

Life's Journey of Trans-woman Students: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Transgender-woman students are already visible in both private and public schools in Cebu City. Although their visibility in the schools is a manifestation of the implementation of the Anti-Bullying Act in the country and the Child Protection Policy of the Department of Education, still there are incidents of bullying and even discrimination not just among trans-woman students but also to other members of the LGBTQ. These incidents greatly affect the academic performance and non-academic activities of the students. This phenomenological study explored how the academic and non-academic life of the 17 trans-woman students shifted throughout their student life, impacted by their gender identity and expression and sexual orientation, and the factors that caused them to refocus, change or shift their priorities and perspectives in their lives as students and individuals over time. This study identified 6 themes that aroused from the transcription of the data. The findings of the study showed that to be a transgender-woman student is never easy and whatever ways they inform everyone about their gender identity and expression and orientation still get bullied. It also showed in this study that trans-woman students respect the people in the school for they also want to be respected in return. When they are given the freedom to express themselves, then they have the strong will to do good in their academic tasks and become responsible citizens. But still, trans-woman students do not feel safe and comfortable in some of the educational systems and facilities in the school like the use of the comfort rooms, curriculum and teaching-learning process. The different people in the school play a critical role in the journey of trans-woman students.

Keywords: *sexuality education, gender and development, LGBTQ, anti-discrimination*

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1. Introduction

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community that includes the transgender-women has been recognized to be a marginalized minority not just in the Philippines but also in most of the countries in the world (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2016a). Several countries recognize the existence of this community and already provided some laws to protect their members. There is a presence of a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) that includes gender identity and expression and sexual orientation in its human rights work in 88 countries worldwide (ILGA, 2016b). The Philippines is one of the countries that has implemented anti-discrimination laws which include employment, hate crime and hate speech, constitution, and other nondiscrimination protections (ILGA, 2016a).

One of the specified anti-discrimination laws for the protection of not just the LGBT and transgender women but also to the other groups in the Philippines is the Republic Act No. 10627, which requires all elementary and secondary schools to adopt policies in preventing and addressing the acts of bullying, maltreatment, and discrimination of any individual in their institutions. Through this law, the Department of Education (DepEd) issued DepEd Order No. 40 series of 2012, DepEd Child Protection Policy, which seeks to affirm the protection of the students from any form of violence, harassment, abuse, or exploitation regardless of religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE) (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Unfortunately, there is no research or monitoring conducted on its implementation whether it is helping the LGBTQ students. The 2013 Philippine National LGBT Community Dialogue has emphasized that there should be mechanisms to check and examine existing education and school-related materials and activities that ensure that they are SOGIE-sensitive (UNDP, 2014).

Although there are efforts to minimize discrimination against LGBTQ and transgender-women students in the Philippines, there are still reported documents of abuses among them in secondary schools. According to Human Rights Watch (2017), these abuses detail widespread harassment and bullying, discriminatory practices and policies, and an absence of resources that support the right to education under national and international law which put LGBTQ students at risk. In many instances, teachers and school administrators partake in mistreatment instead of leading against discrimination and creating inclusive classrooms where all students can learn

(Outrage, 2017). There are observed inconsistencies in the implementation of the Anti-Bullying Law and the DepEd Child Protection Policy (Estremera, 2018) across the country due to the reported incidents of bullying and abuses of the students (Torregoza, 2018). Moreover, most of the existing school policies and practices tend to facilitate discrimination and fail to provide support in the academic and non-academic lives among the LGBTQ youths (HRW, 2017). These school policies and practices were believed to be obsolete because they do not adapt to the current trends and social issues. The reason might be because there is little or no available literature and studies that focus on the lived experiences of the LGBTQ especially the transgender-woman students in the school and how these policies affect them directly and indirectly.

The contributing factors to discrimination in the school which include the teachers, school administrators and staff, school policies and practices are predictors of poor school performance defined by the students' low-grade point average (GPA) (Ifatunji and Harnois, 2015; Chavous et al., 2008) and school dropout (Felice, 1981, Mensch & Kandel, 1988). Perceived discrimination is a well-known risk factor for mental and physical health outcomes (Banks et al., 2006; Brondolo et al., 2009; Ong et al., 2009; Utsey et al., 2008) and raises a wide range of not desirable outcomes (Himmelstein et al., 2015; Assari et al., 2017; Broudy et al., 2007; Assari & Caldwell, 2017; Visser et al., 2017; Gilbert & Zemore, 2016; Otiniano Verissimo et al., 2014). Perceived discrimination is also associated to negative feelings and emotions (Himmelstein et al., 2015) such as depression, anxiety, and distress (Himmelstein et al., 2015; Assari et al., 2015; Assari, et al., 2017; Assari & Lankarani, 2017), behavioral risk factors such as suicide (Assari & Caldwell, 2017), substance use (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009; Visser et al., 2017; Gilbert & Zemore, 2016; Otiniano Verissimo et al., 2014; Sellers & Shelton 2003), and obesity (Sutin & Terracciano, 2013), hyper-vigilance (Brondolo et al., 2008), and social isolation (Broudy et al., 2007).

In the USA, Kosciw et al. (2019) and Pampati et al. (2020) found that transgender students who are members of the LGBT often face harassment and bullying in school that placed the students at high risk of absenteeism. Relatively, the discrimination and harassment students experienced have implications on their academic success and retention (Goldberg, 2018). Stolzenberg and Hughes (2017) also found transgender students were more likely to report frequently feeling depressed. These transgender students struggled with mental health concerns

that had not been diagnosed like depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and personality disorders (Goldberg et al., 2018). It is very alarming that the discrimination experienced by LGBT students has crucial effects on their well-being, yet little research was conducted on the Philippine setting.

In light of the issues about the LGBTQ especially the transgender-woman students, this study focused on a sample of transgender-woman students to explore how their academic and non-academic life shifted throughout their student life, impacted by their gender identity and expression and sexual orientation, and the factors that caused them to refocus, change or shift their priorities and perspectives as students and individuals over time.

2. Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research method employing a phenomenological design. Its focus was to facilitate and provide in-depth lived experiences of the transgender-woman students as to how their academic and non-academic life shifted throughout their student life.

The study was conducted in the select senior high schools of Cebu City for the School Year 2019 - 2020. Potential participants for this study were identified through a couple of methods to get a diverse source of possible participants and to get the most qualified participants. The first method was done by giving an open call for participants through status posting on Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook allowing interested people to privately respond to the call using an online prospective participant screening survey. The second method was through the personal network of contacts.

The 17 participants of this study were selected through purposive and homogeneous sampling (Creswell, 2015). The participants were residents of Cebu City, Philippines, identified themselves as transgender-woman, currently enrolled as senior high school (SHS), 18 years old and above, and open with their gender identity and expression and sexual orientation prior to the study. These participants were students from the different senior high schools in Cebu City, Philippines taking up the academic, technical-vocational livelihood, sports, and arts SHS curriculum of the DepEd.

The data gathering process started with the initial screening, a discussion on the purpose of the study and the expectations of participants. An informed-consent form, the details of the study, and a date request for the first interview were sent to the participants. To adhere to the

research ethics, the participants were informed about the risk-benefit of the study, content, authorization to access private information, confidentiality procedures, and conflict of interest. The participants were asked to sign the informed-consent with all details of the study before they were interviewed. The conduct of the interviews was either through a video-conferencing tool or in-person face-to-face, depending on the agreement of the interviewer and the participants. A set of semi-structured interview questions was used in this study. The interviewer took notes of the answers accompanied by audio and video recordings. Interview protocols were strictly followed throughout the duration of the interview process. To validate the information given by the participants, teachers, school administrators, staff, classmates, and parents were randomly chosen and interviewed through focus group discussion.

The coding process to label segments of text with codes, examine codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes were done after the conduct of the initial review of the transcripts and data (Creswell, 2015). The thematic analysis was used to analyze to data. This was the appropriate data analysis method in this study because it provides the opportunity to code and categorizes data into themes.

3. Findings and Discussion

This study identified 6 themes that aroused from the transcription of the data. The themes are: 1) To be a transgender-woman student is never easy; 2) What you see and hear is what you get but bullying is what I get instead; 3) Like respects like; 4) Now you accept me, now you don't; 5) Freedom to express is the will to become responsible individuals; and 6) Where should I go? Where do I belong?

1. To be a trans-woman student is never easy.

Adjustments

A participant narrated about the adjustments to be a trans-woman student because of discrimination in the school, *"It is not easy, always adjusting because there are so many discrimination in the school."* Aside from the discrimination, gossip about their personality is also part of the adjustments. A participant said, *"It is hard at the beginning and it takes time to get used to and lots of gossip"*. Another participant declared, *"It is not easy para maprocess nmu nga mahimong trans-woman. (It is not easy to process yourself to become a trans-woman.)"*, and

“It is hard for me to blend with the people in the school because some of them discriminate, so I just blend with them as a simple young trans-woman”.

Bullying and Discrimination

Trans-woman students are prone to bullying and discrimination not just inside the school but also outside. Participants uttered, *“I have been bullied every day.”*, *“I did encounter lots of discrimination like walking in the streets, they ask me why I wear such female uniform and why our school allows me wearing such uniform.”*, and *“I have met a lot of circumstances of bullying and discrimination, especially in our school for example my haircut and hairstyle.”*

Prejudice

Most of the trans-woman students think that it is not good and easy to be a trans-woman because of prejudices from judgmental and close-minded people. Participants said, *“it is not good to be a trans-woman especially when you are surrounded with judgmental and close-minded people”* and *“it is not easy, they judge you as a bad person because you are a trans-woman.”*

The adjustments experienced by these students are common not just among transgender-women but also to transgender-men. These adjustments or processes to become such are similar for anxiety and depression (Budge et al., 2013; Bockting et al., 2013). These students can be struggling every day knowing that they experience bullying and discrimination in the school. These confirmed the findings of Kosciw et al. (2019) and Pampati et al. (2020). Similarly, Galupo et al. (2014) found out that different forms of discrimination happen and are most frequently received from cisgender or straight and heterosexual individuals. Discrimination and bullying were positively associated with psychological distress (Bockting et al., 2013). These trans-woman students are possibly having unpleasant feelings or emotions that affect them mentally and emotionally. Interventions that avoid discrimination and bullying with increased social support should be the focus among practitioners like teachers and school administrators in order to improve mental health for trans-woman students (Budge et al., 2013).

2. *What you see and hear is what you get but bullying is what I get instead.*

What you see is what you get

Trans-woman students express themselves like real women. They act and show themselves to the people in the school just like a real woman. A participant shared her experience about this, *“First day of the school, my classmates did not know that I am a trans-woman and my professors asked about my gender, I am shy and I did not talk about myself. I just show to them who I really am, just being a real woman.”*. Participants narrated how they tell everyone their identity, *“Wla nko sila gi-ingan but through my expressions, mailhan ra nila nga unsa akong identity, I just do it like a normal woman.”* (I did not tell them about my identity but through my expressions, they can tell my identity. I just do it like a normal woman.), and *“The way I move that is how I express myself, magbinabaye lang ko kay sometimes mahimong babaye mn akong tingog.”* (The way I move that is how I express myself, I act like a woman because some I have a feminine voice.), The way they dress themselves is also their way of showing everyone their identity. Participants uttered, *“Through actions, doing things as a transwoman, wearing dresses, joining dance troupe, this is me.”* and *“Makita ra mn sa akong panamit. I act like a woman and dress like a woman. (It really showed how I dress up, I act like a woman and dress like a woman)”*.

What you hear is what you get

Telling everyone is the trans-woman students' way of informing everyone in the school about their gender identity and orientation and expression. An incident in the classroom was narrated by a participant, *“At the first day of school, my classmates thought that I am a real girl but I introduced myself as trans-woman and they got shocked, it is okay for them so they can have a lively room.”*

Bullying is what I get

Though some of the people in the school accept trans-woman students after showing, expressing, and telling them about their gender identity, but still, some bully them. Participants

shared their experience after opening up to their classmates about their identity, *“I am bullied.”* and *“There was one time my friend showed me her private parts and she didn’t know that I am trans and so she treated me differently.”*

Educating is the key

The maltreatment received by trans-woman students after opening up on their true identity can be prevented and corrected through educating the people in their classroom and school. One participant believed that *“If there would be incidents like bullying and discrimination, I teach them. I educate them. I encounter lots discrimination. The country is judgmental”*. But for those participants who experienced bullying after opening up narrated, *“By telling me that it is not a good what they did to me”*, *“I tell them to respect us so we can respect the too, there should be quality”* and *“By telling them that I am trans. If you don’t support me then it is ok but we can still be friends.”*

Trans-woman students express themselves through their feminine gestures and outfits. They feel and behave like a real woman and that is how they come out as such. They inform everyone in the school through their expressions and actions and by telling them verbally. Though people in the school are informed about their gender identity and expression and orientation, still they experience bullying, discrimination, and even violence. This is similar to the findings of the research conducted on heterosexual undergraduate college students in which both men and women reported more teasing of trans-women due to sexual prejudice and trans-prejudice (Glotfelter, 2012). Inclusive education should be considered by the educators and policymakers to help improve gender equality—not only to make it more inclusive for LGBTQ youths but for all young people (Gowen, & Wings-Yanez, 2014).

3. Like respects like.

Normal and typical student interaction

To interact with the people in the school as normal and typical student is very common among trans-woman students. They think that being just a normal student would prevent prejudices about them. Participants mentioned that *“By being simple and interacting like a*

normal student to others in the school, so there would be no judgments at all.”, “As a simple and normal student, I interact with my classmates very well so they don’t treat me differently and they have no problem with me.”, “Just a normal student, I treat them right so they will treat me right.”, “Just a normal student, I interact with my teachers without distraction while they teach so that they will also consider me as a normal student. They don’t treat me differently.” and “ I fairly interact with the school personnel just like a typical, so they don not really discriminate me as a trans-woman student and the our school is actually gender-sensitive.”.

Respect begets respect

Trans-woman students believe that interacting with people in the school with respect will reciprocate respect. This is very important to them because they all just want respect from them. The participants uttered, *“I treat my classmates and schoolmates with respect so they can treat me with respect.”, “I greet the school administrators and I respect them. Interact with other school personnel with respect.” and “I participate in the class and I respect my teachers.”.* One participant shared her thoughts about the right attitude a trans-woman student should have in order to gain respect from others and she said, *“Treat everyone right and respect the so there will be no conflict, as a trans-woman we should know our limits and be sensitive as well.”.*

Trans-woman students behave like normal students. This is supported by the statements from their classmates and schoolmates, teachers, and school administrators that these trans-woman students behave like normal students and they interact with them normally and equally. These trans-woman students behave as such maybe because they do not want to be treated differently. This may imply that the current educational system is exclusive only for heterosexual individuals. This observation relates to a study indicating LGBTQ youth perceive current education as basically “exclusive”. Participants in this study suggested that in order to create a more inclusive experience for all students, educators also need to directly discuss LGBTQ issues (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014).

4. Now you accept me, now you don’t.

Accepting and understanding people

Trans-woman students have classmates who accept them and treat them like real women. Participants uttered, *“My classmates treated me the way I wanted to be treated which is as a*

woman.”, *“My classmates treat me normally and get along with me.”* and *“My classmates are supportive to me like pageants and other school activities.”*. Even their teachers and the school personnel accept them and treat them as normal students. Participants shared, *“My teachers treat me fairly the same as others students in the school.”*, *“They treat me as normal person. Everyone treats us equally.”*.

Gender-sensitive schools

Trans-woman students in gender-sensitive schools feel safe and belonging and are treated with the respect they always wish to have. A gender-sensitive school gives them the freedom to do what a real woman usually does. Participants narrated, *“The school decided that trans-woman students like us can have a long hair. University president accepts trans-woman students like us and so we are allowed to wear female uniform.”*, *“My teachers are okay because in our school it is okay to express ourselves.”*, *“Just like my teachers, the school administrators also mingle with us.”* and *“They didn’t treat us harmfully because in our school they accept people like me and we are welcome in that school.”*. But some gender-sensitive schools only allow trans-woman students who are 18 years old and above to wear a female uniform. One participant uttered, *“They accept trans-woman students like us. So they treat us equally. But 18 years old above are only allowed to wear female uniforms.”*.

You cannot please everyone

Wherever trans-woman students go, they cannot deny the fact that not all people will respect them, even in a gender-sensitive school. People have different cultures and views on them. They are bullied and a source of fun inside the classroom. Participants shared, *“Normally my classmates treat me right, but when the teacher mentions about gender like checking of the attendance, they will sometimes bully us because I belong to the male gender.”*, *“My classmates bully me sometimes because I am not a real girl, I was a man before.”*, *“They treat me as a normal student, but there are times when my classmates bully me then my teachers will defend me because they understand the pain I undergone.”* and *“They are sometimes judgmental because they did not know me.”*. But even the teachers, guidance counselors, and security guards bully and discriminate against them. Participants narrated, *“Some of my teachers bullied me because of my attitude and school personnel, some of them bully me as a trans-woman.”*, *“Some of my teachers were very harsh about our gender and we felt bad about it and I don’t mind but*

accept it as a challenge. They should not discriminate people like us.”, “Some of the security personnel do not treat us right and it serves a lesson to us that we should know our own limitation and be sensitive.”

These trans-woman students can be totally accepted in their schools may be because of the existing policies, laws, and local ordinances. In Cebu City, there is wide dissemination and implementation of the anti-discrimination ordinance. This addresses legal and ethical issues related to creating secure, safe, welcoming, and gender-sensitive schools for the LGBTQ youths and for students who do not conform to the stereotypical gender roles (Jacob, 2013). This makes the statements of the teachers and school administrators reliable because they accept and understand trans-woman students. However, there are still incidents of discrimination experienced by these trans-woman students in their respective schools. And even the professionals in the school like the teachers and guidance counselors have the tendencies to discriminate them. One study confirmed that there are school guidance counsellors reported to have a lack of education and support in advocating for LGBT students (Berry, 2016). Allana et al. (2010) emphasized that training programs for the teachers must include leadership and gender training in order to enable them not to discriminate and provide equal opportunities to all the students in the classroom regardless of gender.

5. Freedom to express is the will to become responsible individuals.

Freedom to excel

When asked about the change or shift of the priorities and perspectives on their academic and non-academic life, participants answered that they tend to do more and excel in the classroom and in other non-academic activities because they can freely express themselves in the classroom and in the school. Participants said, *“I am comfortable with the environment in the school because they respect me as a normal student.”*, *“I have my own freedom in school to do whatever I do as a normal student.”*, *“Yes it was changed because we can express ourselves freely.”* and *“Yes it can change because I was surprised of the school works and the way I my lifestyle before. The school works changed me. So I balance both academic and non-academic life.”*

Responsible citizen

The choice to become a trans-woman student is coupled with a responsibility to be a good citizen and a role model. One participant shared that her perspectives and priorities in academic and non-academic life were changed. She said, *“It does change because to be a trans-woman student is not just to study but to show to people that trans-women are different and can be a role model in our society”*. One participant became an active athlete in her school and she uttered, *“My perspectives and priorities in life have changed, I am a varsity player and just got an MVP award.”*. Another participant mentioned that her priorities in life have changed and she narrated, *“Yes, as a trans-woman, you need to shine, you have to dream. I fight for my studies and I need to finish my studies so I can work abroad and have a stable job.”*.

Trans-woman students perform better in their academic and non-academic tasks when there they are free from the victimization of bullying discrimination and harassment. Teachers and school administrators confirmed that when these trans-woman students are given the opportunity to excel they excel and become responsible students. A study found that trans youths who are victims of bullying and discrimination get lower grades than their classmates and are less likely to continue higher education (Glavinic, 2010). Another study also found that LGBT students do not usually pursue further education (Kosciw et al., 2007). The possible reason why these trans-woman students perform better and excel in their academic and non-academic activities is the support they get from the people in the school. A conclusion in one study emphasized that school-based supports contribute to lower victimization of bullying and discrimination and better academic performance among the LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2013).

6. Where should I go? Where do I belong?*Gender-sensitive school*

The environment of the school makes one trans-woman student comfortable. One participant said, *“Yes the environment of the school is friendly. I feel comfortable and as a trans-woman student I feel safe in the facilities and even the classroom activities.”*. Even the subject matter and the teaching-learning process in the classroom create a good impact on the academic and non-academic lives of these students. Participants shared, *“It did change my perspective and*

priorities in my academic performance because in our school especially the subjects and teaching process do not discriminate people like us trans-women.”, “Our school environment, in general, is peaceful and gender-sensitive in which makes me feel to do good in my studies.” and “The facilities in our school are gender-sensitive. In our school, they do discriminate. Even lesbians can go to the male comfort room.”.

Comfort room issues

Even though trans-woman students look like real women, but still they experience confusion as to which comfort room to use. It is contrary to the said sensitivity of schools in terms of gender because there are still incidents of bullying and discrimination in the use of the comfort rooms. And these incidents affect them both in their academic and non-academic lives. A participant narrated, *“Yes, it really affects especially the comfort room. Trans-woman students are not welcomed to the female comfort room in our school, I believe that there is nothing wrong to use the female comfort room because our genitalia has nothing to do with gender identity. School personnel like the janitors should accept trans-women students because we identify ourselves as woman so we should be allowed to use the female comfort room. Some men will laugh on us when we use the male comfort room and that is the start of bullying.”.* This is also supported by a participant who said, *“Yes it affects so much like going to the comfort room. Sometimes I go male than the female comfort room but the men will laugh at me in the male comfort room because I look like a woman though I am not pretty.”.* Another participant said that facilities in the school affect her, *“Sometimes it can affect, my studies because the female facilities are for female-born only.”.* Another participant shared her experience on the effect of the facilities on her studies and self-esteem, *“Yes it affects my studies just like the use of the comfort room. Some janitors do not let us use the female comfort room. It affects our self esteem. Some of us are dressed up like a real woman and the janitors still insist that we should use the male comfort room.”.*

Trans-woman students also do better in their academic and non-academic tasks when the school’s facilities, curriculum and teaching processes are non-discriminating. However, there are still facilities like comfort rooms that are confusing among trans-woman students. This might be a hostile climate for these students that can affect them mentally and socially (McKinney, 2005). Studies suggested that in order to improve the school climate conducive for all types for students

of all genders, teachers and school administrators should make reforms on the areas that include locker rooms, comfort rooms, and gender training and support the teaching and non-teaching personnel of the school (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn et al., 2005). Similarly, educators and policymakers to continue to understand the experiences of transgender-woman students and implement measures to ensure that schools are inclusive and safe for all LGBT students (Greytak et al., 2009).

4. Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored how the academic and non-academic life of the 17 trans-woman students shifted throughout their student life, impacted by their gender identity and expression and sexual orientation, and the factors that caused them to refocus, change or shift their priorities and perspectives in their lives as students and individuals over time. The findings showed the life of a transgender-woman student has never been easy and whatever ways they manifest their gender identity and expression and orientation lead to bullying. It was also shown that trans-woman students respect the people in the school for they also want to be respected in return. When they are given the freedom to express themselves, then they have the strong will to do good in their academic tasks and become responsible citizens. However, trans-woman students do not feel safe and comfortable in some of the educational systems and facilities in the school like the use of the comfort rooms, curriculum and teaching-learning process.

The different people in the school play a critical role in the journey of trans-woman students. The support these people provide and share with the trans-woman students has a positive impact on building their own future. The same as normal individuals, they too have the right to live and create a better story for themselves. Looking into the effects of the school personnel and facilities on the lives of trans-woman students, the policymakers and education leaders should consider sexuality education to be integrated into the basic education curriculum. School Administrators should provide educational activities and school facilities that are suitable for students regardless of religion, ethnicity, and gender. Teachers who serve as the second parents of the students should be an advocate of inclusive education and promote a school atmosphere conducive for all kinds of students.

This study was only limited to the life journey of trans-woman students in Cebu City, Philippines. Their story and experiences as trans-woman students in the school and outside the school premises may have been contributed by the education system and environment in the school and the city. The stories and experiences of the participants may or may not be reflective of the entire LGBT community. Thus, further studies on the same nature are encouraged.

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