

NEWS TRUST AND ENGAGEMENT ON FACEBOOK: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF GEN Z AND MILLENNIALS IN URBAN PAKISTAN

Awais Siddique¹, Qaiser Iqbal², Dr. Muhammad Naseem Anwar^{*3}

¹MPhil School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad,

²Lecturer, Department of History and Politics, University of Haripur, KP,

^{*3}Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Arts, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Hamdard University Islamabad Campus

¹asiddique@ir.qau.edu.pk, ²qaiserrqbal@gmail.com, ^{*3}Naseem.anwar@hamdard.edu.pk

Corresponding Author: *

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the generational differences in news consumption on Facebook and factors of trust, engagement, and motivations among Gen Z (18–24 years) and Millennials (25–40 years) in urban centers of Pakistan. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and Framing Theory, this research employs a mixed-method approach integrating digital ethnography, secondary data analysis, and survey responses from a purposive sample to explore the behavioral and perceptual dynamics of these generational cohorts. The findings reveal a distinct generational pattern: while Millennials display a higher trust in Facebook as a news source and prioritize information-seeking, Gen Z engages more actively through likes, shares, and comments, often influenced by emotional and sensational framing. Facebook's algorithmic news delivery emerges as a critical factor shaping the consumption habits of both generations, where Gen Z heavily relies on personalized feed and Millennials were found more inclined toward verified news sources. These behaviors highlight generational disparities in seeking gratification, with Gen Z favoring entertainment and social connection while Millennials valuing credible information. Practical implications include the need for social media platforms to enhance transparency of news in terms of content framing and algorithmic personalization. While recommending the application of targeted strategies to foster trust across different generational cohorts, this study also addresses methodological and contextual limitations, paving the way for future research on cross-platform news consumption. By synthesizing theoretical insights with empirical findings, the research contributes to a nuanced understanding of generational shifts in digital news engagement and their implications for media practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

Keywords: Social Media, News Consumption, Generational Differences, Media Trust, Digital Engagement

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has replaced conventional news outlets with becoming the primary source of information, especially in urban areas (Ghafoor, 2022). Corresponding to

this global trend and amplified internet penetration, Pakistan also underwent this transformation where Facebook has emerged as platform for consumption of news with over 44

million active users mostly in urban centers (Kemp, 2023). This shift was enabled by the distinctive characteristic of social media platforms offering real-time updates and direct user participation in the news process (Jensen, 2022). Even though Facebook has emerged as an influential space for dissemination of information, there are fundamental questions about reliability and accuracy of news content that is consumed or shared by the users. Moreover, the selective exposure, algorithmic biases, and gate breaking traits of platforms like Facebook also give way to misinformation (Frischlich et al., 2020). Considering the influence of such platforms on society at large, it is essential for policymakers and media practitioners to understand how users trust and interact with news on Facebook.

Scholars had perspicaciously studied the generational differences in social media usage, especially for news consumption (Keller et al., 2020) but in case of Pakistan, there is a research gap of how various age groups (Gen Z and Millennials) interact with and trust news information on Facebook. Unlike the older generation, both Gen Z and Millennials use Facebook as primary source for news and are more skeptical towards traditional mainstream news platforms (Anderson et al., 2021). However, their trust in the social media content also varies greatly owing to the misinformation and biases in news coverage (Fletcher et al., 2021). In this context, Gen-Z understands credibility of news to a lesser extent than Millennials as the latter had more exposure to the traditional media than former and therefore the former is more susceptible to consuming dubious news content on such platforms due to their lesser media literacy. Similarly, Gen Z largely relies on the information shared by their peers while Millennials prefer well-known news sources and are wary of sensational headlines and political biases (Holton et al., 2020). Even though both generations are considered digital natives, their interactions and preferences of using social media themselves varies to a larger degree, where Gen Z prefer short form, visual, and interactive content (McKinsey & Company, 2020), while Millennials opt for long-form news articles and debates on current affairs (Pew Research Center, 2022).

This study aims to bridge the research gap of examining the news consumption behavior,

engagement, and trust variation among generational lines by focusing on the increasing influence of Facebook algorithmic news feed on the level of trust of Gen Z and Millennials residing in urban centers of Pakistan and analyzing various framing strategies i.e. use of images and headlines (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2019). Another rationale for the study is to offer insights to policymakers and media practitioners to tailor their content for enhancing the engagement and trust of audience in the digital age.

1. Literature Review

The emergence of Facebook as one of the central platforms for news consumption shows the transition from traditional to digital mediums (Newman et al., 2017). Pakistan mirrors this transition as a report suggests that growing number of young users in urban centers use the social media platforms for news consumption, especially for breaking news and information updates on social issues. However, their interaction with the content varies to various levels. A study by Azeema and Nazuk (2017) also upholds this view while adding that visual journalism i.e., videos and live broadcasts are more engaging and easier to share among their peers. However, there is a generational difference in the use of social media as a news platform, especially the behavior and content consumption patterns.

Previous studies related to the generational difference in using social media platforms for news show that Gen Z focuses on the immediacy and visually appealing formats in contrast to Millennials who tend to engage in reflective media consumption seeking in-depth coverage and verification from multiple sources (Bouliane et al., 2022). This difference is founded in the different socialization processes and media exposure of both generations, where Gen Z had grown up in the digital era being accustomed to bite-size and fragmented content (Chadwick, 2019). Whereas Millennials had exposure to traditional news platforms before the mass-adaptation to digital platforms as primary source for news, therefore they exhibit hybrid media behavior (Bennett & Segerberg, 2020).

In order to analyze the varying behavior of both generations, Gen Z and Millennials, in terms of

their news consumption, trust, and engagement on Facebook, two theories namely, uses and gratification theory and framing theory were employed to get a holistic view of the problem.

In the 1970's, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch devised a framework through which individual needs and motivations driving media consumption could be studied, calling it Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT). This theory asserts that media consumption of individuals is based on their certain requirements like being informed, socialize, or entertain (Rubin, 2009). In this research, UGT is used to analyze the user's engagement with news posts and their gratification, and it is relevant to this study because both generations are heavily influenced by the features of social media (Duggan, 2015). The motivation for news consumption on Facebook for both generations also vary where Millennials use it for its ease, multitasking ability and to get the social context of the news (Molyneux, Holton, & Lewis, 2017) whereas Gen Z is derived by the rapid access, visual content, and social engagement (Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). However, in both scenarios the user's motivation ranged from seeking informative content to fulfilling their emotional need. UGT helps us to understand the media consumption patterns of individuals based on the demographics and social context, such as Facebook being the preferred medium of news consumption for young individuals in Pakistan (Tufekci, 2014). On Facebook, users actively engage with the news content such as liking, sharing, and commenting on it, whatever gratifies them (LaRose, 2010).

Although the UGT emphasized the motivation behind media consumption, Framing Theory focuses on the construction of news content i.e., language, visuals, headlines etc. and its subsequent influence on audience perception and engagement (Scheufele, 1999). The relevance of framing theory in this study is due to its ability to articulate the user engagement with news content on Facebook as the platform's algorithm impacts what users see and prioritizes certain stories over others (Chadwick, 2019). Research also highlights that news framing influences the perception of news such as its credibility and trustworthiness and in case of social media also the engagement of users. For instance, sensational and emotional

news headlines catch more attention and higher engagement but if the content is framed as biased or misleading it erodes the trust of user (Friggeri et al., 2014). However, balanced, and neutral framing enhances trust but decreases engagement of users and thus less chances of virality (Benkler, 2018). This is pertinent in this study as Gen Z is more inclined towards short and visual content while Millennials focus on content framing that is more aligned with their social identity and values (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). In the case of Facebook, the platform's algorithm promotes sensational and emotional content giving way to echo chambers and showing content to user which is more aligned with their preconceived notions (Pariser, 2011).

In this study, the rationale of employing UGT with Framing theory is to understand how a user's motivation and framing of news content impacts their trustworthiness and engagement with news content on Facebook. Both theories, while complimenting each other, allow us to analyze the interplay between the motive of Gen Z and Millennials news consumption and significance of presentation contributing to their varying level of trust and engagement. Practical insights can be gathered from this study for media practitioners, marketers, and policymakers through understanding the underlying role of Facebook's algorithm in reinforcing certain frames and the motivations of Gen Z and Millennials affecting the quantity and quality of engagement in respect of news content.

Previous studies related to the application of UGT in understanding the news consumption on Facebook highlighted that users engage on such platforms to fulfil their cognitive, social, and emotional needs. A study suggested that users' motivation on Facebook is social interaction (Ksiazek et al., 2017) and this has been taken further by Kim et al. (2018) asserting that emotional gratification like feeling of solidarity underlays the news consumption on social media platforms. Another study indicates that social connection and validation is the motivation behind engagement of users in news content on Facebook (Lee and Choi, 2019). In the context of Pakistan, Anwar and Ali (2020) founded that Facebook users were motivated by the accessibility and peer-driven content shared on the platform. Hinting towards selective exposure, research

credits personal relevance as an underlying factor behind users' engagement on social media for news (Stroud, 2008).

Similarly, studies in the past also demonstrated the relevance of framing theory in understanding the users trust and engagement on Facebook related to news content. A study highlighted that a news story focusing on moral judgement or partisan conflict is often shared by the users who have strong political beliefs (Molyneux, 2015). Entman (2019) labelled it as cognitive and emotional response, while Tewksbury et al, (2009) asserted that engagement occurs if the frame corresponds to the pre-existing views of the user and emotionally resonates with the user. In Pakistan's context, increased engagement is observed in nationalistic or social issues related news content (Ali et al., 2019).

2. Research Methodology

Mixed method approach has been adopted in this study for a holistic examination of the subject and to detangle the complexity and contextual behavior of the relatively young user of Facebook in Pakistan. A qualitative approach helped in analyzing the general behavior of the audience combining with the quantitative approach for insights into the former with a richer data set showing broader patterns emerging out of audience's news consumption and engagement. Blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches augments the validity of research and help in generalizing the trend in larger populations (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Digital ethnography was opted as a tool for qualitative analysis in this study and used for intensive online observation of user's behavior and engagement. While focusing on the likes, comments, and sharing news pieces in different news related groups on Facebook in Pakistan, the focus of study remained uncovering the element of trust particularly in the context of misinformation or biased reporting (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). In addition to this, secondary data, i.e., publicly available datasets, survey reports etc. from authentic sources, were also used to complement the qualitative analysis of this study. This data was utilized to monitor user involvement with news material and to get insight into more general trends, including the frequency of interactions with news articles, the most

popular content categories, and user sentiment regarding news sources. Both digital ethnography and secondary data analysis were employed to get a macro level view of the engagement of generational cohorts on Facebook.

As quantitative component of this study, a survey was administered with a structured questionnaire containing closed ended questions and Likert scale items. To ensure the accurate identification of our target audience and age cohorts under study, demographic questions related to age, location, etc. were also included. Key variables related to the research were measured by the survey including:

- **Trust in News:** Respondents were asked to rate their trust in different types of news sources (e.g., traditional media vs. social media, news outlets vs. user-generated content).
- **Engagement with News:** Respondents reported their frequency of liking, commenting, and sharing news content on Facebook.
- **Motivations for Consuming News:** Questions explored why participants used Facebook as a news source, including motivations such as convenience, entertainment, or informational value.

Data has been collected while considering the target age cohorts of this study, Gen Z and Millennials residing in urban centers of Pakistan namely Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad. The sample for digital ethnography was purposively selected Facebook pages and groups related to news without any exception to media-organizations affiliations to them. In addition, a purposive sampling approach was adopted in the survey to quantify the generational differences in news consumption pattern and level of trust. In this case, the criteria included:

- **Age:** Respondents were categorized into Gen Z (18-24 years) and Millennials (25-40 years) to explore generational differences.
- **Social Media Usage:** Only individuals who reported using Facebook as a regular platform for news consumption were included in the sample.

The survey was distributed on Facebook through a questionnaire link among 300 users, however less respondents completed the survey. This sample size was selected by considering that it will adequately generate statistical results and would

suffice for the representation of two generational cohorts of urban cities of Pakistan.

Following the data collection, the data was analyzed using descriptive (thematic and content analysis for qualitative data) and statistical (cross tabulation and percentage analysis) techniques to identify the emerging patterns and correlations between variables pivoting on the responses of two different generational groups (Gen Z and Millennials). Thematic analysis of data collected through digital ethnography highlighted the users' interaction on Facebook through showing the recurring patterns. The collected data was then coded on the basis of comments, likes, and shares drawing attention towards themes emerging from interactions of both generations separately. Themes were grouped into categories like trust in traditional media, concerns of fake news and misinformation, and preference of user-generated content.

For analyzing the quantitative data, descriptive statistics was utilized to summarize the survey results and mean, median, mode, and standard deviation were used to assist in determining the distribution and central tendencies of the data. The frequency of responses between Gen Z and Millennials about their trust in news and Facebook engagement behaviors was compared using cross-tabulation in order to investigate generational disparities in news consumption and trust patterns.

The combination of qualitative data from digital ethnography and quantitative data from survey provided a holistic view of how Gen Z and Millennials interact and trust news content on Facebook. While the quantitative survey demonstrated verifiable evidence of the frequency of these behaviors in the general public, the qualitative data provided deep, context-specific insights into user behavior and reasons. The results were broad and deep thanks to the mixed-method design, which provided a sophisticated and fact-based examination of how Facebook news consumption varies by generation.

Throughout the qualitative and quantitative data collection phases of this investigation, ethical guidelines were followed to guarantee that participants' rights were respected, their data was safeguarded, and their participation in the study was informed and voluntary. All participants gave their informed consent for the survey and digital

ethnography components of the project, and the data was anonymized and safely stored so that no personal identifying information could be connected to specific answers or actions.

3. Findings and Discussions

The results of the study demonstrated notable generational variations related to trust factors in Facebook news content between the Gen Z and Millennials. Secondary data and survey results show that Gen Z - being digital natives - have shown doubts and skepticism regarding news content on Facebook owing to the widespread misinformation and sensationalist content (Statista, 2022; Reuters Institute, 2021). Conversely, Millennials have shown a moderate level of trust due to their reliance on credible news sources on Facebook and this has been corroborated by the global trends of news consumption on digital platforms (Newman et al., 2021). These results were in consistence with the studies indicating Gen Z reliance and trustworthiness of content shared by their social media friends giving weightage to social proof and they often cross validate the information, whereas Millennials are more likely to trust traditional media sources (Pew Research Center, 2022).

Similarly, disparities were observed in the engagement patterns i.e., liking, sharing, commenting etc. of both generations backed by the quantitative data where Millennials tend to share informative news stories and use Facebook as a platform for civic engagement and raising awareness (Smith and Andreson, 2020). In contrast, Gen Z prefer sharing news stories that are reflective of their dialogical style (Huang, 2022). Findings from digital ethnography also correspond to this trend, illustrating that Millennials share stories from credible traditional media outlets i.e., Geo News and Dawn etc. while Gen Z tend to partake in comments for voicing their opinions.

Synthesis of survey results and digital ethnography highlighted distinct differences in priorities of both generations where Millennials value journalistic integrity while Gen Z being skeptic and interactive. The application of UGT helps in contextualizing the same and inferring that Millennials engage with news posts on Facebook for civic engagement and information seeking while for Gen Z it is social interaction and

critical discourse. Survey results show that 73% of Millennials' informational gratification is paramount and their motivation for using Facebook is to monitor news updates conveniently and to equip themselves for making informed decisions and staying relevant in civic engagement. Ethnographic observation on Facebook furthers this as Gen Z often engage themselves in posts related to climate change, animal rights, and gender debates etc. using the platform for civic engagement and dialogue. These findings also reaffirm the previous studies on the subject indicating that Gen Z prefers social issues related news instead of traditional news reporting (Huang, 2022).

While exploring the motivation of news consumption for both generations in this study, survey results and analysis of secondary data substantiate that the primary driver for Gen Z Facebook use is consumption of entertaining content and social engagement. They gravitate towards dialogue provoking news and prefer participatory digital environment (Reuters Institute, 2021; Banaji et al., 2021). On the other hand, Millennials use Facebook to keep themselves informed of current affairs and consume content that is aligned with their professional and social interests (Newman et al., 2021; Pew Research Center, 2022).

Secondary data analysis has also shown the distinct preferences of both generations when it comes to news consumption on Facebook. Millennials prefer comprehensive news coverage related to politics, economics, and social issues, particularly if shared by the verified sources. Survey results corroborated the same revealing that 68% of urban Pakistani Millennials give precedence to posts shared by Geo News or Dawn etc. Findings of digital ethnography also highlight the same pattern that Millennials tend to share and discuss policy driven articles and posts. Whereas the focus of Gen Z remained limited to news genre like entertainment, lifestyle, viral and trending posts that resonate with their social groups and contain more likes and comments.

While analyzing the factors impacting news framing, digital ethnography revealed that Gen Z engaged with news posts having emotional appeal garnered relatively more likes and shares among their peers while Millennials engaged with serious and fact-backed content. Survey findings highlight

that 58% of Gen Z participants stated that they are attracted towards visually engaging or emotionally resonating headlines and news posts while 64% of Millennials participants expressed their distrust towards such content. This also corroborates with previous studies on the subject matter, showing Millennials interest in credible news content with comprehensive coverage rather than entertaining one.

According to survey responses, 72% of Millennials rated contextually rich posts as credible, compared to 42% of Gen Z participants. Inferring that millennials are more influenced by thematic framing in comparison to Gen Z who are impacted by the episodically framed news content. Digital ethnography also found that Gen Z users in Pakistani Facebook groups often interacted with posts emphasizing individual narratives or viral moments, reflecting their affinity for episodic framing as a storytelling technique.

Element of trust in news is directly impacted by bias or polarized news framing and ethnographic observation found that Gen Z engage themselves in furthering bias narratives as long as they are related to trending topics and share them framing as authentic advocacy while neglecting the manipulative reporting behind it. Whereas Millennials tend to disengage themselves from such content and prefer neutral and professional journalistic articles.

Another notable aspect of the study was exploring the algorithmic curation and personalization of news content by Facebook which exacerbates the effects of framing and reinforce biases. In this regard, Gen Z is more likely to engage themselves in content suggested by Facebook's algorithm while Millennials shows reluctance to viral content and prefer authentic news posts.

Content analysis of reports from organizations like Reuters and Media Matters for Democracy also seconds the fact that Gen Z predominantly uses social media for real-time news updates but prefers visually dynamic, entertaining, and emotionally driven news posts, while Millennials prefer analytical and contextually rich news presentations. Ethnographic observations also finds that young generation of urban Pakistan engages in humor, meme and personal account of people sharing news.

A comparative analysis of secondary data gathered from authentic sources and primary data

collected through digital ethnography and survey revealed two inconsistencies that must be put forth in the findings of this study. First is the perceived reliability of framing where primary data collected through survey shows millennials preference for thematically structured news content while secondary data negates this by arguing that it depends on the sociopolitical settings and millennials also engage in episodically framed content, especially in a developing country like Pakistan where access to in-depth and comprehensive news coverage is rather limited on social media platforms. This inconsistency highlights the importance of development and cultural differences influencing the media consumption behavior in different generations. Secondly, the results of digital ethnography highlighted that Gen Z is more likely to engage and consume algorithmically generated news content which is recommended by Facebook and is usually trending at that time but perusal of

secondary data showed that globally Gen Z is more aware of the fact that prejudiced and biased content is pushed through algorithms for gaining higher engagement. This inconsistency also raises questions about the digital literacy and awareness of contemporary media trends by the younger generation of Pakistan.

In addition, the inclusion of secondary data uncovers several factors affecting the media habits of different generations, for instance in case of Pakistan the increase in internet penetration and accessibility to reasonably priced smartphones amplified the Gen Z’s Facebook usage and thus news consumption on the platform. However, for millennials of Pakistan, the reliance on social media for news is more grounded in the sociopolitical situations like limited press freedom and media censorship or manipulation (Reporters Without Borders, 2022).

Survey Question/Aspect	Gen Z (18-24 years) (% Responses)	Millennials (25-40 years) (% Responses)	Key Insights
Trust in News Sources			
- Trust Facebook as a credible news source	45%	58%	Millennials exhibit higher trust in Facebook’s credibility compared to Gen Z.
- Prefer peer-shared content over official sources	60%	42%	Gen Z is more influenced by peer-shared news.
- Verify news from external sources	38%	67%	Millennials are more likely to cross-check news from other sources.
Engagement with News Content			
- Like news posts	72%	65%	Both generations frequently like news posts, though Gen Z engages slightly more actively.
- Share news posts	40%	28%	Sharing activity is more common among Gen Z, reflecting their participatory culture.
- Comment on news posts	35%	20%	Gen Z is twice as likely to comment on posts, reflecting their preference for interactive engagement.
Motivations for Consuming News on Facebook			
- For entertainment	55%	30%	Gen Z consumes news for entertainment more than Millennials.

Survey Question/Aspect	Gen Z (18-24 years) (% Responses)	Millennials (25-40 years) (% Responses)	Key Insights
- For staying informed	40%	65%	Millennials consume news for informational purposes significantly more than Gen Z.
- To participate in social discussions	45%	50%	Social discussions are equally motivating for both generations.
Perception of News Framing			
- Emotional and sensational framing influences trust	68%	40%	Emotional framing strongly affects Gen Z’s trust, while Millennials prefer neutral and factual content.
- Respond to visually appealing headlines	75%	50%	Gen Z is more likely to engage with visually appealing headlines, reflecting their affinity for visual stimuli.
Role of Facebook Algorithm			
- Discovery of news through algorithmic feeds	80%	60%	Gen Z heavily depends on algorithmic feeds, whereas Millennials actively seek out credible sources.
- Influence of suggested content on engagement	65%	50%	Suggested content has a stronger influence on Gen Z’s engagement patterns compared to Millennials.

Table 1: Survey Results on News Trust, Engagement, and Motivations for Facebook News Consumption

Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate the generational differences in news trust, engagement, and consumption motivations on Facebook among Gen Z (18–24 years) and Millennials (25–40 years) in urban Pakistan. For holistic understanding of the user’s behavior, this study incorporated mixed-method approach by blending digital ethnography, secondary data analysis, and survey results while drawing on Uses and Gratification theory complimented by Framing theory. Notable differences were observed for using Facebook as a news source by both generational cohorts. Both millennials and Gen Z are increasingly relying on Facebook as source for their news gratification, however their priorities differ where the former prefer in-depth and informational content and with trust credible sources unlike the latter opting for entertaining content while emphasizing higher engagement and social proof influenced by emotional and sensational framing. Behavior of both generations

is influenced by the algorithmic content delivery of Facebook, whereas Millennials show a more critical attitude towards this influence.

Results of the survey also supported these trends where millennials were relatively more skeptical

towards sensational and emotional content and exercise fact checking techniques. Whereas Gen Z participants reported that visually attracting and emotional headlines are the primary drivers of their news related content viewing on Facebook. Extensive ethnographic observations on news related groups and pages on Facebook also corroborated with these findings where millennials shared news stories from credible sources and engaged in rational debates while Gen Z gravitated towards humor and social proof in their interactions.

Findings of the study have significant ramifications for media professionals, legislators, and architects of social media platforms and to overcome misinformation, social media platforms must focus on transparency ethical aspect of their

algorithms while devising methods to counteract misinformation. While promoting critical media literacy and flagging false information, media companies should also tailor their content strategies to gratify the unique motivations of different generational cohorts. The underpinning role of media in influencing the public discourse could be bolstered in a positive way if policymakers and professional media practitioners raise awareness regarding responsible use of media and the algorithmic biases of social media platforms.

Along with its contribution to academic discourse and bridging the research gap, this study also acknowledges certain limitations such as possible deficiencies in sampling and its exclusive focus on the urban population. For future research, it is suggested that other areas and platforms should be explored along with the long-term effects of digital news consumption and comparative studies among different platforms.

Briefly, this study focused on how different generational groups are influenced by the media in perceiving the world around them and subsequently their engagement and trust in the media. By bridging theoretical and empirical insights, it underscores the urgency of adapting media strategies to an evolving audience landscape, reaffirming the media's role as both a societal mirror and a catalyst for change.

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