

Searching for Self and Society: Sexual and Gender

Minority Youth Online

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Abstract

Sexual and gender minority youth currently aged 13–21 grew up with the Internet, and online resources and environments are important sources of information and socialization for them. Using data from a survey of 696 such minority youth from across the United States, this chapter answers three main questions: What features of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning- (LGBTQ) specific online environments do these youth use? Why do they participate in LGBTQ online environments? What roles can adult allies play in facilitating positive online experiences for sexual and gender minority youth? Findings confirm sexual and gender minority youth’s need for identity development, belonging and community, and suggest potential, positive adult involvement.

Introduction

While American research on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) adults has taken up the challenge of studying the new “Cyberqueer” phenomenon since the mid-1990s, there is a dearth of research on sexual

and gender minority youth and their use of the Internet, especially as it pertains to their usage of community networking services and other online environments. American youth currently aged 13–21 grew up closer to the Internet than any previous generation. Almost all of them have used the Internet to do research or socialize. According to results from a 2010 survey from the Pew Internet and American Life Project survey, 88% of non-students aged 18-24 and 86% of college undergraduates use social networking sites (Hampton, Sessions Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). An earlier Pew survey found that more than half (55%) of all American youths aged 12–17 who use the Internet also use online social networking sites (Lenhart & Madden, 2007, p. 5).

While sexual and gender minority youth occupy shrunken public spaces in school (Irvine, 1997; Macgillivray, 2004; Meyer, 2010; Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002) and in their families, there are countless LGBTQ-friendly websites where they can claim their identity, learn from, and relate to LGBTQ peers. A large-scale study of a social networking site by Piskorski (2007) has shown that people reporting same-sex attraction were close to two times more likely to have logged into a networking site over a two-day period than those who did not report same-sex attraction (n=13,230). As Mike Glatze, founder of the activist website Young Gay America, noted: “Gay youth use the web like no other subset of the population. ... What exists today was completely unheard-of even 10 years ago” (cited in Alexander, 2004). And, as Cohler and Hammack (2007) have argued, “[s]ocial change such as that inspired by the internet, which has made available accounts by sexual minority youth overcoming obstacles and coping with minority stress ... has led to changes in the manner in which sexual minority youth narrate their life stories” (p. 49).

I investigate the importance of the internet for sexual and gender minority youth using a large-scale (n=696) online survey of American sexual and gender minority youth. While a growing number of small-scale qualitative studies discuss the online experiences of sexual and gender minority youth (Alexander, 2004; Curry, 2005; Driver, 2005, 2007; Egan, 2000; M. L. Gray, 1999; Laukkanen, 2007; Rothbauer, 2004; Silberman, 1997) and investigate whether or how they come out online (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Driver, 2005; Munt, Bassett, & O'Riordan, 2002), there is a paucity of survey research addressing these same issues and the role of the Internet in the lives of sexual and gender minority youth. And while Australian scholars Hillier and Harrison (2007) have conducted two large-sample mixed-methods studies with sexual and gender minority youth in Australia, to date they have published only their qualitative data. In a world where policy is most often dictated by a combination of both qualitative data and quantitative data, it is surprising that no study has yet been published that combines both approaches to investigate the online behaviors and communities of sexual and gender minority youth.

My study uses qualitative and quantitative data and answers the following questions:

1. How important are certain key features (see below) of LGBT online environments to sexual and gender minority youth?
2. What factors do sexual and gender minority youth identify as reasons why they participate in LGBTQ online environments?
3. What roles can adult allies play in facilitating positive online experiences for sexual and gender minority youth?

This paper is a preliminary attempt to document quantitatively and qualitatively how American sexual and gender minority youth make use of the Internet.

Literature Review

Most accounts of the lives of sexual and gender minority youth in relation to the Internet are qualitative, written in a provocative journalistic style (e.g. Egan, 2000; Silberman, 1997), or are concerned mostly with access to information questions. Curry (2005), for example, worried whether librarians would help sexual and gender minority youth find answers to their questions in (queer) cyberspace, and Rothbauer (2004) showed the extent to which library and Internet-savvy young lesbians struggle to find lesbian literature online. Laermer's (1997) *Get on with it: the gay and lesbian guide to getting online* and other such reference books are mostly resource guides for LGBTQ Internet users that list sexual-and-gender-minority-friendly sites. Of those, very few are specific to sexual and gender minority youth (an exception is Ellis, Highleyman, Schaub, & White, 2002).

In most studies, treatment of the importance of the Internet in sexual and gender minority youth's lives is almost accidental. For example, out of the fifteen sexual and gender minority youth cited in the very influential book by Mary Gray (1999), only five discuss their Internet experiences. Indeed, her chapter on sexual and gender minority youth and the Internet is one of the shortest in the book. One of the most telling quotes is from "Ernie Hsiung," a first-generation Chinese American who grew up in a suburb of Berkeley, California. He sees the Internet as a necessary space for social encounters: "As far as meeting other gay folks are concerned, I meet other people through the Internet" (Gray, 1999, p. 100). Similarly, of the 54 youth featured in the sexual and gender

minority youth anthology *Revolutionary Voices* (Sonnie, 2000), only two mentioned the Internet, and wrote about their online experiences only in passing.

More recent studies (post-2000) are typically part of the new field of “cyberstudies,” and so is this paper. Kick-started in the early 1990s, this emerging field treats online behavior as a topic of interest in its own right. Two main themes emerged from the early cyberstudies work: identity and community. While Bruckman (1992), Turkle (1995) focused on the development and management of identities online (a common theme in cyberstudies), Rheingold (1993) discussed the potential of the Internet for community-building and community-development. He defined virtual communities as “the social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). Correll’s (Correll, 1995) study of an online “lesbian café” focuses on community development across space, noting how the internet enables sexual minority women to negotiate their identity and build relationships despite physical isolation.

In general, such cyberstudies legitimize identity and community experiences on the Internet as more than merely cold and artificial. Walther (1996), for example, refused to accept that Internet interactions are by definition “impersonal,” and argued that in some cases, computer-mediated communication could lead to “hyperpersonal” interactions and associated deep feelings of intimacy, without the need for a bodily presence. Research by Diamond (2003), Diamond, Savin-Williams and Dube (1999), and Holloway and Valentine (2003) suggests how the minority status of LGBTQ youth makes the internet a key resource for the development of identity, community and romance.

The subfield of cyberqueer studies, constructed upon the foundations laid by pioneer Nina Wakeford (1997), examines the tensions of LGBTQ identities and communities online. Among cyberqueer studies of sexual and gender minority youth, the work of Driver (2005, 2007), Hillier and Harrison (2007), Laukkanen (2007), Munt, Basset, and O’Riordan (2002) and Gray (2009) deserve further mention.

British researchers Munt et al. (2002) discussed the way young women attracted to women “came out” and used identity labels on an American website which they dubbed “gaygirls.com.” Their study of forum postings by 66 women allowed them to claim that women’s queer identities are built online in a “discursive community” (p. 136). Coming out, being out, and understanding what it means to be a woman attracted to women is seen by these young women as a critical component of LGBTQ online forums.

In *Out, Creative and Questioning*, Driver (2005) provides the reader with glimpses of the homepages of queer and trans girls. She shows the extent to which these girls resisted cultural definitions by creating and giving voice to sometimes contradictory identities. For Driver, homepages serve as flexible spaces where youth create and display identities and desire, halfway between perfect anonymity and self-disclosure, away from the pressures of adults. Driver argues that “[w]hile the turn to online communities may seem like a poor substitute for face-to-face interactions, it becomes crucial to rethink simple divisions between real and virtual sociality” (Driver, 2007, p. 174).

Laukkanen (2007) questions the apparent unlimited possibilities for queer self-representation on the Internet. Her analysis of the online experiences of a group of fourteen Finnish youth underscored the heterosexual and gender normativity of youth

online services, most of which are, in Finland as in the United States, commercial sites with limited and limiting features.

Open coding the qualitative data in their survey, Hillier and Harrison (2007) identify six aspects of non-heterosexual life that sexual and gender minority youth “practice” online and offline: sexual identity, same-sex friendship, disclosure (coming out), same-sex intimacy, “homosex,” and finding out about and practicing living as part of the gay community. The Internet, in Hillier and Harrison’s view, exists as a “practice” field for youth, in prevision for their “real” offline lives. This view is an amplified version of the more nuanced view by Munt et al. (2002) and Driver (2005), who see the Internet as practice ground or backstage arena but nevertheless see online experiences as real.

These studies emphasize the distinction between online and offline behavior, in contradistinction with other studies that see online and offline lives as inseparably interconnected, both as constitutive of “real” life. Berry and Martin (2000), for example, argue that “the net is neither a substitute for nor an escape from real life. Nor is it simply an extension of existing offline communities and identities. Instead, it is part of lived culture, informed by and informing other parts of users' lives” (cited in Alexander, 2002, p. 80). Similarly, Osgerby (2004) notes the seamlessness of youth’s online and offline lives.

In their manifesto for the empirical study of online networking sites by queer researchers, MacIntosh and Bryson (2007) forcefully argue that educators need to pay greater attention to social networking sites and their significance for sexual and gender minority youth, and understand these sites as “constitutive of everyday locations of

engagement and signification” (p. 141) rather than as threats or trends. Sexual and gender minority youth are flocking to online websites and imprinting the world with their presence. My study attempts to document what matters most to them online.

Finally, Gray’s (2009) study of rural LGBTQ youth – even though it is not centrally about the internet – illustrates vividly the importance of the internet and new media in the development of community and identity among sexual and gender minority. Despite relative physical isolation, rural LGBTQ youth use new media to find one another and mobilize for respect and acceptance.

Methods

This paper presents quantitative and qualitative results based on a large-scale (n=696) online survey, whose target population consists of American self-identified sexual and gender minority youth aged 13-21 who use the Internet. The survey questionnaire went through five different iterations, following the methodological steps generally agreed on for survey design (Fink, 1995; Fowler Jr., 1998; Iarossi, 2006; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005; Riggle, Rostosky, & Reedy, 2005). It was tested in paper-based format over a two-hour long focus group with four self-identifying sexual and gender minority youth, and pre-tested in a computer lab on the Stanford campus.

The final version of the survey questionnaire consists of 120 questions, divided into seven sections. A *Personal Information* section asked youth about their age, grade level, current state, ethnic origin, religiosity, family tensions, whether they were “out” to their parents, etc. A *Gender and Sexuality* section asked about gender identities, sexual orientations, and attraction to same and other genders. An *Online Habits* section asked questions about access to computers, privacy while using the Internet, number of hours

spent online per day, etc. If youth said they accessed LGBTQ-specific sites, they filled a *LGBTQ Online Environment* section, where they were asked a plurality of questions about their online behavior. If youth said they felt they were part of an LGBTQ online community, they filled an *Online Communities* section, where they were asked how often they participate, completed a Sense of Community Index test (Chavis & Pretty, 1999), and rated the importance, absolute and relative, of their online communities in their lives currently. The *Friends and Acquaintances* section asked youth where they meet their LGBTQ friends, if they meet offline people they first meet online and, if so, to describe one such experience. It also asked them whether they see a difference between online and offline friendships and, if yes, how so. Another section, *Offline Communities and Overall Support*, asked questions about LGBTQ offline support networks, including trustworthy adults, Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and offline communities. The final section *Discrimination against LGBTQ Youth* asked about perceived levels of safety, openness, and discrimination online and offline. The full survey questionnaire is available from the author. Did you run any statistical analysis to see if your questions actually grouped into your assumed categories? This should be addressed here - it adds strength to the quality of your survey.

I was careful in my approach to the “boxing” of identity (Paradis, 2009) in the *Personal Information* section. Queer researchers have documented the symbolic violence of forcing queer identities into binaries: male / female, straight / gay (Gosine, 2007; Laukkanen, 2007; O’Riordan & Phillips, 2007). In order to better accommodate queer identities, I asked questions that allowed for the selection of multiple check boxes.

Furthermore, while I suggested pre-defined identity categorizations, respondents could elect to fill an “other” text box.

I used two different approaches to evaluate why sexual and gender minority youth participate in LGBT online environments. I first looked at how often they indicated going online for a set of reasons chosen from the literature and validated during a focus group (see above). These results are quantitative. I then coded 155 responses to the question “What is the number one reason you use LGBT online environments?”

I used a snowball sampling technique (Fink, 1995) to find my research subjects. Starting with LGBT online resources listed on popular LGBT websites and in Ellis et al. (2002), I reached a total of 190 LGBT resources across the country. Sexual and gender minority youth, activists, researchers, and allies were asked to forward the online survey link to the sexual and gender minority youth they know, and to any contacts they might have in schools, GSAs, and LGBTQ organizations across the United States. The American national organization of Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) agreed to distribute my survey to its youth members, after their review board approved the study. Between 19 November 2007 and 17 October 2008, 696 valid questionnaires were completed.

One of my starting hypotheses was that the online experience of sexual and gender minority youth would differ based on their educational level: college, or middle and high school. I therefore present a stratified analysis for college and non-college youth, and test this hypothesis using by comparing means across groups and submitting them to two-tailed, independent-sample t-tests. Results of these analyses highlight the direction and

magnitude and significance of differences between groups, and hint to the social and cultural processes that shape youth's relationships to the Internet.

Results

Evidence that many more youth demand greater choice in the way they identify – or to not identify – with any of the LGBTQ labels (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Laukkanen, 2007; Paradis, 2009; Savin-Williams, 2005) can be seen in the distribution of answers that I obtained for gender identity and sexual orientation. While the great majority of youth checked only one box for gender identity (80.5%), close to 20% of all respondents checked more than one box, with an average number of responses of 1.34 “gender boxes” per youth (S.D. = 0.85). The picture is even more striking for sexual orientation. Only 57.1% of respondents checked a single box, such that more than two out of five youth in the sample chose more than one label for themselves. On average, youth checked 1.63 boxes for sexual orientation (S.D. = 0.90).

1. How important are certain key features of online environments to sexual and gender minority youth?

Surveyed youth were asked to rank a list of twelve features of LGBTQ online environments to evaluate how important these features are to them using a five-point scale (see Table 1). College-attending sexual and gender minority youth listed in descending importance inclusive spaces for all queer people (3.73 out of 5), socializing spaces (3.67), LGBTQ-specific health information (3.40), communities of interest (3.09) and support groups (3.06). Youth who are not in college listed as the most important features inclusive spaces (4.03 out of five), socializing spaces (4.02), support groups (3.68), communities of interest (3.66) and spaces shared with straight allies (3.44).

----- INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE -----

If not for the importance accorded to LGBTQ-specific health information, the difference in rating between college- and non-college- attending youth for the top five most important features is statistically significant, and non-college attending youth almost always rate these features higher (i.e., more important) than their college-attending counterparts. The only features for which college-attending youth gave significantly higher ratings were networking / business and housing opportunities.

2. What factors do sexual and gender minority youth identify as reasons why they participate in LGBTQ online environments?

I asked youth how often they go online for sixteen different reasons including “to ask questions” and “to find a date or a hookup” (see Table 2).

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Sampled youth tell a clear story: their online lives mostly fulfill their need “be themselves,” “belong,” “socialize” and “be out.” Non-college-attending youth report going online most often to be themselves (6.31 out of 7), feel like they belong (5.07), come out / be out (4.88), feel normal (4.48), and explore their identity (4.28). College students report going online most often to be themselves (4.73 out of 7), feel like they belong (3.92), get information (3.92), explore their identity (3.81) and come out / be out (3.73).

Notable exceptions are the frequency at which youth go online to meet people face-to-face (mean difference = -0.20 , significant at the 0.10 level) or to find a date or a hookup (mean difference = -0.13 , not significant). Although these results are not statistically significant, this could result from the greater social isolation of the younger

youth as they discover their non-mainstream sexuality or gender identity, to younger youth's less cautious online usage, greater gullibility or greater need for adventure, or to changing social norms that make it more acceptable for younger generations to meet offline people that were first met online.

Another striking observation is the very low frequencies that sex-related items obtained in this survey. Youth go online less than once a month to find a date or a hook up (college and non-college, respectively: 1.76 vs. 1.65 out of 7), to play out fantasies (1.45 vs. 1.70 out of 7), or to have online sex less than once per month (1.32 and 1.47 out of 7).

To give the sexual and gender minority youth in my sample a chance to express themselves freely on the reasons why they go online, I asked: "What is the number one reason why you use LGBTQ online environments?" From the 198 possible respondents who had viewed this question when I started coding the data, I obtained 155 answers (response rate of 78.3%) and a total of 202 reasons. Frequencies for each code can be found in Table 3.

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A majority of youth (54.2%) who answered this question mentioned socializing in one form or another as the number one reason why they go online. Some youth answered with a short "socialize" to the question, while some others provided more details: they organize LGBTQ events, learn about such events, meet LGBTQ people, or keep in touch with friends.

31 percent of youth go online mostly to gain information about LGBTQ lives, people, culture, or history. For example, a 19-year-old bisexual Asian-American woman

attending college in California responded: “To stay up-to-date on queer-related pop culture or entertainment news in the lesbian community.” Similarly, a 19-year-old gay Latino male wrote: “It’s where I can get information about cultural and sexual practices without feeling any cultural pressure.” Others reported going online to find LGBTQ contents for school-related purposes.

24 percent of youth reported going online to find a sense of belonging or to be themselves. They wrote, for example, that they want to “feel a part of something,” “[m]eet people who identify with me” or “feel like I belong.” That one in four youth hinted at issues of belonging and / or identity as a key reason why they go online is quite telling of the role that relationships to peers play in their lives as sexual or gender minorities. Many youth are indeed explicit about this need to relate to “like-minded people” or “[t]o be in a place where I feel like I belong and where I can find/chat with fellow LGBT people” (19-year-old white lesbian college student in Vermont).

A non-trivial 10 percent of youth alluded to the difficulties of their “offline” lives, including geographical isolation. A 17 year-old Washington-state high school student of mixed race who identifies as male / gender neutral and gay wrote that he goes on the Internet “[b]ecause many people are not out in real life and we are spread apart by distance.” Others mentioned the lack of LGBTQ people nearby, including one youth, a 19-year-old Colorado college white lesbian / bisexual who wrote that online environments “supplement the lack of the homosexual lifestyle in my life. I don’t have any lesbian friends or love interests, [so] the internet offers a way for me to still be active in the community.” Some responses were altogether heartbreaking, such as the isolation and pain felt by this 18-year-old white college-attending gay male: “To meet people. I

want friends, dates, anything. I want to feel like I'm not some ugly fag that no one wants to be around or date. In Utah, that's all I feel like. There's no 'love' for 'our kind' and there aren't people I like that like me back.” Finally, some youth mentioned the need to escape discrimination, sanctions, and the judgments of others. They go online “[t]o make friends that won't judge me” (white 20-year-old lesbian from Florida).

Fewer than 10 percent of youth who answered the question mentioned going online to get advice. A 14-year-old white Massachusetts bisexual male provided an elaborate answer:

Again, I use LGBTIQQ (or, LGBTQIA, as I have heard it) environments to meet other people and discuss with them their own experiences, especially in comparison and contrast to my own experiences. I often find myself conversing with other people about coming out, being out, having a significant other, their first time with sexual intercourse, etc. In the end, I most usually find that I simply converse and confer with other persons.

Others wrote that they go online to “listen to and learn from others' experiences” or to “give support to the people I left behind in my high school or in the old groups where I used to need support. Now I get my support in real life instead of [online], though, so I don't really need any.”

Finally, only 2.6% of respondents mentioned pornography or erotica as one of the main reasons they use the Internet, and when they did, it was often with a single word: “porn.”

Discussion

Much of the literature on sexual and gender minority youth indicates that they occupy shrunken spaces in the offline world, when compared to sexual and gender majority youth. School, for many sexual and gender minority youth, is one such shrunken space. Whereas schools should be safe spaces for all adolescents, school authorities are currently not able to provide an adequate level of resources to sexual and gender minority youth, be it physical safe space or sense of community (Irvine, 1997; Macgillivray, 2004; Meyer, 2010; Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002; Pascoe, 2007). Indeed, as noted by Mufioz-Plaza et al. (2002), “[m]any researchers have particularly focused on the lack of social support systems for lesbian and gay youth within our schools, identifying the classroom as the most homophobic of all social institutions” (Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002, p. 53). In such a context, it is reasonable to think that a significant portion of these youth will find their community through other avenues, such as LGBTQ community centers (if they exist), or on the Internet.

My survey results go against pathologizing interpretations of the over-sexualized cyberqueer such as those found in the study by Wolak et al. (2003): “normal” kids should be able to make “real-life” friends; the others – the “abnormal” – should compensate this lack of social skills with “non-real-life” behavior. Given that homosexuality and gender non-conformity are often pathologized, this discourse is potentially harmful to sexual and gender minority youth, and at any rate quite troubling.

Instead, I would argue that sexual and gender minority youth are searching for self and society. These results are in line with the qualitative results of several researchers (Bryson, 2004; M.L. Gray, 2009; Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002; Munt et al., 2002; O’Riordan & Phillips, 2007; Pascoe, 2011), but contrast with cultural stereotypes about the sexual

lives of LGBTQ people. Rather than positing youth as lacking in social skills (a deficit model), my data shows that sexual and gender minority youth use the Internet to socialize and to feel as sense of belonging over any other purpose. They are not primarily going online to find dates, to have sex, or to look at pornography, even though they may still be finding love, maintaining relationships and meeting face-to-face the people they first met online (Bryson, 2004; Pascoe, 2011).

Even when life is rough for some sexual and gender minority youth, they do find comfort, support, and community online. Overall, my data shows that sexual and gender minority youth find on the Internet an inclusive social space for the expression, acceptance, and exploration of their queer identities; it shows that the Internet's queer-friendly features are more important to youth in middle through high school than they are for their college-attending counterparts; and that younger youth seem to use LGBTQ websites more often and use them more intensely than college-aged youth.

This chapter, however, is another step in setting a new research agenda about sexual and gender minority youth and their communities: one that is less pathologizing, that focuses on non-trivial issues of community, identity and belonging among sexual and gender minorities.

In Practice

To have allied adults to talk to will be particularly critical for younger youth, youth living outside urban centers, and youth who choose to attend college at more conservative institutions. Allies interested in helping sexual and gender minority youth explore their identities and find community should feel comfortable to direct these youth to the Internet for several reasons. First, as shown in this paper, it is a very important resource

sexual and gender minority youth across a range of activities, especially for youth who are at the exploration stage and want to investigate gender and sexuality anonymously. Second, there is evidence that they engage mostly in productive behavior and use the internet for identity and community development, important parts of youth development. The numbers presented here should add to educators' argumentation tools by depathologizing and desexualizing youth's online explorations, while simultaneously emphasizing the productive uses youth make of new technologies. And third, there are lots of very helpful resources online. A list of websites that educators can visit and recommend to school administrators, other educators, students and parents can be found as an Appendix.

Appendix

The Center for Disease Control has a resource page that is worth consulting and bookmarking (<http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm>). There are plenty of other websites that educators can visit and recommend to school administrators, other educators, students and parents, including the following:

(1) School Administrators and Educator Resources

<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/just-the-facts.aspx> <http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm>

<http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/youth-resources.htm>

<http://www.genderspectrum.org/>

<http://www.glsen.org>

<http://www.gsanetwork.org>

(2) For Youth, about Sexuality, Gender and Health:

<http://www.glaad.org/transgender>

<http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu>

<http://www.isis-inc.org>

<http://www.kidshealth.org/teen>

<http://www.teenwire.com>

<http://www.youngwomenshealth.org>

(3) For Parents

<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/index.php/glbqt-issues-info-for-parents>

<http://www.pflag.org>

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