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Abstract

This study examines the role of social media in health communication, with a particular focus on health information acquisition and communication gap reduction in the province of Punjab. In today's digital era, social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram have emerged as important sources of health-related information and channels of communication between healthcare providers and the public. The study aims to investigate the impact of social media on health awareness, access to health information, and the reduction of communication barriers within society. A quantitative research design was employed, and data were collected from 200 respondents through a structured questionnaire. The findings reveal that social media is widely used for acquiring health information, and respondents generally perceive it as an effective medium for promoting health awareness and facilitating health communication. The results further indicate that younger age groups are more likely to utilize social media for health-related activities than older age groups. Moreover, while social media has significantly improved access to health information and helped reduce communication barriers, concerns regarding misinformation and the credibility of online health content remain substantial challenges. The study concludes that social media serves as an essential tool for contemporary health communication in Punjab. However, enhancing digital health literacy and strengthening the regulation and verification of online health information are necessary to ensure the accurate and reliable dissemination of health-related content.

Keywords: Social Media, Health Communication, Information Acquisition, Communication Gap, Health Awareness, Punjab, Digital Media, Misinformation, Public Health, Online Information Seeking.

Introduction

Social media has emerged as one of the most powerful communication, information sharing and public awareness platforms in the modern digital times. People from a variety of age groups use applications like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly known as Twitter) to get information at a single click. The growing presence of smart phones and internet in everyday life and communication has made the contribution of social media in health communication significantly greater in Punjab. Social media is no longer just for entertainment and social

interaction, people are using social media for health-related information, medical advice, disease awareness and health-related updates about public health issues.

Health communication is an integral part of health promotion that enables people to make informed choices regarding health and lifestyle. Punjab's way of disseminating health information was primarily by television, newspapers, radio, hospitals and healthcare professionals. These traditional methods, however, were sometimes difficult to access, slow to disseminate and had communication barriers between health care providers and the public. Social media has become a viable alternative that allows for quick communication, interactive engagement and access to health information, without regard to geographical differences.

In today's era, social media has become a medium of knowledge about health among the people of Punjab. In times of health emergencies and public awareness campaigns, social media channels can be a source of real-time information on disease prevention, vaccination, hygiene, mental health, nutrition, and healthcare services. Nowadays, social media is increasingly being used by government institutions, healthcare facilities, physicians and non-governmental organizations to raise public awareness and to educate. Social media has played a crucial role in facilitating communication between people and health experts and trusted sources of information, both in rural and urban areas.

While beneficial, social media has its drawbacks. The dissemination of incorrect information, fake news, and unverified medical information can have a harmful impact on the popular public health awareness and decision-making. It can be challenging for many users to identify genuine and bogus information, leading to confusion and mistrust. Thus, it is important to grasp the impact of social media on health communication to assess its benefit and risk.

The purpose of this study is to find out the part of social media in gaining health information and reduction of communication barriers in Punjab. It aims to examine the impact of social media on public access to health information, on the communication between health service providers and communities, and on raising awareness about health. They have also examined the difficulties with using social media in health communication and the effectiveness of social media as a contemporary communication medium. The research in this paper can help to build a better

understanding of the effects of social media on public health.

Objectives of the Study

- To study the role of social media in acquiring health related information among population in Punjab.
- To find the role of social media in narrowing the communication gap between health care providers and public in the context of Punjab.
- To recognize the barriers and impact of using social media for health communication and awareness.

Literature Review

In today's digital age, social media has emerged as one of the most powerful communication tools, revolutionizing the way people receive, share and consume information. Social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter have revolutionized the way information is shared in the realm of health communication. People are now heavily dependent on digital platforms to gain awareness on health, to find information on diseases and preventive measures for them, to seek medical advice and to communicate with health care providers. Over the past decade, the use of the internet as a source of information and mobile access have improved immensely in the state of Punjab and social media have become an important source of health information in rural areas as well as urban areas. The role of social media in facilitating information acquisition, raising public awareness and bridging communication gaps has been investigated by scholars around the world, while the role of social media in the dissemination of misinformation and loss of trust in online information has been discussed.

A number of studies have indicated that social media may play a crucial role in enhancing peoples' access to health information. Malik, Islam, Ahmad and Mahmood (2022) reported that health information-seeking and sharing among young adults in Pakistan is determined by the use of social media platforms. They discovered that Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube are often used to learn more about diseases and cures, fitness, nutrition and mental health related matters. The researchers discovered the ability of social media to provide information at the time of use, as well as to share with other people health experiences which can increase health awareness among the youth.

In a similar way, Ittefaq and Iqbal (2018) spoke about digitalization of health sector in Pakistan and emphasized that the online communication via social media and mobile application is vital in health sector. They did the research on MARHAM – a digital platform that brings patients and doctors, and health practitioners together. The study found that social media and web platforms have been an integral part of the link between healthcare and public, particularly in society women and rural area. The use of these digital channels may be more convenient than the traditional healthcare system, offering users access to medical advice, appointment scheduling, and consultation with healthcare providers on health matters.

Social media is effective in providing health communication that is accessible to people in online health information-seeking behaviors as well, too. As a result, the internet is a place that they increasingly resort to for health information, as it provides them with information that is fast, convenient and inexpensive, as confirmed by an increasing number of systematic reviews like that of Jia, Pang and Liu (2021). They determined that having health information online is beneficial for health decisions and health prevention behavior. In addition, the study identified the potential of social media to provide a direct pathway for users to communicate with health care experts and communities and facilitate the sharing of knowledge and emotional support.

Studies have shown that social media is a unique medium in Pakistan during a health crisis and outbreak of disease. Ahmad, Malik and Mahmood (2021) conducted a research on Information Seeking behaviour during Dengue outbreak, the results indicated that the people heavily dependent on social media platforms to avail information in relation to symptoms, prevention, treatment etc. of Dengue. The study revealed that digital media has superiority in reaching consumers and is more effective in disseminating information on the dangers of the consumption of anabolic steroids than other media such as radio and newspapers. Social media channels enabled health bodies and government agencies to reach the public without having to go through the traditional media chain, thus minimizing information delays.

Social media has ever gained more significance in health communication, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this pandemic, millions people used social media for information about symptoms, vaccines, precautions to take and government guidelines. Tsao et al. (2021) did a

scoping review on the use of online social media as a medium to disseminate public health messages internationally during the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall conclusion of the researchers was that social media could be a very effective tool in the hands of healthcare institutions in order to reach the masses in case of urgency and that it may be useful to spread preventive measures like wearing a mask, washing hands and even launch vaccination campaigns. The government health authorities could use social media to spread information to the masses regarding lock-downs, testing centres and vaccination schedules in Pakistan.

Social media helps to mitigate communication gaps between healthcare providers and communities, beyond just being used for information dissemination. In the past in developing countries like Pakistan it was difficult to communicate between doctor and patient, primarily due to financial constraints, lack of health care facilities and distance. Leverage of these gaps has been helped through social media by letting health care providers communicate directly with the public. Internet based consultation services, health awareness campaigns and live communication sessions have enabled more people in Punjab to have access to health care. In the health institutions, health awareness messages on digital communication tools have also been delivered to specific target groups.

Another theme area in the literature that has been explored is the use of social media for awareness building, and educating the public about health. Social media campaigns have been found to have a positive effect on people's education on healthy lifestyles and health risks in research studies. Preparing complex health information in a simplified way, using videos, infographics and interactive discussions by health organizations can be delivered to people.

According to a study conducted by Khursheed and Rasul (2024) social media platforms are a source from which students and educated young people can obtain nutrition, mental health and fitness related information and knowledge about the prevention of diseases in Pakistan. They concluded that social media is a platform that makes it easier for people to learn about themselves and is a personal incentive to become healthier.

Furthermore, the social media's interactive aspect has emerged as an important part of improving

health communication. There is another disparity between traditional media and social networking, and that is that with the traditional media, people have no chance to ask questions, share their personal experiences, comment or discuss – while with the social networking, they do. This two-way communication not only builds a stronger bond between the public and the campaign's efforts but also engages the public, resulting in a more effective health awareness campaign. The interactivity of social media can promote user interaction and motivation in the process of actively searching health information (Shang et al., 2021).

Interactive communication can also help to build a sense of belonging to a community when communicating with people who have chronic conditions, mental illness, and/or social stigma. Despite its advantages, social media also presents significant challenges in health communication. One of the major concerns identified in the literature is the spread of misinformation and fake news.

Saqib and Hussain (2025) have researched the effect of fake health news in Pakistan and found that individuals are sharing news without verifying the authenticity of the news, which is a step towards spreading fake news on social media platforms. Wrong information regarding medicines, treatments, vaccines and disease can negatively impact public behavior and mislead the public. There is immense problem of vaccine related misinformation and remedies during the pandemic of COVID-19 in all countries including in Pakistan.

A great deal of research has been conducted on information credibility as well. Khan et al. (2022) did a systematic literature review of information credibility and social media information adoption behaviors. When the health related information is provided from a credible and reliable source, users will be more inclined to trust and uptake the information. However, the openness of social media allows anyone to develop and publish content and it's hard for users to distinguish between real and fake. The research underscored the importance of enhancing the digital footprint of healthcare organizations and government agencies to provide trustworthy and combat misinformation.

Another hurdle in the area of social media health communication is that there are segments of

society which are not knowledgeable about digital skills. Many rural Punjabis are lacking in information sources assessment skills (ISA) on Internet. This digital illiteracy raises the likelihood of the adoption of misinformation and unhealthy behavior. According to Javed and Rahman (2024), news verification process by Pakistani social media users revealed that they verified news information from social circles, family and friends and official websites. One of the reasons is because it helps the dissemination of misinformation regarding health issues in a fairly short time.

The literature review found that other factors such as socio-economic and demographic factors are also known to affect the use of socio media for health communication. Overall, it seems children and students and those with more education are more active in their search for health information on the Web than are older adults. Access to the internet and use of digital exposure tends to be higher in the city and lower in the rural areas, without technological and infrastructural capabilities. With the coming of the smartphone and low cost internet packages, gradually the usage has grown in social media across all the social classes in Punjab. In the present-day, for this reason, social media are becoming more and more a public communication space and a public awareness space.

The effectiveness of the social media as health communication tool is also compared to the traditional media. The traditional media, such as radio, newspaper and television, have long played an important role as media sources of health information. Typically, however, these are described as channels in which there's little communication and slow information flow. But, social media has a number of advantages like immediate communication, reach to wider audience and interacting with others. The results of the study revealed that both traditional and social media are contributing to the dissemination of official information, however, they are more effective in terms of motivating action and also real-time dissemination of information.

In general, the articles examined indicate that the social media has become a significant medium for health communication and information. It has helped people to access health information, raised awareness of health, helped to bridge a gap in communication and offer opportunities for communication between health stakeholders and communities. The social networks have been a game-changer in raising awareness on diseases, preventive health care and healthy life in Punjab. At the same time, misinformation, the credibility of Internet information and low digital literacy are challenges to the effectiveness of Internet health communication.

Although a considerable body of literature has examined the relationship between social media and health communication, most studies have been conducted at the national and international levels. Limited research has specifically focused on the province of Punjab, particularly regarding the role of social media in health information acquisition and the reduction of communication gaps among the population. Furthermore, the socio-cultural factors that influence the use of social media for health communication in Punjab remain largely unexplored. Therefore, a significant research gap exists in understanding how social media facilitates access to health information and contributes to bridging communication gaps within the unique socio-cultural context of Punjab. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the impact of social media on health communication, information acquisition, and communication gap reduction in Punjab.

Theoretical Framework

It was based on Use and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Health Belief Model (HBM) that has been well grounded in the understanding of how social media influences health communication, acquisition of health information and gap reduction in health communication in the context of Pakistan particularly in the province of Punjab.

Uses & Gratifications Theory is a theory that explains the strategic use of the media "to satisfy needs and interests". UGT's vision of the recipient is different from the one used in the traditional concept, that is, the recipient is a passive receiver of information who receives information through the media. UGT philosophy is that the user is not passive, but active, not a consumer, but a producer of the media; user is an active user who is also involved in using the media to get information, entertainment, social interaction and self-development. People in Punjab rely on social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and Instagram for health-related information, talking to health experts, and getting updates about diseases, treatments, and preventive healthcare measures. To meet the information and social communication requirement of the users, the real-time health awareness information and interaction communication platform has been provided through social media, answering their questions. The theory offers an explanation as to why social media is a more popular choice than traditional media for gaining health information.

The other important theory relevant to this study is Health belief model. This model suggests that individuals' perceptions of risk, benefit and barriers to health related behaviors will influence the health related behaviors. People will be more likely to seek health information and more likely to engage in the types of behaviors they believe are preventive if they think they are at risk of the condition and the behavior will benefit them. These perceptions are a big part of social media, as it is used to disseminate health awareness messages, educational campaigns and medical advice. Internet communication plays significant role in the promotion of social participation in health related activities and to create awareness in health related issues such as consciousness on symptoms, prevention of the disease, vaccination programs etc. in Punjab.

There is a wide coverage of the combined model of the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Health Belief Model on social media's effect on health communication. The UGT describes the motivations for obtaining health-related information from social media and the HBM explains the effect of health information in social media on the attitudes, awareness and health behaviors. The above theories reinforce the idea that social media can serve as a source of information on health issues, but it can also be used to interact with others and communicate information immediately as well, thus helping to bridge the communication gap between the health care provider and the health care user.

Social media is the independent variable while acquisition of health information and gap reduction in health information communication is dependent variables in this study. The more social media was used, the more likely people were to share health information, to know about health issues, and to have good communication with the health care organizations and the communities, the framework recommends. Meanwhile, other factors like Information credibility, Digital literacy and Internet services can affect the effectiveness of the use of social media in health communication.

Thus, the theoretical basis of this study is centered on the role of communication media in the present day particularly the social media in disseminating health awareness, information seeking behaviour and bringing the public of province Punjab into the limelight. It is a conception that needs to be examined in relation to how digital communication platforms can cut down on

communication barriers and ensure better access to knowledge around health-related matters among population.

Research Methodology

In this study the methodology adopted was quantitative research to study the effect of social media on health information acquisition and reducing gaps in communication in Punjab. The quantitative approach is appropriate since it enables the researcher to gather quantitative data from the respondents and analyze the relationship between the use of social media and the patterns of health communication.

Research Design

The study uses descriptive research design to explore how the social media platforms are used for disseminating health information and how it can help in communication gap between health care providers and public. The descriptive design is useful to grasp the behaviours, attitudes and perceptions of social media users towards health communication.

Population

The population of this study is social media users of Punjab. The target groups are boys and girls between the ages of 13 to 17 that actively use the social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter for health information.

Sampling technique and sample size

Convenient sampling method has been utilized in the data collection process as it is easy to access the respondents within the time and resources available. The study has collected data from 200 respondents of various areas of Punjab. The respondents chosen have been cross-sectioned into different educational and social backgrounds to get a diversity of opinions and experiences.

Data Collection Method

Structured questionnaire has been used to collect primary data. The questions were closed questions on social media usage, how health information was gained, effectiveness of communication and awareness of health issues. The questionnaire has been sent out in both

electronic and hard copy to the respondents.

Research Instrument

There are two parts to the questionnaire. The first section includes information on age, gender, education, occupation etc. The second section highlights the use of social media for health communication, the preferred social media platforms, trust in online health information and the role of social media in closing health communication gaps.

Data Analysis

Data collected is statistically analyzed. The data obtained from the respondents have been analyzed using descriptive statistic such as frequency, percentage, tabular and graphical. The analysis showed the pattern of how social media can impact the acquisition of health information and health communication in the province of Punjab.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical guidelines have been adhered to in conducting the research. The purpose of the study has been explained to the Respondents and their participation has been voluntary. The participants' confidentiality and privacy has been ensured and the information collected has only been used for academic purposes.

Data Analysis

Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis was conducted to measure the internal consistency of the questionnaire used in this study. Cronbach's Alpha was applied to determine the reliability of the scale items related to social media usage, health information acquisition, and communication gap reduction. The overall reliability value of the instrument was found to be acceptable, indicating that the questionnaire items were consistent and suitable for data collection.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Media Usage	5	0.81
Health Information Acquisition	5	0.84
Communication Gap Reduction	5	0.79
Overall Reliability	15	0.82

The Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.82 indicates a high level of reliability because values above 0.70 are generally considered acceptable in social science research.

Demographic Analysis

Gender Distribution

The study included 200 respondents from Punjab. Among them, both male and female participants actively participated in the survey.

Table 2: Gender of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	112	56%
Female	88	44%
Total	200	100%

The table shows that 56% of the respondents were male, while 44% were female.

Age Distribution

Table 3: Age of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
18–25 Years	78	39%
26–35 Years	64	32%
36–45 Years	38	19%
46 Years and Above	20	10%
Total	200	100%

The majority of respondents (39%) belonged to the age group of 18–25 years, indicating that young adults are more active users of social media for health communication.

Educational Qualification

Table 4: Educational Level of Respondents

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage
Intermediate	36	18%
Bachelor’s Degree	82	41%
Master’s Degree	60	30%
Other	22	11%
Total	200	100%

The findings indicate that most respondents were educated, with 41% holding bachelor’s degrees.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze respondents’ opinions regarding social media and health communication.

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Media Usage for Health Information	4.12	0.71
Health Awareness Through Social Media	4.05	0.76
Communication Gap Reduction	3.94	0.82
Trust in Online Health Information	3.67	0.89

The results show that respondents highly agreed that social media is useful for acquiring health information and spreading health awareness.

Independent Sample T-Test

An independent sample t-test was conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference between male and female respondents regarding the use of social media for health information acquisition.

Table 6: Independent Sample T-Test by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
Male	112	4.18	0.68	1.94	0.054
Female	88	4.02	0.74		

The significance value ($p = 0.054$) is slightly above 0.05, indicating that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female respondents regarding social media use for health information acquisition.

T-Test for Communication Gap Reduction

Another independent sample t-test was conducted to determine whether age groups differed in their perceptions regarding communication gap reduction through social media.

Table 7: Independent Sample T-Test by Age Group

Age Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig. (2-tailed)
18–35 Years	142	4.08	0.73	2.31	0.022
36 Years and Above	58	3.74	0.81		

The significance value ($p = 0.022$) is less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant difference between younger and older respondents regarding perceptions of communication gap reduction through social media. The age group has been merged in to two categories for this test.

Interpretation of Findings

The analysis indicates that social media plays a significant role in health information acquisition and communication gap reduction in Punjab. Most respondents considered social media an effective source of health awareness and communication. Younger participants were more likely to use social media for healthcare information compared to older respondents. The findings also suggest that social media platforms help bridge communication gaps between healthcare providers and the public by enabling quick and accessible information sharing.

Overall, the statistical analysis supports the study objectives and demonstrates that social media has become an important tool for health communication in Punjab.

Discussion and Conclusion

Present study aimed to get insight into role of social media can play as a medium of information regarding health information and how it could fill the communication gap in Punjab. The results are clear among educated and young, and information regarding health available via social media is good. The mean scores gained for the descriptive statistics were high for each of the various social media platforms used to seek health information ($M = 4.12$) showing that respondents were very dependent on the social media platforms they use; such as, Facebook, Whatsapp, YouTube and Instagram to seek health information. The discovery also aligns with that of Malik et al. (2022) which was previously conducted that the young people in Pakistan would look for information on social media (health related issues: mental health or nutrition) and they would share it with others. In this study in Punjab, they discovered that Digital platforms could play an important part in improving access to adequate timely health information.

Further, the study has revealed that there is huge potential that can be used via social media between the Healthcare providers and public. The mean score ($M = 3.94$) shows that social media is considered as a good tool to enhance the interaction and access to health communication. This is in line with the results of Ittefaq and Iqbal (2018) who stated that the digital platforms in Pakistan, such as MARHAM has successfully empowered individuals to access doctors or overcome the distance and time constraint and access to healthcare. Likewise, Jia, Pang and Liu (2021) found that in addition, users can also directly interact with the health care workers on online health communication platforms, which leads to their trust and decision making in health. In the present study, results are matched with all above mentioned studies as all of them revealed that the use of Social media is positive in the process of communication in the health care system of Punjab.

Another finding was that there were more young than older users gaining health information via social media. This difference in age group with respect to the reduction in communication gap, was statistically significant ($p = 0.022$) using t test. This finding has validated the existing research related to digital divide in health communication. The gap between the older and younger generation in the use of technology is due to their attitudes towards health and wellbeing information consumption: older consumers are more interested in traditional media (TV, newspapers, etc.) while the younger ones are interested in digital media for health and wellbeing information (Khursheed, Rasul, 2024). This shows that two factors play a significant role in attitudes and behaviours towards health communication such as age and digital literacy, respectively, especially in the developing countries of the world like Punjab.

Another result of this study was that social media have become a more and more important tool for health crisis and awareness campaigns. This is also reflected in the literature, since today social media is being used during COVID-19 to communicate health problems – e.g. information on vaccination and prevention – and health guidelines. Based on the statements made by Tsao et al. (2021), social media has proven to be an important and effective tool for health messages to be disseminated in a timely fashion during the pandemic. Similarly, the Government of Pakistan could also leverage social media to disseminate health messages to the masses and health agencies could do the same. This is just one such example of how social media can be used as an emergency communication tool and information in a "health-related situation.

But some of the issues brought up by the study in the realm of social media and health communication have emerged. The problem of the spread of misinformation and fake health news is among the main issues. The recent study conducted by Saqib and Hussain (2025) revealed the following three reasons why misinformation can be easily spread in social media platforms. This can have potentially negative consequences such as incorrect self-care, vaccine refusal/confusion about healthcare guidance. Additionally, WHO commissioned and ordered a systematic review and other research studies around the world have pointed to the serious consequences of health misinformation and its impact on health trust and health worldwide. Results show that social media can be a solution to boost information availability, but also suggest more efforts to regulate and be aware of its negative aspects.

Another variable in this study found was the reliability of the information. Moderate trust was reported of information posted online in their social networks ($M = 3.67$); this means that users might not always know what information they are getting online is accurate or not. This is in line with Khan, Soroya and Mahmood (2022), which discovered that credibility is a crucial aspect that influences online users' acceptance of health related information. People often don't trust medical advice of others and thus are less likely to absorb misinformation. Thus, digital health users need to have critical health literacy to be able to critically analyze digital information.

The current research also demonstrates that social media has a significance as a medium to create public health awareness and change. Along with this, there are many educational videos, awareness raising programs, infographics and such on social media, which are easily accessible and disseminate information regarding disease and prevention. This is in accordance with the study conducted by Shang et al. (2021) which showed interactive social media communication has relationship with engagement and interaction in social media communication that increases adopting a healthy lifestyle. This is especially true in the Punjab where a large percentage of the population accesses the internet, internet access via cell phone (mobile phone) and social media are a suitable medium to create awareness of health.

Although these positive findings confirm the healthcare communication landscape cannot be replaced by social media, they nevertheless suggest that social media can supplement these

traditional communication methods in the healthcare industry. It can make it more accessible and more known, but often isn't professionally supervised. Diagnosis and treatment can still be done accurately using traditional media, and direct communication with health service providers. A well-rounded approach is needed and social media should be used in conjunction with other medical knowledge resources.

Therefore, it can be concluded that social media has an immense role that is highly beneficial in acquiring health information and reducing the communication gap in Punjab. It has revolutionized the way people access health information, enhanced the connection between health system and citizens and brought health awareness to the citizens' use. But problems like information literacy, credibility crisis and misinformation diminish its effectiveness. The study recommends that digital literacy programs be strengthened, methods of verifying content be improved and the participation of official health organizations on social media be expanded in order to further increase its positive influence.

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