

# Promiscuous Technologies: Shifting Notions of Gender and Sexuality in Nigeria's Digital Public Sphere

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## Abstract

This paper critically examines the emergence of sexual technologies in Nigeria's digital public sphere. In particular, it explores how the use of sexual technologies like vibrators and dildos in public spaces is viewed as transgressive, and how cultural, social, and religious factors shape Nigerians' perceptions. The paper adopts the concept of transgressive publics to describe how social media enables minoritized groups to challenge dominant norms around sexuality. Two recent cases are analyzed – one involving a Nollywood actress publicly distributing dildos at an event, and another with a blogger recording Nigerian women using vibrators. To examine public discourse around these events, social media comments on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were collected and analyzed thematically. Key findings show sexual technologies are condemned as immoral, demonic, disrespectful to cultural values, and a threat to masculinity. Criticism relies heavily on moral and religious beliefs that cast non-normative sexual expressions as sinful. Reactions also expose gender anxieties related to female autonomy and shifting power relations. However, some pragmatic comments defend women's actions given Nigeria's difficult economic climate. While stigmatized, the public emergence of sexual technologies constitutes a transgressive public for asserting women's sexual agency and pushing boundaries. The study demonstrates how cultural narratives regulating sexuality are negotiated through technology, highlighting tensions between tradition and modernity.

**Keywords:** sexual technologies, gender, religion, transgressive publics, Nigeria, social media.

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## INTRODUCTION

Scholars have shown significant interest in sexual technologies, such as Ruberg's exploration of the cultural implications of sex dolls in "*Sex Dolls at Sea*" (2022) and Comella's examination of feminist principles in promoting a sex-positive approach to sexuality through pioneering sex-toy stores in "*Vibrator Nation*" (2017). Scholars have also addressed topics such as sex toys and sexual wellness (Eaglin & Bardzell, 2011; Döring & Pöschl, 2018), technologies of pleasure and race (Cruz, 2016) and sex and the internet (White, 2003; Race, 2015; Beecham & Unger, 2019). In Africa, the topic of sexual technology has been relatively understudied. One of the earliest attempts to explore it was made by Evans-Pritchard (1970) in his article "Sexual inversion among the Azande" of South Sudan, where he noted how women sought their sexual gratification using inanimate objects, such as sweet potatoes and bananas when a male partner was not available. Since then, there has been limited research on sexual technology in Africa. It was not until recently that

Fiaveh (2019) conducted a study that explored how women and men in urban Ghana construct the penis in relation to sex and gender, and how the nuanced narratives surrounding self-sexual gratification and the use of sex toys are changing notions of sex and the penis.

As research continues to explore the emergence and use of sexual technologies globally, it has become increasingly evident that the use of sex toys is proliferating worldwide, including in Africa. However, there remains a significant gap in the study of sexual technologies in Africa. This article critically examines the emergence of sexual technologies in Nigeria. We are particularly interested in exploring how the use of sexual technologies in public spaces is viewed as transgressive, and how cultural, social, and religious factors influence Nigerians' perceptions of this emergence.

## Contexts of sexual technologies and transgressive publics in Nigeria

Nigeria is a country with deeply rooted cultural and religious traditions that shape attitudes and beliefs around sexuality (Izugbara, 2005; Josephine Para-Mallam, 2006; Mukoro, 2017; Olaluwoye & Ogungbemi, 2020; Ayodabo & Ojebode, 2021). Historically, sex was a taboo subject that was not openly discussed in public, and traditional sexual practices were strictly regulated by social norms and customs (Ogungbemi, 2016; Ayodabo, 2021). However, with the advent of modern technology and the internet, there has been a growing interest in and use of sexual technologies in Africa, particularly among younger generations (Fiaveh, 2019). Sexual technologies, such as sex toys, pornography, and dating apps, have become increasingly accessible to Nigerians, thanks to the global trend towards the commodification of sex, the increasing availability of sex-related products and the proliferation of smartphones and social media. While the use of these technologies is still largely stigmatized, there has been a growing interest in exploring and experimenting with new forms of sexual expression that challenge traditional cultural norms and values. For instance, the emergence of recent social media platforms like Queenys' View YouTube channel that focus on the use of sex toys, along with numerous online sex toy retailers, as well as instances of Nigerian women using vibrators and engaging in oral sex with dildos at public events, are evidence that the public display of sexuality in Nigeria has reached unprecedented levels. These events have sparked intense debates and discussions around social change, morality, and cultural identity in Nigeria. However, they also provide a unique opportunity to analyze these incidents as transgressive public.

This study adopts the concept of transgressive publics to describe groups or communities that challenge and resist dominant norms and values, often through acts of subversion or disruption in public spaces. At their core, transgressive publics are platforms for the expression "formed by structurally disadvantaged people—by those excluded from participation, by those with unstable or partial citizenship, and by those who are neglected or marginalized" (Gilman-Opalsky, 2008). They provide a space for individuals to share their experiences, opinions, and beliefs without fear of censorship or repression. In Nigeria, transgressive publics have emerged in response to the limitations of mainstream public discourse, which tends to be dominated by a narrow range of voices and perspectives. One of the most significant examples of transgressive publics in Nigeria is the use of online communities and social media to engage in public debates on controversial topics such as sexuality, gender, and religion. For example, social media as transgressive publics have been instrumental in challenging the stigmatization of LGBTQ+ individuals in Nigeria and advocating for greater acceptance of diverse sexual orientations. These spaces have allowed LGBTQ+ individuals in Nigeria to

connect with others who share similar experiences and beliefs, express themselves and challenge dominant cultural narratives around sexuality.

## Discussion of the case study

In recent years, there has been a rise in transgressive publics that provide avenues for the public display of sexual technologies and new forms of sexual expression. While there have been several instances of sexual transgressions as previously mentioned, two recent cases are worth highlighting. The first incident happened in 2022, when a prominent Nollywood actress, Nkechi Blessing made headlines after she was filmed sharing dildos with female attendees at her mother's remembrance ceremony. The actress, who is known for her outspoken views on sexuality and women's rights, used the event as an opportunity to encourage women to explore their sexuality. However, the incident illustrates the complex relationship between sexual technologies and cultural values in Nigeria as it sparked a public debate on the emergence of sexual technologies in Nigeria, with some criticizing the actress for promoting values that are seen as contrary to traditional cultural norms. Others, however, praised her for her courage and for using her platform to promote sexual exploration.

After the controversial case of Nkechi Blessing, another case emerged that transgressed the dominant cultural and sexual space. This time, it was a blogger who recorded Nigerian women using vibrators and offering cash rewards for those who were able to last five minutes without removing the vibrator. The video was recorded live and shared on various social media platforms, sparking a heated debate around sexual freedom and autonomy in Nigeria. The emergence of transgressive publics in Nigeria, enabled by the increasing access to social media, has played a significant role in challenging dominant cultural narratives around sexuality. In this case, the actions of the blogger and the women who participated challenged the societal attitudes towards female sexuality, sexual pleasure, and sexual freedom. While the public reaction to the video was also mixed, it reflected the ongoing debates around sexual rights and gender equality in Nigeria.

## METHODOLOGY

To examine the emergence of sexual technologies, a content analysis of social media reactions, especially Facebook comments, Twitter tweets and Instagram comments were conducted. Prominent social media handles and accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram where the cases were shared were identified to collect the data. The collected data were then analyzed using a coding scheme to categorize and analyze the comments, tweets and posts based on themes related to norms and values around the emergence of sexual technologies in Nigeria.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Morality and Societal Decay*

One dominant theme that emerged in the study is the criticism of society and cultural values about the use of sexual technologies. Many people view the display of sex toys in public as shameful, mad, and evidence of moral decline. Considering the cultural set-up of Nigerian society, which is typically secretive about sex and prides itself on moral values, it is not surprising to see Nigerians reacting to the use of sex toys as a transgressive act that undermines traditional values and norms around sexuality. Articulating this, a Facebook user @Madubueze Jubril commented:

What a shame !! what is happening to our values in this country!! I saw a child there, how does she defend these nonsense to these kids. Some of this nonsense should be about your personal life not public. How did we get here?

The user expresses concern about the potential impact of such behavior on children and argues that the use of sex toys should remain private and not be visible in public spaces, especially where children are present. His comment is also a reflection of a sense of bewilderment and concern about the current situation regarding the emergence of sexual technologies as transgressive acts in Nigeria. The user wonders how society has reached a point where such behavior is becoming more visible and accepted, particularly given the traditional values and norms that they hold. Other people also view the display of sex toys in public as madness. For instance, Twitter user @Kogi\_Eyes, refers to the incident as "madness," while another user @The\_AdeolaJr describes it as a "mad show of shame," suggesting that it is viewed as a form of deviant behavior. She further adds that "decency is now scarce in this generation o", indicating the decay in society's morality has allowed for the public display of sex toys. These comments suggest that the use of sexual technologies in public spaces is seen as a deviation from cultural and societal norms and is therefore stigmatized. There are Nigerians who also saw the use of sexual technologies as disrespectful behavior in relation to familial and cultural values. For instance, a Facebook user @Aribisala Bukkey states that Nkechi Blessing has no "single respect for [her] late Mom.". This sentiment is also echoed by another Facebook user @Chii Henri who sees the use of sexual technology as "so disrespectful to the womanhood." Such comments suggest that the use of sexual technologies in public spaces is not only viewed as transgressive but also as a sign of disrespect for cultural and societal norms that expect women to be decent in appearance and behaviors.

The theme of Morality and Societal Decay concerning the case of the blogger recording Nigerian women using vibrators also highlights the tension between traditional values and modern sexual expression in Nigerian society. Reacting to the video, Facebook user @Kate Ebinoluwa says:

"What arrant nonsense is this in the name of making money? You all should discourage things like this, this society is already rotten...I blame those useless ladies doing such stupid thing...What kind of morals is this bringing to the society?"

The user describes the behavior as "arrant nonsense," and blames not only the blogger but also the women who participated in the video, calling them "useless ladies." The comment suggests that the behavior is immoral and brings shame to society, implying that not all sexual expressions are seen as acceptable in Nigerian culture. Another Facebook user, @Ojie Tony refers to the women as "disgrace to humanity," and says "We must show the public things that are beneficial and not this", suggesting that the behavior is not only morally reprehensible but also dehumanizing. The comment implies that those who engage in sexual activities that are considered taboo are not worthy of respect or dignity and should remain hidden. Overall, the criticism of society and cultural values theme concerning the use of sexual technologies in public spaces is characterized by negative reactions that center on the idea that the behavior is deviant, shameful, and disrespectful to Nigerian cultural and societal values. This theme underscores the stigmatization of sexual expression and the role of women in Nigerian society and reflects broader cultural narratives around sexuality and appropriate behavior.

### **Religious beliefs and condemnation**

Public perceptions of the two cases are also strongly influenced by religious views. Religion has a significant impact on how Nigerians understand things that they perceive as mysterious or beyond their comprehension, particularly in the context of sexuality. For instance, a Twitter user, @Kogi\_Eyes tweeted in reaction to Nkechi Blessing's sharing of dildos, "This is pure madness, thank God for my religion anytime any day". This tweet highlights the role of religion in shaping perceptions of sexuality in Nigerian society, indicating that the user sees the sharing of dildos as a form of madness and that their religious beliefs provide a framework for making sense of the act. The phrase, "thank God for my religion" is an expression of the user's gratitude for his or her religious beliefs that supposedly shield him or her from such immoral acts while the use of the phrase "anytime any day" suggests a deep-seated commitment to these beliefs and the role they play in shaping attitudes towards sexuality.

Sexual technologies are further portrayed as a terrible religious transgression, tagging it as a sin that needs deliverance. A Facebook user @Osaretin Eweka describes Nkechi Blessing's behavior as "spiritual insanity", claiming "she needs deliverance". This comment suggests a belief that the actress's actions are the result of a spiritual sickness that requires intervention. The use of the phrase "spiritual insanity"

suggests a belief in the existence of a spiritual realm that can have a direct impact on mental health. The call for deliverance implies that the commenter sees the actress as needing help, rather than simply being condemned. Similarly, another Facebook user @Wisdom of Solomon calls on "Lord Jesus by your infinite mercy" to "redeem this Soul and help her out of this reprobate mind. She needs help!!!!". This comment further combines religious language with a more compassionate view of the actress's actions. The use of the phrase "Lord Jesus by your infinite mercy" implies a belief in the power of redemption and the potential for change. The use of the phrase "reprobate mind" implies a belief that the actress's actions are the result of a distorted way of thinking, rather than inherent moral corruption.

The religious angle through which sexual technologies are deprecated as demonic possession is further asserted through @RomeoRichman's tweet "Demons 🐼 are no longer coming in spirit but now physically with us. God show us your mercy ☐". This tweet expresses a similar sentiment to the earlier tweet, in that it invokes religious beliefs to condemn the act of sharing dildos. However, it takes a more extreme view, suggesting that the act is the work of demons and invoking God's mercy in response. Similarly, another Facebook user @Adam Aliu Yusuf claims Nkechi Blessing's transgressive act is "a pointer that Mama is chilling in hell". The use of the phrase "chilling in hell" suggests Nigerians' belief in a starkly binary moral universe, where actions are either good or bad and where punishment is swift and certain. The reference to her mother also indicates Nigerians' tendency to always associate children's deviant behavior with poor parenting.

Another interesting dimension to the appropriation of religion to commentary on sexual technologies is from reactions to the case of the blogger recording Nigerian women using vibrators. There we find a singular role of religion: as a tool for demonizing sexual technologies. A Facebook user Numfor Julius's comment, "The devil is at work. God help this generation," suggests a belief in the devil as a malevolent force at work in society, tempting people to engage in immoral behavior such as using vibrators. It also appeals to God for help in combating this perceived threat. Similarly, Nicholas Amevor's comment, "But the devil is very cunning. New tricks to trap people's soul to indulge in these things," and Ezenwa Chibuzor's comment, "Wow Devil and his tricks," implies that the use of vibrators is a trap set by the devil to lure people into immoral behavior. The comments further highlight the perceived "trickiness" of the devil and his ability to infiltrate society through new forms of technology and behavior that people must remain vigilant against. Overall, these comments suggest that there is a perception among many Nigerians that the use of vibrators is a manifestation of the devil's influence and a threat to moral values. This perception is rooted in

religious beliefs that emphasize how Nigerians adopt religious ethos to make sense of things that are beyond their comprehension, particularly in the context of sexuality. These perceptions resonates with Akande (2016)'s affirmation of the centrality of religion to perceptions of sexuality in Nigeria when he submits:

It is safe to say that any issue that is considered anti-thesis to religion and inconsistent with the acceptable cultural norms is most likely to fail popularity contest and when such issue is up for debate; it is usually considered as dead on arrival (34).

Hence, it is understandable why many of the comments reveal the strong influence of religion on perceptions of sexuality in Nigeria, with many perceiving sexual expressions outside of religious teachings as sinful, demonic, devilish, and deserving of punishment. While these reactions are reflections of many Nigerians, it also highlights the need for more discussions and education on sexuality that considers religious beliefs and values in Nigerian society.

### Gender Roles and Power Dynamics

The two cases also highlight issues related to gender roles, power dynamics, and the subversion of masculinity in Nigeria. Nigerian society is highly patriarchal, with a strong sexualization of the male identity (Langa, 2014; Ayodabo & Amaefula, 2021; Ogungbemi, & Bamgbose, 2021). As a result, people's perceptions of gender roles are shaped by the belief that men are the primary sexual partners in a relationship, a gender ideology that influences people's attitudes and behavior towards the emergence of sexual technologies in the study. For instance, Facebook user @Bassey Ogbonnaya Kanu claims Nkechi Blessing "is encouraging ladies to remain single. Which mean no need for them to get married since they can be servicing themselves". The comment suggests that Nkechi's behavior disrupts traditional gender roles, indicating that women who engage in such sexual transgression will not be seen as desirable partners since they are not conforming to traditional gender ideals. This resonates with some scholars' assertion of the importance of marriage system in Nigeria and the place of women in it (Ayodabo, 2016; Solanke & Ayodabo, 2017). No wonder, many people claim that such behavior must have been the reason why Blessing's former husband left her. For instance, a Twitter user @Dennisumukoro1 insists "Now I know the main reason why her husband pursue her". Similarly, @NATIVITY claims that "we have seen why honorable (her former husband) discharged her, what a pity". The comments on Nkechi Blessing's marital status suggest that she is not living up to her role as a wife because of her sexual behavior, reinforcing the idea that a woman's worth is tied to her sexual behavior and fidelity in Nigeria.

The public display of dildos by Nkechi Blessing also raises concerns around masculinity, with many Nigerians believing that sex toys not only undermine natural intimacy but are a big threat to men's masculinity. An Instagram user @ibisslovehaven's comment that says "men will not like this" suggests that sex toys threaten their masculinity and power dynamics in a relationship. This is reinforced by @deon\_9078 who agrees that sex toys "takes away the natural values and intimacy between both sexes." The threat of sex toys to masculinity and the idea that sex toys can replace men are also present in @impeccable\_danny views that sex toys are "annoying, when it is not that men don't have penis again". The men's concern reinforces the idea that the use of sex toys by women is shifting the balance of power in gender relations by diminishing men's control. This belief is based on the idea that women should only experience sexual pleasure through men, which reinforces the unequal social structure that undervalues women by denying them the opportunity to seek sexual pleasure independently.

The second case involving the use of a vibrator furthermore reinforces the above idea. For instance, @Ayinla Ridwan's comment, "Machines are no longer taking our jobs but our women too... wish I'm a vibrator 🙄" expresses a sense of humor and irony, while also conveying concern about the potential impact of vibrators on gender relationships in Nigeria. The use of the phrase "Machines are no longer taking our jobs but our women too" suggests a humorous exaggeration, but the comment also reflects a concern that the use of vibrators may lead to a decline in sexual relationships between men and women. The use of the sad face emoji at the end of the comment may also indicate a sense of resignation or sadness about the situation. Similarly, other men express a different perspective, with a focus on the potential impact of sexual technologies on men's role and value in relationships. For instance, Leo Odynaka complains that the blogger:

spoil business for men especially those of us that believe we can't be replaced due to our energy performance.... see fine girl with everything good now will prefer that thing to hardworking men like us visiting gym all the time.

The comment suggests a fear of being replaced by vibrators and a belief that men who put effort into their physical appearance and sexual performance may be less desirable to women who can achieve sexual satisfaction with a vibrator. The use of the phrase "girls will prefer that thing (vibrator)" suggests a sense of frustration or resentment towards women who may choose vibrators over men. In addition, a Facebook user @Bizmack believes that the proliferation of vibrators is an attempt to make "men USELESS", implying that women who take control of their own sexual pleasure are threatening to men's power. Similarly, Ibekwe Emeka claims that women who use vibrators will become

dissatisfied with their partners and criticize their sexual performance, reinforcing the belief that a man's sexual performance is the only measure of his masculinity. According to him, women who use vibrators will end up "calling her man 2mins man". These comments reveal a deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset that views male sexual power as central to masculinity and views female sexual pleasure and agency as a threat to male dominance.

The conclusion we draw from the above is that sexual technologies are resented since they do not fit into the narratives of male power and masculinities because, to Africans, the penis is the only sexual symbol that forms an important aspect of sexual practices in heterosexual unions, reinforcing that masculinity "is closely associated with our sexual partners, their sexual appeal, the size of our penises, the claims that we make about our sexual stamina, whether we can maintain a healthy erection and how virile we are" (Ratele, 2011:399). However, it is important to note that the use of sexual technologies, including sex toys, can enhance sexual experiences and pleasure for both partners and can be a healthy and consensual addition to a sexual relationship.

### Expressing support

While the majority of the reactions to the emergence of sexual technologies in the study are critical, harsh and extreme, there are instances of expressions of support. In response to Nkechi Blessing sharing dildos during her mother's remembrance ceremony, @IamDynamicV tweeted "Women supporting women 🍆🍆🍆 #WomenSupportingWomen". This tweet expresses support for Nkechi Blessing and her actions of sharing dildos during a remembrance ceremony while the hashtag #WomenSupportingWomen suggests that the commenter sees this as an act of solidarity between women. Similarly, a Facebook user @Blessing Christopher says, "Thank you Namesake. Women deserve genuine happiness. Thank you for this generosity". This comment expresses gratitude towards Nkechi Blessing for her actions and expresses the belief that women deserve to experience genuine happiness in their lives outside of traditional gender relations space. Another Instagram user @comediandeeone expressed a simple sentiment regardless of whether Nigerians agree with her actions: "I just love her". These comments show a sense of support for women who use sex toys, seeing the use of sex toys as a natural and normal aspect of female sexuality.

Also, responses to the blogger's recording of Nigerian women using vibrators and offering cash rewards for their performance are more pragmatic, with many defending the women's actions and citing the difficult economic situation in Nigeria. Ogechi Robinson argues that:

Imagine free 200k for this hard economy hmm abeg Nothing is wrong 🤔🤔🤔 if she asks people to help her with money, I know people will tell her say things are hard....so please everybody should respect her way of life.

Ogechi Robinson's comment suggests a sense of approval and understanding of the women's decision to participate in the challenge. The use of the emoji with the tongue sticking out suggests a playful and lighthearted tone to play down the seriousness of the issue, while the comment itself conveys a sense that the offer of free money in a difficult economic climate is understandable and even justifiable. The comment also highlights the societal stigma around asking for financial help, suggesting that the women may have turned to the vibrator challenge as a way to earn money without facing judgment or criticism. In addition, another comment from @Tata Ozee read, "Country is hard. That's someone's salary for 30 days of hard work, so don't blame her much, what she is doing might be wrong but a hungry person is an angry person." Tata Ozee's comment takes a more pragmatic view of the situation but also focuses on the economic realities faced by many Nigerians. The comment acknowledges that what the women were doing may be considered wrong, but also highlights the desperation that many people face in a difficult economic climate. The use of the phrase "a hungry person is an angry person" suggests an understanding of the emotional and psychological toll of poverty, and the need for people to find ways to survive and provide for themselves and their families. Overall, the comments on both cases demonstrate a complex range of support for the women involved. In the first incident, the comments focus on women supporting other women and expressing admiration for the actress. In the second incident, the comments express empathy for the difficult economic situation in Nigeria and suggest that the use of vibrators is not necessarily a negative thing. Overall, these comments suggest that there is a segment of the Nigerian population that is accepting sexual technologies and supportive of women who use them. However, this support is not universal, as seen in the negative comments discussed in previous themes.

## CONCLUSION

The present study contributes to existing enquiries into social media studies, gender studies and sexual technologies. This is particularly apposite within the Nigerian and African settings where sexual technologies are demonized and castigated. Hence, the study explored the emergence of sexual technologies in transgressive publics and the role of culture, religion, and gender roles in shaping public discourse around sexuality.

The study contributes to the knowledge of the nexus between society and creative endeavors, particularly as it has been established that social media

enjoy substantial social capital among their audience. The realisation and emergence of sexual technologies on social media and in public spaces may signal a departure from the silence that used to follow such practices. For instance, Epprecht (1998) holds that African communities were tolerant of sexual eccentrics provided they were discreet in their relations. Social media, therefore, act as a transgressive public through which minoritisation, as regards sexual technologies, is presented and explored.

From the analyses of the two cases explored, it is identified that sexual technologies are remarked as deviant, demonic, and a threat to gender roles and masculinity. Rejection, denunciation, and guilt-tripping constitute ways in which women involved in the two cases are reined in. One must however note that the public emergence of these cases suggests a movement in the acknowledgement, theorization, and engagement of issues surrounding sexual technologies.

The criticism of sexual technologies relied on moral and religious convictions where the acts are regarded as evidence of moral decay and sins in need of God's intervention and deliverance. Even further, sexual technologies are resented as transgressors of gender roles and threats to masculinity since they do not fit into the narratives of male power and masculinities. While there might not have been overt drums in support, the emergence of sexual technologies on social media studied in this paper however constitutes a transgressive public for the provision of women's agency. The use of sex toys pushes the boundaries of female sexuality, gender roles and female autonomy as they provide opportunities for the accommodation or rejection of alternative sexual explorations. The agency is central to women's use of sex toys. This is because as against the silencing, showcasing the use of sex toys allows women the opportunity to seek sexual pleasure independently, hence reinforcing the humanity and naturalness of sexual technologies. In a society where sexuality is often stigmatized and shrouded in secrecy, the emergence of sexual technologies is therefore a significant step towards challenging the restrictive cultural and religious attitudes surrounding sexuality and promoting more inclusive discussions of sexuality and sexual freedom.

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