Exploring the link between social media and young people's thirst for perfection – is this becoming a modern-day Greek tragedy?

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Abstract

This study examines the impacts of social media on the young people's thirst for perfection; it is based on secondary research. The research established that young people are now connected to various social media platforms, which has created an increased desire for perfection and celebrity performance which is indicated by posting edited and perfected photos, videos and other types of content. Over the past years, young people have increased the time spent on social media compared to mainstream media. Spending excessive time and overreliance on social media has led to reduced time spent with families and other important people in society. As a result, the desire for perfection has led to stress, depression, anxiety and other related mental health issues emanating from negative feelings. The social media usage behaviour of youths can be compared to the Narcissus myth because of their increased efforts to perfect their photos before posting, hence, indicating that they have in love with themselves. Perfectionism is driven by a desire to achieve increased likes and comments, symbolic of achieving validation among members of the public. This paper explored CBT and other theoretical modalities, which can be used to explain the current behaviour of the youths in their use of social media, confirming that they seek satisfaction and support within their different life stages. The thesis concludes that social media has led to perfectionism among youth, which has negatively affected their social status and interaction, leading to mental challenges. Society needs to adopt mental health interventions that provide the opportunity to reform and manage this condition.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, social media has grown to become one of the main reasons for online activity (Hou et al., 2019; Oh &Syn, 2015).

Social media can be defined as internet-based communication networks that allow information sharing among connected people (Fuchs, 2017; Miekle, 2016). According to Clement (2019), in the year 2018, internet users spent at least 136 minutes on social media every day, hence confirming the increased global reliance on, and general obsession with, social media use.

Over the past five years, social media has undergone a number of changes, especially as regards behaviour online and general user habits (Stockdale & Coyne, 2020). The time spent by people on social media has increased, whilst time watching television (TV) has reduced. According to Cleary et al. (2020), people are now spending 15 minutes more per day on social media than on mainstream media, with about 50% of millennials spending time on Facebook rather than on consuming TV and other traditional media. Health practitioners recognise the power of social media sites such as Facebook and others in disseminating information and promoting health interventions and related activities (Thackeray et al., 2008).

Saroj & Pal (2020) noted that social media has experienced a change in personal sharing over the past five years. In 2014, opinion sharing was one of the key drivers behind use of social media, however, sharing general content has now grown to become the main reason for use of social media.

Recently, motivation for using social media has evolved further from just information sharing; users now have a desire to be seen and recognized by many people (Van-Den-Beemt et al., 2020). This thesis demonstrates that, despite arguments regarding the benefits of social media to present ourselves to others, the generalised impact on young people is negative and

has led to increased cases of mental health issues, mainly due to stress, depression and other related social problems (Balázs, 2020).

Social media usage has become addictive for users, attracting them to spending a lot of time interacting with people online (Saroj & Pal, 2020). Social media allows for the sharing of different forms of content ranging from images, text, audio and video among many others. Wiederhold (2020) observed that the younger generation is seeking perfection on social media, trying to ensure that their content has high likeability and receives a lot of positive feedback. Consequently, the desire to receive validation has led to increased obsession with unrealistic expectations about life, for example seeking to improve one's beauty, and a general desire for perfection. O'Reilly (2020) noted that irresponsible use of social media among young people can lead to mental health issues due to the negative effects of low-esteem, depression and anxiety related to life not matching up to their expectations.

To answer the question as to whether there is a correlation between usage of social media and thirst for perfections and whether this is a modern tragedy, this paper will be structured as follows:

Chapter one will explore the argument of whether social media has a beneficial or negative impact on young people's mental health. In doing so, the concept of perfectionism will be examined as this a pivotal issue in the debate. It will also explore how young people have become obsessed with being perfect, placing huge importance on becoming famous and popular.

Chapter two will consider comparisons to Greek Tragedy, showing links between social media use and the myth of Narcissus. It will explore more in depth the link between perfectionism, the formation of self. It will focus on how social media can help to form a sense of self. It will outline and examine long term impacts, including mental health impacts.

Chapter three will focus on implications for clinical practice and different theory modalities, which can be used in therapy room to address the negative impact of social media. It will also provide suggestions in relation to the training and identify the gaps in the research.

Chapter One

The Role of Social Media – problematic or beneficial?

This chapter explores the benefits and challenges of social media influence on young people and how this relates to perfectionism.

There has been much debate regarding the potential benefits of social media for promoting mental wellbeing as well as the negative influence on mental health.

Proponents of the potential for social media to enhance young people's wellbeing argue that the use of social media is important for young people from a developmental point of view; they learn to interact with others and form their own online identity (Bartsch M, Subrahmanyam K. 2015, Subrahmanyam K, Šmahel D. 2017). Research shows that Facebook has been associated with increased social activity for young people with low self-esteem. There is also evidence that use of Facebook lowered levels of anxiety, depression and loneliness (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Deters & Mehl, 2013; Grieve et al., 2013). There is further research evidencing positive impact, for example demonstrating that when young people present their true self, this promotes wellbeing in young people (Grieve R, Watkinson J, 2016; Reinecke L, Trepte S, 2014.)

Wakefield & Wakefield (2018) have identified that social media plays a critical role in helping young people form a strong sense of self as they mature through different life stages. Formation of a strong sense of self helps people to discover themselves, unveiling the capabilities and the life strengths possessed by individuals. As a result, social media contributes towards sharpening the talents and capabilities of people which in turn improves their ability to solve problems and their general quality of life (Wiederhold, 2020). Similarly, Brodie (2020) argues social media has provided a platform for social identity realization and helping people to shape talents and capabilities that have helped them later in life.

Others, like Ling (2020), argue that people who naturally have high confidence levels are less affected by mental issues arising from social media. Therefore, a person's confidence level affects the rate at which they are impacted by issues stemming from social media. In other words, the issue is not social media but the individual's state of mind.

However, there is significant counter evidence that social media affects young people negatively. The statistics by Prieler et al. (2021) indicate that at least 60% of social media users have experienced negative effects on their self-worth following its use. 50% of all social media users have reported negative effects on their relationships. Deighton-Smith & Bell (2018) state that the increase in use of some social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Tiktok has had a significant negative impact on the self-worth of an individual through issues such as anxiety, loneliness, narcissism, poor social skills and depression among many others. A similar study by Oh et al. (2020) confirmed that at least 80% of people have reported to have been deceived by other users through their sharing online.

Arguments by Nesi (2020) indicate that an understanding of the current trends and patterns on social media confirm that people who only post unrealistically positive information have an increased immunity to feeling negative about themselves. This leads to a deluded image of who they are. Coyne et al. (2020), Miller (2010) and others argue that this negative affect is due to social media's role as a driver in perfectionism.

According to Chang (2019), young people are over reliant on social media for attention from and interaction with others in order to fill a feeling of emptiness inside them. Social media use has practical implications on the lives of young people in society, for example, the present shift from interaction in real-life towards social media has created overreliance on it, making it a vacuum filler for young people. Young people have developmental needs that require them to have support from others, which isn't always available in real-life. They rely on the information posted by others on social media to fill the

gaps. In the process, a lot of young people yearn to become social media influencers, seeking to attract a huge following of people from different parts of the world (Dickson et al., 2019).

Hudders et al. (2020) established that the social media influencers are individuals who have many followers within the society and are perceived by people as role models in many aspects of life. The social media influencers play a significant role in influencing the behaviour of users. Coyne et al. (2020) indicate that the increased perfection of social media content such as photos and videos is reflective of the obsession with perfectionism that has grown among users due to peer pressure from others and competitiveness around people's status in society. According to Miller (2010), young people are constantly preoccupied with what others think about them, and they would never be happy to show others their life exactly as it is. They may feel unworthy of love and lack a sense of belonging. Therefore, they may start striving for perfection.

Perfectionism and mental health

Doktorová & Piteková (2020) define perfectionism as an individual's characteristics that makes them seek flawlessness while making a series of self-evaluations, and preoccupation with other people's evaluations and judgements. Some of the common signs of perfectionism include the inability to perform tasks unless there is certainty of doing them successfully, procrastination to get time for improvement, and spending excessive amounts of time on simple tasks. Holden et al. (2020) stated that perfectionism is an important element in increasing the chances of success in most missions undertaken by an individual.

Contrary views by Gniewosz et al. (2020) assert that perfectionism is detrimental because it often causes anxiety, depression, stress and other related mental issues causing negative thoughts and creating feelings of inadequacy within an individual. Therefore, perfectionism can have both positive and negative effects on people's lives.

According to Zavada, (2020), there are three main types of perfectionism: personal standards, self-criticism, and socially prescribed perfectionism. Personal standards perfectionism is defined by an individual's desire to achieve high standards of performance flawlessly (Stoeber, 2011), experience positive emotions (Kaye, Conroy, & Fifer, 2008), and experience motivation that facilitates this (Stoeber & Becker, 2008). Wellman et al. (2020) note that personal standards perfectionism is less harmful in comparison to other forms of perfectionism because an individual sets personal performance levels which motivate them to work towards attaining them.

Self-critical perfectionism is characterized by intimidation by goals set rather than being motivated by them. As a result, there is high likelihood of becoming depressed, developing negative feelings or experiencing anxiety and self-condemnation (Terry, 2020). Socially prescribed perfectionism refers to situations whereby society or the community the person is part of demands high levels of perfection. In this case, people are pushed into behaving according to societal standards or due to a culture of high expectations from others, and in some cases the goals set are unrealistic. For example, research indicates that body dissatisfaction amongst woman has been associated with social media use due to influencers presenting particular content and setting unrealistic beauty standards, mainly on platforms such as Instagram (Lonergan et al., 2019).

According to Sabik et al. (2019), young people have adopted corrupt values from social media that have affected their performance and general interaction with the society. This is because they look to the morals and values promoted on social media, which can be a positive or negative. As stated earlier, they tend to set themselves unrealistic standards. Similar views by McNeill et al. (2021) indicate that friends, relatives and strangers assert a lot of moral pressure on youth, leading them to adopt mechanisms to strive for perfection, which is usually impossible and so they are left with a sense of failure, because nothing is

ever enough. In general, social media sets the expected standards of behaviour and conduct that other users copy consciously or unconsciously, hence, making them strive to achieve them. People share content that is mostly positive and celebratory, especially as regards social status, wealth and quality of life in general. Creating a perception that one's life is better than it actually is leads to pressure, anxiety and general stress amongst social media users (Stockdale & Coyne, 2020). Hidden negative feelings affect people's general quality of life, especially in cases where it is devoid of positive interactions with others and there is no support or help.

Chapter Two

The myth of Narcissus and the formation of self

This chapter explore links between social media use and the myth of Narcissus. It explores more in depth the link between perfectionism, the formation of self and examines long term impacts, including mental health impacts.

According to Petek (2021), the current behaviour observed on social media is reminiscent of the Narcissus myth. Chatterjee & Kar (2020) echo this, stating young people are experiencing mental and social issues as a result of falling in love with their own reflected image. Social media users strive to create and maintain a positive online image in terms of their looks, social status and other aspects of their life. This results in financial strain and complements; the false image is reinforced and validated (Shepherd, 2020). Consequently, the failure to achieve the desired level of perfectionism and fulfil personal expectations offline, has led to an increase in mental health problems.

According to Bertolini (2020), increased social media usage, and the way it drives narcissism is reminiscent of a Greek tragedy in terms of the inevitable and inescapable damage done to the true self. Cyberpsychology claims many young people have aspirations of becoming famous or even just being associated with popular personalities and celebrities; this has almost become an obsession (Uhls et al. 2014). This need can be associated with self-focused aspiration and narcissism – an "inflated sense of self-worth" (Greenwood et al., 2013). According to Ozimek et al. (2017) narcissists use social networking sites for self-glorification, and states that social media assists young people to achieve their needs.

This concept of Greek tragedy describes different approaches to admiration exhibited by people in relation to different elements of their lives. Young people seek to imitate others through images which create unrealistic impressions about themselves or their lives that are not accurate. As presented by Miller, (2010), like Narcissus, they obsess about the reflected

image and deny the true self. He "died" because he tried to escape emotions such as helplessness, shame, envy, confusion, rage and grief. Being alive does not mean only being beautiful or good, but also experiencing and expressing emotions which aren't always acceptable to others. Orth (2020) confirmed that increased use of and reliance on social media creates false perceptions and encourages admiration of false and unrealistic representations.

A key driver in the strive to perfection, are social influencers. Zhang et al. (2020) noted that in the past decade, there has been a shift in terms of who has the power and ability to act as an influencer. Before 2010, influencing was mainly performed by film stars, fashion models, music artists and other types of celebrities (Amon et al., 2020). However, nowadays individuals with huge followings on YouTube Channels and others social media platforms have risen to become influencers. Consequently, all people have equal capacity to become influencers if they can attract huge numbers of followers on social media. The reduced barriers to becoming influencers in society due to social media has led to increased desire among young people to become social media celebrities (Su et al., 2020).

Identity formation and the sense of self

Social platforms provide a huge opportunity for the creation of a false self, because of the privacy it allows (Acun,2020). A false self is created only through images, videos and other content, which is shared, however viewers do not have access to the physical and actual life characteristics of others (Lu, 2020). The information shared by others on social media is mostly exaggerated and targeted to create an impression of superiority, wealth, high social standing and celebration. The advent of the internet has reduced the amount of physical interaction between people and increased reliance on the perceptions created by others, which are misleading and fictional (Acun, 2020). This leads to further copying and imitation. In cases where one may be unable to imitate accordingly due to financial or other restrictions,

young people are likely to experience negative feelings, low self-worth and low self-esteem (Shah et al., 2019).

According to Bauer et al. (2020), the desire of young people to get approval/validation from others drives this behaviour. Similarly, Van-Den-Beemt et al. (2020) confirms that young people wish to be seen as superior in the eyes of their peers and others. Relative poverty, perceptions of unattractiveness, failure to keep up with the latest fashions and similar issues lower self-esteem. The failure to feel a sense of love, belonging and validation (Zhang et al., 2020) results in stress, depression, anxiety and low mental health. Young people will sacrifice other elements (such as time or money) and strive to social media perfection to obtain approval.

Through social media, people can create multiple personas with different views and opinions, which they can test online before recreating a personality in real life. Whilst a lot of social media activity is positive, the phenomenon of creating multiple online personas can be problematic.

According to Rudnick (2020), the increased longing for validation amongst social media users is associated with the psychosocial desires of people to appear better than they think they actually are, or to meet the expectations of other users. Young people feel under pressure to be accepted, and their social esteem levels are easily impacted by this (Gibson &Trnka, 2020). Fan et al. (2020) note that at least 13% of youths have reduced self-esteem due to excessive social media use, leading to stress, anxiety, depression and other mental health issues across the world. Users want to be popular on social media and often try to copy the practices of influencers, trying to depict a seemingly perfect life which often does not reflect their actual life (Oliveira et al., 2020). Constant comparisons to others and frequently making evaluations of self-worth based on the number of likes and comments from other people.

According to Twenge & Martin (2020), loss of self-worth is detrimental to one's life expectancy because it leads to mental health issues s. In the same way, low self-esteem as a result of loss of self-worth can affect one's confidence in making decisions, increasing the possibility of engaging in dangerous activities that potentially put lives at risk. Tandon et al. (2020) note that increased preoccupation with social connections and status affect people's interactions with important figures in their lives. For example, young people spend less time with their parents which impacts on their psychosocial development (Brown, 2018). Loneliness and overreliance on false information affects general quality of life as young people are misled in their decision making.

Peng et al (2019) argue that, as a result of comparisons to unrealistic and 'perfect' standards, social media users often develop a sense of self which is unrealistic. They believe they lead a low-quality life that needs to remain hidden (Brown, 2017). Comparing other people's social media feeds, leads to young people developing low self-esteem within their private lives (Peng et al., 2019). The variations between presented and real self creates internal pressure that leads to increased mental health problems that affect young people's general quality of life (De-Clercq et al., 2021; Sabik et al., 2019).

Simultaneously, fear of talking openly about challenges that they (young people) are experiencing increases the possibility of failing to obtain the help and support required for their personal development. This situation arises from both internal and external pressures on an individual to meet the standards set by social media users. The young generation is continuously seeking validation from others; friends, relatives, peers and even strangers (Oh et al., 2020). However, instead of providing them with the required information, social media increases the pressure for young people to look perfect. Through this they are encouraged to impress their peers and other people on social media platforms and fail to speak to friends and family members in person about their individual concerns (Schemer et al., 2021).

Young people face daily life struggles whilst working out how to become successful adults. They try to cover their insecurities by masking low self-esteem masking and hiding aspects of their lives which they think aren't good enough and other issues they face. Similar views are held by Abi-Jaoude et al. (2020) stating that the illusion of perfection to the public created by photos and other perfect content which young people hide behind deters people from intervening to help those suffering, which is harmful to their health and their general quality of life. This makes it difficult for parents, friends and relatives to understand the challenges experienced by young people and therefore to help them.

Chapter Three

Implications for Clinical Practice

This chapter explores the implications for clinical practice and different theory modalities, which can be used in therapy room to address the negative impact of social media. It also provide suggestions in relation to the training and identify the gaps in the research.

In light of the significant negative mental health impact of social media on young people, there is an urgent need for increased mental health interventions (Stockdale & Coyne, 2020).

Narcissus had no one to help him realise that he was on the path to self-destruction. With appropriate mental health interventions, we can help young people to trust that they can be good enough just as they are, and find connection, real support and friendship without the need for a false self.

Mental health interventions play a critical role in changing the behaviour, thoughts and actions of an individual (Curran & Hill, 2017). In the process, young people will improve their individual, interpersonal, institutional and social-ecological relationships, leading to reduced cases of mental health issues and counteracting the general negative effects of social media use.

Initial assessment will assist clinicians in identifying appropriate interventions. Perfectionism can be measured using the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale, which can provide mental health professionals with insight into specific sources of perfectionism (Benson, E. 2003). For instance, an individual might be a perfectionist in one domain but not another. This scale was developed by Gordon Flett and Paul Hewitt. They also developed the Perfectionistic Self-Presentation Scale, which rates perfectionistic behaviours in self-presentation. It seems to predict psychological distress

due to perfectionistic tendencies to a greater extent than the original scale (Benson, E. 2003).

Fuchs (2017) evidences the effectiveness of CBT interventions to address the current negative effects of social media usage. This starts with identifying cognitive distortions which include: spending excessive amounts of time on social media, believing that all information posted is true and frequent desires and struggles for perfection among users. The next step entails cognitive restructuring and general reframing of behaviours with a view to changing beliefs and understanding the benefits of behavioural change. The next step will entail a thought record, where the mind is challenged with suitable alternative tools that have positive effects on behavioural change (Chang, 2019). After this, a worry tree, consisting of possible questions and appropriate decisions to be taken depending on their effectiveness. Once all these stages have been followed, the next part of the process entails creating a pathway to changing behaviour, broken down into different steps with clear benefits (Cuevas et al., 2020). These CBT steps can be utilized to address mental health issues associated with social media addiction and overreliance.

Psychodynamic theory emphasises the relational and intersubjective processes at play in the therapeutic dyad. Object Relations for example focusses on the influence of interpersonal relations on a person's development starting from the earliest stages of their life. Theorists such as Klein and Winnicott argue that the early relationship between a child and its mother has a significant impact on its relationships throughout life. Klein and Winnicott's early work is still relevant in psychotherapy today and has laid the foundation for the development of concepts such as intersubjectivity and attachment theory (Brodie, 2019). This theory refers to the internalised relationship between the self and the most significant other when we were young. Psychodynamic theory and practice focusses on the influence of early relationships, the formation of our sense of self and how this plays out in therapy

through transference and countertransference. More recently, Fonagy & Allison (2014) argue for the application of a mentalising approach to establish epistemic trust. They link evolutionary biology (drive to epistemic trust/social and cultural learning) to attachment theory and clinical practice.

The idea that individuals develop a sense of self through relationship with others is highly relevant. Psychologists emphasizes the innate drive to share information in social media is a desire to share interesting entertaining or useful information with others (Falk et al., 2013). Therefore, when creating social media posts, young people consider the value of content for other people and aren't just motivated by how they themselves perceive the information they are sharing (Stuart Wolpert, 2013).

Narcissus could not risk a relationship with anyone; being seen and accepted as you are is very powerful. Can clients risk being themselves and still be loved? Person-centred therapy's emphasis on the core conditions of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard, introduced by Carl Rogers (1980) are essential. According to Rogers, the therapeutic healing will begin if therapists offer to clients these three core conditions. He considered these conditions both necessary and sufficient for constructive change to occur. 'Unconditional positive regard' occurs when the client is accepted as they are without any conditions. 'Empathy' can be described as the therapist's attempts to understand the client's experience. 'Congruency' is where the therapist is authentic and genuine in their interaction with the client.

Whatever modality therapists are trained in, there are opportunities to engage and address social media mental health impacts in clinical practice. Given the widespread usage of social media and the evidence of its negative impact, it would seem inevitable therapists will be faced with this issue. However, as explored earlier, relationship not modality indicates

the probable success of a therapeutic intervention. As stated by Cooper (2008), the "Dodo Bird Verdict" suggest that most therapies and techniques are all equally effective.

It is a necessity that therapists receive a proper training within this field and become aware of current trends within social media and how this can affect young people. Equally important is education, to challenge the falseness of social media images. Young people should receive education about the negative impact of social media, especially how striving to perfection can cause them mental health issues. This should include in-house interventions where young people can experience the acceptance by therapist and explore their issues.

Professionals should work together with youth and their families to mitigate the risk of negative impact of social media, including education and solution focused interventions. This will require the organisation of awareness raising events, and social policy that promotes healthy environments that foster resilience (Abi-Jaoude et al. (2020). According to Goodyear et al. (2018), there is no proper guidance for therapists on healthy usage of social media and there is some misperception and ambiguity how this can impact young people's mental health. Also, there is a little information in current European, UK and US policy; therefore, there is a still gap in research and policy in understanding the correlation between young people and the impact of using social media.

Conclusion

It needs to be recognised that when young people look for approval through social media to make them happy, it only lasts momentarily. They are constantly seeking validation and trying to ensure that 'my posts' are the best, checking likes and constant posting to ensure that 'I am still the best and perfect'. This way of seeking joy and satisfaction can be perceived as an external force, temporal and not conducive to creating a more constant sense of well-being.

While there is some evidence of potential positive impact, the weight of evidence/majority indicates that social media has a significant negative impact specifically related to the drive towards perfectionism.

Many social media users create profiles which depict 'fake' lives through inaccurate and exaggerated representations of their actual lives; these representations are often far-removed from reality. This virtual interaction and behaviour have led to increased isolation within society, as young people are afraid to show their true selves; they think they are not good enough.

This paper unveils the underlying issues experienced by the teens as a result of using social media. Young adults are experiencing the negative effects of social media such as anxiety, depression and the stress. This information can be used to help in designing approaches for managing this problem in society.

The current problem of young people excessively using and relying on social media can be managed through social behavioural change. Many children engage in social media activities without understanding the negative effect it can have on their lives. The leaders of educational institutions need to adopt strategies to increase education and general awareness in young people about the negative effects of irresponsible social media use. Education on

responsible use of social media can enhance understanding of the role of social media, inform young people about exaggerated and unrealistic depictions of life. As part of this, young people need to be empowered in terms of alternative options and interventions are required to reduce social media consumption and increase well-being. Educational programs need to target the specific groups of people that are most affected by these problems such as school pupils, youth and religious groups and others.

Equally, it is important to introduce more education in schools via in house counsellors.

Evidence based therapy can play a huge role in addressing the negative mental health impacts of social media. Therapy is about relationship where people are accepted as they are; many young people like Narcissus couldn't risk relationship. The use of mental health interventions can contribute significantly towards management and reduction of negative effects of social media use. Psychotherapists should make appropriate decisions and embrace the techniques available to manage the obsession with perfectionism that is currently affecting the behaviour and conduct of young people in society (Antony, 2015). Through CBT for example, young people can use techniques to guide them towards behavioural change and responsible use of the media. While CBT remains the most evidence-based intervention, it seems PCT, and psychoanalytic theory/approaches have much to offer and require further research. As social media is relatively young subject, there is a need to educate and train psychotherapists in recent social media trends and how to address this issue.

It is imperative this crisis is addressed urgently as young people's perceptions of their own self-worth affects further stages of their lives. A young person's connections and interactions with others determines the quality of their lives. In the same way, perceptions of their physical appearance in comparison to edited images affects their self-esteem. Growing

up under the illusion of social media has long-term repercussions, potentially negatively influencing young people into adulthood, including parenthood and role modelling in society.

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