunities for community ties and encounters
	Denial of COVID-19 outbreak
4. Citizens' power to improve their neighborhood	Sense of powerlessness
	Delegation
	Involvement of citizens and creation of a local network

4.1. Neighborhood Experience under COVID-19-Related Measures

The first theme has been labeled neighborhood experience under COVID-19-related measures and includes the following dimensions: (a) indifference to local dimensions and (b) "forced" rediscovery of local dimensions.

These dimensions underline the first huge crossroad that emerges from the World Café. That is, moving from a previous homogeneous situation where participants were not active nor involved in their neighborhood community life, and were not used to visit local places nor to hang out with their neighbors in their spare time, two different—and quite opposite—paths developed under COVID-19-related restrictions.

On the one hand, about half of the participants reported that they were not used to hanging out in their neighborhoods and with their neighbors before the COVID-19 outburst, and this did not change under the COVID-19 restrictions, despite the impossibility of going far from their home for long periods. Most of them clarified that they had only been involved in their neighborhood and interested in it when they were younger—in most cases with specific reference to their childhood—and that by now they only visited it to buy groceries and to go to the tobacco store.

> *"The pandemic did not change how I live in my neighborhood. Even before the pandemic, I did not visit it that much. When I was younger, I was more participatory for sure."*

They attributed this change in their attitude towards their neighborhood to the displacement of their friendships and acquaintances to other neighborhoods or cities due to school and/or university attendance or to the lack of local meeting spots and socialization

opportunities. Consistently, their neighborhood was experienced for as long as the years in which they attended schools in it.

> *"Even before the pandemic, I did not hang out in my neighborhood, so nothing has changed. I admit that during my childhood I was more involved in it, but my interest waned when I started high school in another city."*

> *"Since before the COVID-19 outbreak and the related lockdown, I have lived in my neighborhood less and less, because as I have grown up, my meeting places have become others. Indeed, one consequence of living in a small village with few meeting spots and attending first high school and then university in the nearby city was experiencing the places in the city center more and those in my neighborhood much less."*

Specifically, an ambivalent relationship emerged with the neighborhood of belonging [55], which was connoted as the places they hung out in and the community they felt part of when they were younger but not as the one they felt part of and identified with in their present. This distancing from the neighborhood of belonging and the community inhabiting it seems somehow distinctive of how young citizens live in their neighborhoods in modern communities: Indeed, previous studies have already shown that in modern times, young citizens often perceive their local communities of belonging as lacking developmental opportunities for themselves and for the community as a whole, which is rather perceived as a static entity [56,57]. This makes identification processes harder [56,57]. For the present participants, this distancing was even stronger, since they had attended schools out of their neighborhoods, which had brought about the establishment of friendship relationships out of it too [45]. Consistently, even COVID-19-related measures and the forced and prolonged stay in their neighborhood due to them seemed not enough to focus their attention again on their surrounding environment and community, to strengthen their perception of its inadequacy, or to re-evaluate it.

On the other hand, other participants stated that the forced and prolonged homestay had made them appreciate their neighborhoods more.

> *"The few times I find myself walking through the streets of my neighborhood, I dwell much more on its beauties, especially during Christmas time."*

> *"Before the lockdown, I did not hang out in my neighborhood, because I tended to move to other neighborhoods; now, due to the current restrictions and not being able to move to other neighborhoods, I am rediscovering some of its areas, even if in a limited way."*

They expressly highlighted that, despite the above-mentioned ambivalent relationship with their neighborhood and of their distancing from it over time, COVID-19-related restrictions had brought them to re-evaluate their surrounding environment. In doing so, they achieved a renewed and heightened focus on both local strengths and problems, which made them feel closer to their neighborhood again.

> *"Before the COVID-19 outbreak, we certainly weakly lived in our neighborhoods and frequently tended to move away. This led us to estrange ourselves from our places of belonging, which have always offered few initiatives for young people, and to move to places where the nightlife was guaranteed. During this pandemic, however, as we found ourselves unable to move, we have been forced to experience our neighborhoods/towns, rediscovering the problems and strengths of the community and, consequently, getting closer to it."*

> *"The way I live in my neighborhood has changed drastically. I have never fully experienced the place where I live—except when I was a child—and the causes are different: Growing up, I have lost interest in going to the same places, I have lost the friends I had as a child, I have met people from different backgrounds. But now my neighborhood is the only place where I can go out, have fun, and be in company from a distance. I, therefore, changed my way of experiencing and seeing it, going out at least once a day if only to take a walk."*

From participants' words, how COVID-19-related restrictions allowed citizens to "get closer" to their neighborhoods emerges. That is, by forcing individuals to go out into their neighborhoods, these measures somehow allowed the rediscovery of local resources and potentialities, which could allow greater awareness of the opportunities the neighborhood offered [55]. Furthermore, this "forced" stay has given young citizens a stronger awareness of the weaknesses that contribute to making the neighborhood a less livable and interactive community, allowing them to think about these aspects as something that could be tackled and improved through citizens' active engagement —as it emerges in other themes— perhaps thanks to the greater maturity they acquired since the last time they enjoyed their neighborhoods.

4.2. COVID-19 Effects on Local Relationships

The second theme has been labeled COVID-19 effects on local relationships and includes the following dimensions: (a) polarization of the relationship with neighbors and (b) distance from other community members and fear of getting infected.

These dimensions outline the more complex effects COVID-19-related restrictions have had on local dimensions when it comes to social interactions and relationships. That is, the effects and consequences of these measures on the relationships with neighbors and with other neighborhood members at large (that is, people participants could meet while going around in their neighborhoods who were not living in their building) were shaped differently according to respondents' words.

As to the relationships with neighbors living in the same building, a strong polarization emerged. Moving from a previous climate of generalized indifference, some of the participants reckoned that their relationships with neighbors had improved after the COVID-19 outburst. In some cases, they attributed this positive shift to the "forced" opportunities for deeper reciprocal knowledge provided by COVID-19-related measures, up to discovering shared interests and common visions and creating close relationships. Indeed, while not being able to go out of their neighborhood and hang out with their usual social networks, out of the hectic pace of everyday life, citizens became able to look around and get in touch with people they basically had met every day for years.

> "The time of the lockdown [...] brought me closer to my neighbors, with whom I found myself talking much more often. I got to know them a lot more in those three months than in the last 20 years."

> "The relationship with my neighbors has improved a lot. Specifically, I made friends with my neighbor's daughter, who is almost my age. Together we took long walks in our neighborhood and long chats at the window, each one in their own home. To date, we are real friends, we hear from each other regularly, and sometimes we even go out together."

Furthermore, the feeling of "being in this together" prompted affiliative behaviors and stronger solidarity among them [36], which is the other element to which participants attributed the improvement of the relationships with their neighbors. This solidarity and prosocial tendency could substantiate what Zaki [42] recently defined as "catastrophe compassion".

> "Our relationship has certainly changed, because if before it was limited to greetings and the usual pleasantries, now maybe we are more united, because we are in this together, and even if we cannot physically meet, we hear each other on the phone more frequently."

> "Over the years, there has always been a relationship of ups and downs that has stabilized clearly following the pandemic, where there has been greater mutual availability and a pleasant exchange of gestures."

> "During the pandemic, we certainly tried to be more united and to help each other as much as possible. Everyone tried in their own small way to be available for others, for example, avoiding letting the elderly out—since they are a group at greater risk of contagion—and making purchases online and in-person for them. [...] Now we know we can count on each other in case of need, especially after some emergencies."

Overall, this seems consistent with previous studies suggesting that a large-scale emergency can strengthen citizens' ties to their community of belonging, reinforcing their feelings of connectedness and belonging as well as their identification with it in the face of shared suffering [33,34,36–38].

Nevertheless, other participants rather noted a strong worsening of their relationships with others living in the same building. In some cases, this was attributed to previous conflicts or gaps that had been worsened by the forced proximity due to COVID-19-related measures—which seems somehow the other side of the coin, consistent with the acknowledgment that emergencies also represent periods of stress and pressure for social relationships [36].

> *"The relationships with my neighbors have deteriorated somewhat. They are quite annoying people, and during the lockdown, their presence was felt—and not a little."*

However, the main cause to which participants attributed this negative tendency in the relationships with their neighbors was the mainstream perception that the Other could generally be the carrier through which the virus could reach their houses and families. This has also brought about self-imposed limitations on social moments and opportunities out of the households (e.g., avoiding small talk while waiting for the escalator).

> *"The relationships with my neighbors have never been very intimate, but in recent months they have particularly cooled down because each of us sees the others as a possible danger, as the ones who can transmit the virus to us and compromise both ourselves and our households."*

> *"There is practically no relationship with neighbors anymore, as you always try to avoid any kind of contact, both for your own health and others'."*

The same tendency mainly characterizes the relationships with people going around in the neighborhood, who have undergone self-imposed limitations to social moments and opportunities too.

> *"Before the COVID-19 outbreak, we stopped even for a few minutes to chat in the street; now, this happens from the balconies or it doesn't happen at all, and the conversation in person is preferred over the telephone, so you feel a little distance."*

However, the distance that arises causes ambivalence in the participants: While they talk about it with homesickness and mourning, they also believe that by now this distance is commonly felt as "synonymous with safety" and broader health protection. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that it has produced a void both as a relational lack and as the concrete emptying of common places within the neighborhood.

> *"These circumstances of uncertainty inevitably lead people to distance themselves from others, they are insecure of the slightest contact with each other, for the matter of preventing their own health."*

> *"By now, reciprocity is drastically lacking due to social distance, a distance that today is almost synonymous with safety, whose wake is a cold indifference, but which at the same time brings a deep sense of emptiness, loneliness, powerlessness."*

> *"The places in my neighborhood that were most populated before the COVID-19 outbreak are currently semi-deserted."*

> *"The way we live in our neighborhood has changed, especially in the activities that we can carry out today. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, local common places were lived in for the most part with friends, while today for the most part they are frequented in a solitary way or with someone belonging to the family unit at most."*

4.3. Desire for Reappropriation

Despite the above-mentioned crossroads among participants, they all converged towards a common desire, that is, to give back local social dimensions to their neighborhoods.

This theme, which has been labeled the desire for reappropriation, comprises the two main elements on which participants focused regarding their desire for reappropriation of local social dimensions, that is, local social spaces and opportunities for local interactions and community ties. Consistently, this theme includes the following dimensions: (a) the desire to exploit the previously forsaken urban open-air spaces, (b) the desire for opportunities for community ties and encounters, and (c) denial of the COVID-19 outbreak. That is, a crossroad emerged for this theme too.

Indeed, regarding the desire for social spaces, most participants mentioned the possibility of and need for an urban redevelopment of the open-air spaces that were already present in their neighborhood yet had been forsaken due to institutions' and citizens' lack of attention and care.

> *"In my neighborhood, there are several spaces that could potentially favor the social dimensions; however, due to the lack of controls and to the little interest of the community, these areas are abandoned and over time have become unusable."*

> *"It would be useful to reuse the unused spaces of the neighborhood by creating solutions that encourage the participation of the inhabitants of the neighborhood and beyond."*

Overall, the focus on open-air spaces seems consistent with the widely spread acknowledgment that due to the COVID-19 outbreak, open-air spaces currently represent safer settings for social encounters and interactions—at least under low COVID-19 contagion circumstances—as has also been mentioned by participants. Several ideas and concrete elements that could make these areas more welcoming and livable for citizens, fostering the chance to use them as meeting spots, have also been proposed.

> *"I would definitely add something to the park in my municipality, which is very beautiful and very large but also really empty. It would be nice to add some benches to enjoy the view and maybe a few merry-go-rounds for families who go out with their children, but something more should be added for young people too."*

> *"I would use the green areas as key points of the neighborhood, redeveloping them and also organizing events for young people in these places, in order to repopulate the neighborhood with young people."*

However, a small number of participants rather expressed a desire for indoor meeting spaces and opportunities as well as broad social gatherings, which conflicts with the well-known guidelines and restrictions issued by the national government and local and worldwide health authorities [2,4,5], suggesting a sort of denial of the COVID-19 outbreak and of the risks and harmful consequences that have stemmed from it and brought about the need for the above-mentioned restrictions and guidelines.

> *"In my opinion, more initiatives could be implemented for young citizens, such as events and sports games that can improve the territory and give greater opportunities of knowledge both of the neighborhood and among peers."*

> *"I would promote the organization of cultural events (art exhibitions, presentation of books, concerts, theatrical performances)."*

> *"I would organize more festivals and feasts, social and cultural events, to increase the sense of community and the culture within the neighborhood."*

Nevertheless, while going against the trend as to the preventive measures for COVID-19 spread, these wishes also show a desire for local social and cultural enrichment as well as for an enhancement of opportunities for local ties and a sense of community.

Overall, the main purpose participants expressed was to make their neighborhoods more livable and enjoyable for young citizens too—which seems consistent with their age range. Regardless of the kind of social space participants wished for, they all believed that their neighborhoods needed more face-to-face social opportunities that could allow the building of community and strengthening of the ties among members [18–20,58], and

explicitly wished for this to happen. Indeed, broad attention to the opportunities for local redevelopment is typical of the disaster recovery process [59].

> *"More open-air spaces, especially parks, which under circumstances like the one we are experiencing can allow people to relate face-to-face safely."*

> *"A place that you can attend even in periods like the present one and therefore where it is possible to respect the safety distance but at the same time meet people we have not seen for months."*

Specifically, they believed that having local places encouraging encounters and interactions among community members could enhance the sense of belonging to that community, the identification with it, and the sense of community at last as side effects [11–13,19,58].

> *"I would add a meeting place that purely concerns the neighborhood and the people who live there, because all the available meeting places concern all the people of the municipality and also people who come from other municipalities. Instead, we would need something that makes us feel we belong to this particular neighborhood and that makes us want to have something to do with those who live there."*

> *"We would need meeting places that relate purely to the neighborhood and/or municipality of residence and all the people who live there, in order to increase our sense of belonging to a community and motivate us to more assiduously go out in our own town."*

Furthermore, participants also highlighted that not only available and frequentable local spaces, but also the involvement in local social and civic initiatives and associations could play a relevant role in the opportunities to broaden citizens' local social network and help them feel actively involved in their community, strengthening their sense of community at last [11,12,60–65].

> *"A fundamental step is to create initiatives that bring the population closer to their own town; certainly, feeling an active part of a community invites them to more assiduously live in their neighborhood."*

> *"I would bring back to life associations such as ACR (Azione Cattolica Ragazzi, Catholic Action for Youths), or meetings of young people who were in church, also discussing topics not necessarily concerning the latter, or I would set up meetings to exchange ideas or books."*

> *"It would be critical to carve out moments of social contact for the community by organizing social events, including cultural ones; in this way, we believe it could be possible not only to strengthen social ties, but also to have more activities available for young people."*

Indeed, active participation within the community of belonging is able to foster the creation and maintenance of significant social relationships out of family ones and favors the integration in and connectedness to the community [66,67]. Furthermore, being members of socially and civically active associations or groups means developing an individual commitment and assuming responsibilities for the identification of local critical issues, the use of individual and common resources to face them, and the enhancement of a common vision to produce changes for the community at last [11,62,63,68,69].

4.4. Citizens' Power to Improve Their Neighborhood

The last theme has been labeled citizens' power to improve their neighborhood and includes the following dimensions: (a) a sense of powerlessness, (b) delegation, and (c) the involvement of citizens and creation of a local network.

The need for a change that could make their neighborhoods more livable for their members clearly stemmed from participants' words.

> *"Certainly, many of us need a change, something that makes us feel alive and active in the communities where we live."*

They believed that such a change is not easy to activate, yet they also showed some clear ideas about how to work towards this aim. The main tendency that emerged was the acknowledgment that everyone should take responsibility and actively engage in order to propose ideas and plans to improve the current conditions of their neighborhoods, redevelop their forsaken open-air spaces, and make them available and frequentable again for community members. They suggested that a local network focused on taking actions with this aim could be set up involving citizens, associations, and institutions, since each of these social actors plays a specific role and holds specific skills and powers with reference to the goals they aimed to achieve.

"Making such a change is not easy. For this reason, I would involve as many people as possible. First, it would be right to involve the relevant institutions of the neighborhood, such as schools with children and teachers, but not only. I would also ask my neighborhood church for help, as it has always tried to help, and I know it would not hold back. Obviously, I would also bring the municipality into the question, asking for the support of many workers of different categories, such as having more and more active ecological operators in very busy and dirty areas. Finally, I would seek support from my friends and peers by trying to raise awareness about the importance of common spaces and mutual respect."

"To activate a change, there must be dialogue between institutions and community members first, so that there would be a citizens' initiative and active involvement."

"We need to understand how to actively change something that we have thought would always remain the same until now: Being a citizen also means taking action to make things more advantageous not only for oneself, but also for those who will follow. Consequently, we think it would be nice to be able to cooperate with those who can concretely carry out these changes. There are few opportunities where we live—mostly clubs—and it would be good to be able to change this through everyone's commitment."

It seems like participants acknowledged a need for what has been defined as a sense of responsible togetherness (SoRT) [63,64]—that is, a representation of community members being actively involved in the community, having equal opportunities, respecting and supporting each other, and taking responsibilities to improve individual and community circumstances. Indeed, citizens with SoRT believe that individuals' and groups' active involvement within their local communities represents a key element in order to play out actions aimed at improving local conditions. Lastly, participants also reckon the broadening of local social networks and the strengthening of citizens' ties to their community as side advantages of this way of representing and living in their community of belonging [70].

"Only through taking care of, controlling, and maintaining shared spaces, aware of our sense of civic responsibility, can we courageously obtain their revaluation, redevelopment, and enhancement, but also open the scenario to new possibilities and innovations with the introduction of recreational activities that could allow the inclusion of young people who, through knowing each other, could establish relationships and new friendships within the same neighborhood."

"I would focus on the involvement of young people, precisely because they would become the main users of those spaces; in general, I would tend to involve the entire community in order to be able to strengthen local bonds."

However, some other minor tendencies emerged too: To delegate to local institutions and expert professionals without considering the critical role citizens could play by taking responsibility and actively engaging, and to feel powerless in the face of the current status of their community places, which seemed also worsened by the acknowledgment that the COVID-19 outbreak and related current circumstances posed further limitations to the chances to play out changes regarding community places and relationships. Indeed, some participants referred to mayors, institutions, and professionals as the only ones having enough skills and power to implement the desired changes. Others referred to

feeling like all their ideas and proposals were utopias, since they felt either at the mercy of recent changes of scenario and limitations and thus unable to think about how to play out improvements for their community or overwhelmed by the widespread indifference they perceived in it, and thus unable to promote citizens' engagement for their community.

> *"We would turn to municipal bodies and mayors, as they are those who have the technical skills and the power to be able to implement these changes."*

> *"We perceive a strong sense of powerlessness, almost as if each of us is just a passive subject who is powerlessly subjected to the future of these continuous events and changes."*

> *"However, all our proposals seemed a utopia more than anything else to us: Beyond the COVID-19 outburst, there are many people who remain indifferent to the everyday life that surrounds them, and who therefore commit themselves to redeveloping and rediscovering their neighborhood and community very little or not at all, moving further and further away from it."*

5. Discussion

The present study was aimed at investigating the changes in young citizens' experience of and attitudes towards their local community of belonging due to COVID-19-related lockdown and social distancing measures, which represent fairly specific and unprecedented emergency circumstances. That is, citizens have alternatively experienced a forced, total or partial, loss of their opportunities to go out and meet their acquaintances—during the total and partial lockdowns—or their reduction—that is, the loss of those opportunities that extended out of their neighborhood, during periods of partially eased restrictions. The effects of this alternation of stricter and more eased restrictions on citizens' local community experience require further attention, being a new and unprecedented phenomenon. This is particularly relevant to younger citizens, who often show outward movements from their neighborhoods [45] and for whom social opportunities as well as autonomy and independence boosts are critical to their evolutionary tasks [44].

Overall, the above-mentioned restrictions, which have cyclically repeated consistently with the continuous and cyclical nature of the pandemic, have shown a twofold effect on young citizens' local community experience. That is, on the one hand, they have fostered a renewed attention to local dimensions and an enhanced desire to actively engage and take responsibility in order to improve the current conditions of their community of belonging, making it more welcoming and livable according to participants' needs as well as to the ongoing pandemic. However, on the other hand, they have rather enhanced the distance from and indifference towards local dimensions and a sense of powerlessness or even attitudes that imply a denial of COVID-19-related restrictions and consequences. A similar tendency emerged as to the relationships among neighbors too: Some participants reported increased rates of solidarity and supportiveness, which had helped in enhancing the relationships with their neighbors, while others talked about a broader distance from their neighbors, which was mainly due to the mainstream tendency to perceive the Other as a potential threat and to the reduction of serendipitous opportunities for small talks and quick interactions, which were both consequences of the awareness about COVID-19 contagion modes and of the related restrictions.

These results suggest that after almost a year since the COVID-19 outbreak, the participants were at different stages of the recovery process. Indeed, the two different reactions emerging from participants' words should not be considered as two different effects of COVID-19-related restrictions on citizens' local community experience, but rather as two stages of the recovery process after an emergency outburst. Some participants noted emotions, perceptions, and reactions to the emergency that are typical of what has been defined as disillusionment phase [32] or as disorientation [43], in which the reality of deaths, deconstruction, and broader losses becomes evident and makes individuals aware of what cannot be undone, ratifying somehow the end of their daily life as they knew it. That is, individuals realize that what has been familiar, usual, and comfortable

to them is no longer possible, and this gives way to repeated moves, lack of physical and social resources, bewilderment, a sense of powerlessness, or even denial. Conversely, other participants seemed engaged in what has been defined as reorientation [43] and rebuilding phase [32]. That is, participants relied on what had been familiar and valuable to them during their childhood (places and relationships in their neighborhoods) in order to reconstruct their identity and re-establish "ordinary" functioning and daily habits. In addition, they started to think up new strategies aimed at preserving this functioning and these habits in the case of further outbursts of the emergency—which was also fairly likely to happen due to the cyclical nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is true with reference to both individual and community life. However, it should be mentioned that previous studies [43,59] have also shown that the phases of the recovery process after a large-scale emergency do not represent a linear continuum, but rather a repeated cycle, which prevents making assumptions about which attitude could be considered as farther in the recovery process.

Nevertheless, the present results provide a first step in unpacking how resilience has been shaped in the face of the broad emergency that has affected individuals and communities worldwide. That is, these results outline the processes on which individuals and communities have relied in order to bounce back from the disruptive changes the COVID-19 outbreak has brought about. As to the individual level, one of the most relevant aspects emerging from this study is that the communities of belonging—that is, neighborhood communities—may have worked as anchors to which young citizens clung as an attempt not to be overwhelmed by the disorientation brought about by the loss of almost all the elements that usually marked their daily life (e.g., routines, life places, face-to-face sociability)—regardless of them escaping their communities and sometimes depreciating them before the COVID-19 outburst. This result stands with others [59] in suggesting the need for the promotion of more meaningful and actively engaged people–place relationships as drivers for recovery processes under emergency circumstances. While the evident advantage of this process would be that local communities of belonging may help young citizens in not being overwhelmed by disorientation, distress, anxiety, and other pandemic-related negative feelings, other less evident advantages could stem too. Indeed, participants' words suggest that this process has implicitly caused young citizens to get closer to their neighborhoods and neighbors, positively re-evaluate them, and play out more cooperative and helpful behaviors towards other community members, which has, in turn, enhanced community resilience too [71]. Indeed, what emerged also suggests that communities have built upon local social capital and supportiveness to face the pandemic, with younger and healthier citizens making themselves available to help more fragile ones. This could be due to a renewed identification with the community and its members, which builds upon local shared spaces and meanings and is further strengthened by the acknowledgment that "they are in this together" [11–13,33–38].

Despite the continuous and cyclical nature of this pandemic, attributing the differences in the stages of the recovery process that emerged among participants to the different severity of local contagion seems hard and reckless, since the participants were from cities and towns all undergoing similar circumstances in December 2020—that is, when data have been collected. Thus, this difference may be rather attributed to individual and contextual resources that could have allowed citizens to more or less quickly move across phases, since participants were from different kinds of communities (that is, neighborhoods of different sizes located in towns and cities of different sizes). For example, previous studies have shown that levels of disaster training and experience, intelligence, and previous history of mental health problems may have a role in the onset of what has been defined as "disaster syndrome"—that is, they can impact individuals' cognitive functioning in the face of disasters [72]. As to the behavioral and emotional aspects, local supportive networks and social capital, individual and community resilience and preparedness to face disasters, citizens' tie to the community and responsibility towards it, their attitude towards local places and resources, and their trust in institutions and their communications may represent

protective factors too [36,37,43,73]. Consistently, further research questions emerge about the role that individual and contextual characteristics may play in individuals' progress across these phases in the face of emergencies that are characterized not only by continuity, but also by cyclicality—that is, they alternate phases of more serious risk with phases of relative "normality". Indeed, understanding how adaptive responses have been shaped in the face of the ongoing pandemic and how to promote adaptive coping strategies in the short-term and longer-term aftermath represents a critical and urgent challenge to be tackled, since this could help in safeguarding individual and community integrity and well-being [74] in the face of a pandemic whose duration we do not know yet.

Limitations

The results of this study provide insights into how young citizens are spontaneously reacting to the COVID-19 outbreak and the related restrictions in Italy after almost a year since the COVID-19 outbreak. However, the present one is an untraditional use of the World Café methodology. Indeed, while it is usually aimed at detecting and implementing new paths for community transformation, in this case, it has been used to activate processes of stepping out of the current powerlessness [48]—which had been further loaded by the COVID-19 outbreak—and imagining new means of involvement and engagement in their rediscovered communities, fostering reorientation processes rooted in participants' identification with and belonging to their neighborhood. Nevertheless, while it was not aimed at explicitly activating local transformative processes—which would have also been difficult to play out in the short term due to COVID-19-related restrictions—it is undeniable that the peculiarities of this methodology allowed participants to share ideas and open new perspectives about their neighborhoods and the potentialities arising from their engagement in and for them. That is, some transformative potential and proposals emerged too, as is shown by the themes.

Furthermore, the online adaptation of this methodology had several advantages—e.g., allowing the implementation of these processes even under lockdown and social distancing measures—but also proved to have some limitations that required some changes in the original methodology—for example, moving the whole organization online implied a difficulty in implementing cross-pollination processes across groups.

Lastly, it should be mentioned that the participants belonged to different neighborhoods that had different environmental and social features and were open or closed to different extents [16]. This represented a difficulty to be faced in the first steps of the work, since it made it initially hard for participants to meet and match the proposed questions. However, while thinking about the latter, believing that they all shared the same experience regarding the COVID-19 pandemic represented a critical element to move on.

Overall, despite these limitations, the present research meets transferability criteria [75] and provides meaningful insights in unraveling how neighborhood experience and relationships, a sense of community, people–place relationships, and individual and community resilience have been shaped when challenged by COVID-19-related restrictions and the subsequent upheaval.

6. Conclusions

The COVID-19 outbreak has assumed the characteristics of a continuous and cyclical emergency, which alternates phases of more serious risk with phases of relative "normality" in citizens' and communities' lives. COVID-19-related restrictions follow the same trend.

The present results provide a first picture of how young citizens have reacted to this after ten months since its start, that is, when its cyclical nature was becoming a fact more than a worry. Building on what emerged, local dimensions and community relationships seem able to act as anchors to which citizens—especially young ones—may cling to recover from the disorientation caused by the COVID-19 outbreak and detect new "ordinary" functioning and daily habits [43]. Indeed, being able to take advantage of local places and enjoy local relationships with neighbors could provide citizens with environmental

and social landmarks that could help them in creating new habits, routines, and purposes, preventing them from being overwhelmed by the lack of meaning and activity brought about by COVID-19 outbreak.

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