

## **Pull Factors Motivating Lesbians to become Involved in Same-sex Activity**

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### **Abstract**

Same-sex activity are not a new issue and is often debated about in society as it goes against cultural norms, religious practices and laws in Malaysia. This situation has driven lesbians to fight even harder to fulfil their sexual desires. Thus, the objective of this study is to analyse the pull factors that motivate lesbians to become involved in same-sex activity. This study uses a qualitative approach and through the snowball sampling technique, 12 lesbians were contacted from 10 states in Malaysia, namely Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Malacca, Sarawak, Negeri Sembilan, Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Selangor and Pahang. All the study respondents were interviewed, and the results were analysed using version 12 of the Nvivo for Mac. The research results found 11 pull factors, i.e., support from lesbian friends, compatibility with their lesbian partner, negative experiences with men, support from heterosexual friends, support from the lesbian community, sexual satisfaction, wanting to try something new, family conflict, acceptance by family members, husband's encouragement, and the influence from pornography. In addition, researcher also suggested future researchers should focus on the relationship of using dating apps on smartphones and its influence on the involvement of same-sex activity in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Sexual Desire, Same-Sex Activity, Lesbian, Pull Factors, Malaysia

### **Introduction**

Involvement in the world of lesbians involves individuals from all ages. In reference to the Knowledge and Rights with Young people through Safer Spaces (KRYSS) in 2012, there were respondents who stated that they realised they were attracted to females since a young age of five to six years old, then admitting it at the age of 12 years (KRYSS, 2014). Furthermore, in a study by Ahmad et al (2015), it was found that many same-sex relationships begin during the teenage years. This is probably because at this age, they are driven by the need for love and attention. However, lesbians face a lot of discrimination, negative assumptions and violence, either from the local community, institutions, and even within their own family. It is

natural that individuals building a new sexual identity will be influenced by their community, especially with regard to the message portrayed by that identity (Levy, 2009). Thus, they would need to make an important decision as to how far they would go in admitting their sexual orientation to the people around them (Burke, 2000).

In Malaysia, normally the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community do not expose themselves to the public (Yusof et al., 2014). Shield (2012) also explained the same matter by stating that statistics regarding the lesbian community are hard to obtain and information about them is also limited. Additionally, being isolated from the community, especially from their family, is not easy. They do not have a social support system as the community only views this issue in general, not realizing that support from an individual's social environment can influence the level of involvement in same-sex activity, specifically lesbianism.

### **Literature Review**

In this study, pull factors refer to factors that drive or motivate women to live as lesbians. According to Yusof et al (2014), same-sex couples understand their needs better and have a similar way of thinking, which are among the main pull factors in a same-sex relationship. Lesbians also have a higher tendency to receive love, give commitment and accept responsibilities as well as provide sexual satisfaction, which are seen as additional factors strengthening trust in a same-sex relationship (Yusof et al., 2014).

Peplau and Amaro (1982) were of the opinion that factors causing the presence of feelings of love and satisfaction in a lesbian relationship are the love and commitment that make for a happy relationship. Additionally, there is the factor of a balance of power; many lesbians strongly support egalitarianism in a relationship (Peplau & Amaro, 1982). There is also the factors of similar attitudes and backgrounds, which are believed to ease the relationship (Peplau & Amaro, 1982). A woman's intimate relationships can change along the course of her life and differ according to the social environment which influence them in choosing men or women. For example, McCabe et al (2011) stated that loneliness and separation in previous relationships, lack of satisfaction in relationships with men and permissive social surroundings would form same-sex relationships. According to the study by Ahmad et al (2015), respondents stated that their previous boyfriends would take advantage of them making respondents feel unsafe; these experiences have caused negative feelings towards men. Furthermore, for the respondents of the study, same-sex partners are more understanding compared to their male partners, strengthening their confidence in the relationship (Ahmad et al., 2015).

The study by Ahmad et al (2015) also proved that a weak family institution is also a cause leading to same-sex relations. Results from the study found that conflict among parents and lack of attention given to the children due to work commitments were among the causes of children looking for attention elsewhere outside of the house. Thus, same-sex relationships gave them an avenue for them to receive love, with their lesbian couple being their source of fulfilment.

Sells (2013) stated that when individuals have a sexual identity that is clearly different from the norm, they will fight for that identity and seek social and emotional support from a different source. In this case, online communication is the main channel that encourages

social happiness among lesbians and has the potential to help them face the discrimination from the outside world. In that space, they build relationships with lesbian friends and join the lesbian community (Sells, 2013). Some individuals feel uncomfortable discussing sexuality issues with family and friends due to the fear of social exclusion. Individuals who are active using this medium feel a high level of acceptance among the lesbian community, thus strengthening their belief in their involvement in same-sex relationships. This strong community bond can help alleviate stress among its members, especially when faced with stereotyping, stigma and discrimination from the society (Brooks, 1981), as well as providing a comfortable space to carry out activities (Higa et al., 2014).

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

Research design used is a qualitative approach. This approach comprises analysis through primary data, secondary data and interviews with respondents.

### **Sampling Technique**

The snowball sampling technique is among the main techniques to carry out sampling procedures on hidden populations (Heckathorn, 1997) and is often applied in qualitative research, especially through interviews (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). In this study, the traditional snowball sampling technique was used to select respondents from a community and naming other potential candidates to become a sample (Meyer & Wilson, 2009). As the sample for this study is also achieved through social media platforms such as facebook, the virtual snowball sampling was used by the researchers to find those from hard-to-reach populations such as lesbians. According to Baltar and Brunet (2011), the combination of both the traditional and virtual snowball sampling techniques can improve the sampling process. This combination not only eases researchers' access to the online research sample but offline too; 12 respondents were found from 10 states in Malaysia, i.e. Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Melaka, Sarawak, Negeri Sembilan, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Selangor and Pahang.

### **Data Collection**

The interview process was carried out in phases and an in-depth interview procedure was started with selecting respondents based on the research sample criteria. Before embarking on the interview process, researchers first built relationships of trust with the respondents, so that they would be more confident in being involved in this study. The researchers took a long time to gather the 12 respondents as they were very sensitive to the confidentiality of the information given to this study. As such, the researchers informed the respondents that the interviews were carried out only with the aim of conducting this research and all information will be disposed of when the study is completed. Respondents were also given the freedom to withdraw from this study if it invaded their privacy or touched on any sensitivities they may have. Researchers also explained to the respondents why this study was being carried out, the reason they were chosen as respondents for this study, the duration of the interview and the use of tape recording during the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Filtering of data is very important to ensure that data analysed are correct and to determine the existence of the missing value that might occur from the respondents' failure to answer

any of the interview questions, which would affect the data analysis to be carried out. Data analysis for this study was conducted using the Nvivo for Mac version 12 software.

## Results

### A) Support From Lesbian Friends

Ten respondents admitted getting support from lesbian friends, having met them through the lesbian community or known them from school. They also admitted to communicating with them via facebook, whatsapp and smartphone apps such as FEM Chatting. Most respondents reported spending a lot of time with their lesbian friends, either meeting in person or chatting online, where they share experiences with each other. Through this sharing, respondents are more prepared for whatever risk that may come in the future. This is valuable for respondents who are still new in same-sex activity, for them to further understand the lesbian world. There were also respondents who reported that they were offered to be introduced to the ideal sexual partner by their lesbian friends. The following are excerpts from the interview.

*"I received support from friends...those who are like me (a lesbian) especially on facebook. We exchanged numbers and connected a lot through whatsapp. They shared a lot of their experiences. At least I am now prepared to face any possibility and I don't feel alienated."*

(R1)

*"I had a lot of friend suggestions on facebook. Now I have more followers. Sometimes I message them privately. I also connect with them through video calls on facebook. We can chat and get to know new partners."*

(R2)

*"I search for a lot of information about this and also chat with lesbian friends...on facebook. I spend a lot of time online in FEM Chatting. I share my feelings and ask a lot of questions there. Even though we have never met, I feel comfortable in chatting this way. Just sharing stories and opinions"*

(R4)

*"I just chat online with other lesbian friends to understand these feelings I have, by asking them to share their experiences or opinions...especially since I am new to this. So, I need to know what other lesbians think"*

(R5)

*"I have friends in college and from outside who are like me. So, I have no issues in this. It is easy to understand since we share the same lifestyle. There is no stigma or being ostracised. Sometimes there are opportunities to find new partners"*

(R6)

*"I like spending time chatting with them especially regarding intimate relationships"*

(R7)

*"As I mentioned earlier, I only have "pengkid" friends, that's all. Other than that, I chat a lot with my lesbian friends on facebook"*

(R8)

*"I am with my lesbian friends only to hang out, chat and have fun. I get excited hearing their stories and so it is impossible for me not to try it"*

(R9)

*"I only seeking support from my lesbian friends from whatsapp groups. There are only lesbians there and there is more privacy"*

(R10)

*"I joined their group at that time. I just wanted to try something new"*

(R12)

## **B) Compatibility with Lesbian Partner**

The respondents reported that lesbian partners showed more affection, maturity and responsibility in relationships. Same-sex relationships also involve intimate relations as an element of trust towards the lesbian partner and the relationship. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"I feel very comfortable with my partner. Even if she has other lesbian partners."*

(R1)

*"I need someone to help me forget about all the negative things about men. Relationships with women are easier... I am happier, they understand me, it is easy to share anything"*

(R3)

*"I became more confident after meeting my partner. I feel loved and cherished by somebody. She is always concerned about me. She is not like other lesbians who only talk about sex"*

(R4)

*"I feel this relationship is exciting, so I am carrying on with it. Makes me feel excited"*

(R6)

*"I started with my senior in school. Gradually, it became more fun. Now I am in a relationship with a schoolteacher, who is already married. We meet often because she is my son's teacher"*

(R7)

*"I started feeling that relationships with women are not complicated and are more fun, because when it is just between women, it is easier to understand each other's needs"*

(R9)

*"She is still studying at a nearby university. I got to know her through a whatsapp group and as we met often and got along well, we started to have feelings for each other"*

(R10)

*"We both wanted to try bring our relationship to another level. I could feel she was sincere with me. I am no longer anxious about family issues and forget those matters when I am with her"* (R11)

### **C) Negative Experiences with Men**

Negative experiences with men not only involve heterosexual couples but also relate to male friends and family members, such as the father, grandfather, uncles, in-laws, male cousins, and ex-husbands. In this context, negative experiences include being cheated on by a boyfriend, witnessing domestic abuse in the family, being raped by the grandfather and nearly molested by a stepfather. All these experiences leave trauma and negative impressions towards men so much so that respondents have lost trust in the role of men in relationships, whether as a boyfriend, husband, father, uncle or grandfather. This is also a basis for respondents being involved in same-sex activity. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"This relationship did not last long as my ex-boyfriend cheated on me"*

(R1)

*"I need someone to help me forget all the negative things about men. Those who have made my life difficult all this while. I am no longer confident about being involved with men"*

(R3)

*"I don't like to talk about this further, but I can only tell you that every relationship needs loyalty, confidence and a sense of responsibility"*

(R5)

*"Intimate relations with men are sometimes painful and violent. Enough. I don't want to talk about men"*

(R8)

*"My father used to create problems for my mother. He was lazy to work and had a temper. My mother asked for a divorce as she couldn't stand my father's habits. At that time, I was still in school. From that day onwards, I have been helping my mother find means to support ourselves"*

(R10)

*"But not long after that, my grandfather took advantage of me and what me angrier is that I didn't know anything at that time. I had thought I would be safe there, by my stepfather also had bad intentions towards me"*

(R11)

*"I admit I lost my confidence in men after many times of having my heart broken. So, I came to the conclusion that I am not suited for relationships with men"*

(R12)

### **D) Support from Heterosexual Friends**

The admission of the respondents' lesbian identity and their same-sex relationship receive a positive response from heterosexual friends. Respondents also feel comfortable in living as a lesbian with the existence of that support. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"I receive support from my friends who can accept me as I am"*

(R1)

*"I told my close friends. They can accept it"*

(R6)

*"I have become used to a lifestyle that free like this and it was not a surprise to my friends after I confessed to liking women"*

(R9)

*"My dancer friends know about this and they are very open to it and have no problems accepting it"*

(R12)

### **E) Support from Lesbian Community**

According to the respondents, the lesbian community is large and have a presence on facebook, in separate communities and also whatsapp groups. From these sources, the respondents receive emotional support, information and get the opportunity to meet lesbian friends through community activities. Therefore, the respondents use the lesbian community as a platform for them to receive social support and continue living as a lesbian in a positive way. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"There is no help given. It is just that I have a space like the community page to get to know lesbian friends for me to chat with, share information, experiences and to say whatever about myself or any topic whatsoever"*

(R1)

*"To feel comfortable and accepted and be in a community where I feel more confident and stronger. They share information and organize various activities even though I do not join in. I am content with just being online"*

(R4)

*"They organize a lot of activities to gather us all. There are some which I join in, if I am not busy. I feel happy getting to know other friends. We chat and have fun together. No one is there to judge"*

(R10)

*"I feel happy. Not only do I get to know many lesbian friends, but am also introduced to the ideal partner"*

(R12)

### **F) Sexual Satisfaction**

Sexual satisfaction is an pull factor as respondents in this study have admitted that intimate relations are an important measure to their decision to become involved with a lesbian partner. Sexual satisfaction with a lesbian partner appeals to respondents, making them want to continue with the relationship to this day. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"I have no negative experiences with men, but I am divorced. I felt that he was unable to give*

*me sexual satisfaction. I didn't want to carry on pretending everything was okay and felt it was better that we separated"*

(R7)

*"I feel satisfied by having intimate relations with women"*

(R8)

### **G) Wanting to Try Something New**

In this study, two respondents admitted that in the beginning they only did this for fun and wanted to try something new. However, they enjoyed it that drove them into more serious involvement in same-sex activity. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"At first, it was just for fun. Gradually it became more serious"*

(R6)

*"It was not easy giving in to that feeling because in the beginning I was only trying things out. But after frequently joining in their activities, I started to accept it"*

(R12)

### **H) Family Conflict**

Family conflict not only creates a permissive environment to the respondent, but negative experiences with male family members also strengthen their motivation to be involved in same-sex activity. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"I live in a family where my father has married, and my mother has married. My sister too, four marriages because she was beaten by her husband, then the husband cheated on her. For me, my father never liked me since I as little because he was certain I as an illegitimate child. As if my mother had other men. Until adulthood, he treated me as if I didn't exist"*

(R3)

*"I am confident my mother does not care about me as she has a new family. I have not contacted her for a long time. We live apart and I have a new life here"*

(R11)

### **I) Family Acceptance**

For some respondents, family acceptance is important to guarantee a good life as a lesbian. This is shared by a respondent that her family members had a positive reaction towards her identity as a lesbian and her relationship with a lesbian partner. Thus, the respondent has a solid basis to keep living as a lesbian. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"My sister knows about this matter, but she accepts it well"*

(R7)

### **J) Husband's Encouragement**

Based on the results from this study, only one respondent admitted to being married with a



heterosexual partner. It is as if the respondent as using the marriage to cover up her actual sexual identity as a lesbian, including to hide the matter from her family. The respondent's husband is also a "pondan" who has similar experiences dealing with his sexuality; they both support each other and respect each other's same-sex relationships. Thus, the respondent's husband is a strong factor for her carrying on with her same-sex activity. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"My husband gives me a lot of support to carry on with my sexual desire for women. He is a "pondan" and can accept me as a lesbian. Therefore, we understand each other's needs"*  
(R2)

### **K) Influence from Pornography**

Based on the study results, the researcher found that only one respondent had reported watching adult videos, a pornographic material, as a basis for her involvement in same-sex activity. In this context, the researcher found five important factors that explains the relation between adult videos and the respondent's involvement in same-sex activity, namely the widespread availability of pornographic material, wanting to try something new, sexual satisfaction and influence from lesbian friends. The following are excerpts from interviews regarding this matter:

*"I am just going with my feelings, even though I am just watching adult videos. I feel like trying it out"*  
(R8)

### **Discussion**

Overall, this study found 11 pull factors that motivate respondents to become involved in same-sex activity. Among them, respondents receive support from lesbian friends through online communication such as on facebook, whatsapp groups, smartphone applications such as FEM chatting and meeting during community activities. This shows that there are various channels that respondents use to connect with lesbian friends, such as to chat, share experiences, ask for opinions, sharing of information. The study by Higa et al. (2014) also explained that the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community is a source of social support, especially when respondents face a dilemma over their sexual identity and need a space to share things with. The study by Mufioz-Plaza et al. (2002) explained that his study respondents also received emotional support and information from peers and adult from the LGBTQ community.

Compatibility with lesbian partners is also a strong basis for respondents to give full commitment to a same-sex relationship as they can achieve mutual understanding as well as receive loyalty, satisfaction and confidence. Compatibility in a gay/lesbian relationship encompasses a partner's personality, trust in the relationship, reactions toward each other by way of communication, resolution of conflicts, and level of support from family and friends towards the relationship. Respondents also stated that negative experiences with men had caused them to lose trust and confidence in men. These experiences also involved the failure of the role of males in a family, such as of the father, grandfather, brother, uncle and cousin. Similar to the view by Simari and Baskin (1982), domestic abuse and negative sexual experiences are strong drivers for women to become involved in same-sex activity.

According to this study as well, respondents reported their admission of their sexual identity to their heterosexual friends, which they were happy with their friends' acceptance. Their heterosexual friends also gave support in terms of information regarding lesbian communities on facebook. According to Mohamad (2012), the support and positive response from their friends made them feel positive towards being involved in same-sex activity. Diamond and Lucas (2004) also explained that the minority sexual group are able to identify which heterosexual friends clearly support them without any stigma, as they realise that the admission of their sexual identity can bring the risk of losing friendships.

An addition, support from the lesbian community that the respondents join is also an influence towards their involvement in same-sex activity. This is because the support makes the respondents feel stronger and more confident to carry on with their activities. The community also carries out initiatives to form community pages on facebook, to create a space to share their routines, information and opinions without being judged. Brooks (1981) explained that the lesbian community is more positive in offering emotional support, social inclusion among members, and ensuring the members are strong in facing stresses from the surroundings. There are also other lesbian communities that organize activities to enable the lesbian members to meet each other and they also create whatsapp groups to communicate more privately between the community members.

In this context, respondents admitted that sexual satisfaction with their lesbian partner influenced their serious involvement in same-sex activity. According to Md Yusof et al. (2014), intimate relations are an additional element after the presence of trust and commitment in a relationship. There are also respondents who just want to try things out, but then begin to enjoy it and thus carries on with the relationship. McCabe et al. (2011) explained that during the teenage years, individuals are bonded through heterosexual relationships first, then explore same-sex activity without thinking of the level of sexual satisfaction of other women. Similar to the view by Loewenstein (1985), an individual's involvement in lesbian relationships is mostly out of boredom and wanting to try something new. Owoyemi and Ahmad Sabri (2014) also explained that same-sex activity is tempting towards individuals who like are curious and like to try new things.

The factor of family conflicts such as the letting go of responsibilities, rape attempts, arguments, abuse and divorce also form outer and inner conflict in respondents thus bringing about negative assumptions regarding men. Failure of an individual to receive emotional support and information from their parents and other family members can be caused by a negative environment especially they faced with the dilemma of lesbian identity (Mufioz-Plaza et al., 2002). However, feedback from another respondent stated that her relationship with her lesbian partner is known by her family and they are able to accept it well. According to Ahmad et al (2015), emotional support and reaction from the family are very important to individuals who are going the confusing phase regarding their same-sex desires and gives a big impact on the development of their individual sexual orientation.

This is also the same for feedback from a respondent who stated that her involvement in same-sex activity received support and encouragement from her husband, even helping in finding lesbian partners. Vance (2018) explained that some lesbians are married with

heterosexual partners to fulfil cultural norms and avoid stigma from the community but at the same time still carry out same-sex relations.

The next factor is the influence of videos or pornography, which also motivates respondents to try out sexual relations with a lesbian partner. Due to the feeling of satisfaction, respondents continue with the relationship on a more serious level. According to Arrington-Sanders et al (2015), pornographic materials act as a manual to increase understanding and curiosity about sex, especially for respondents who have never had sexual relations. Figure 1 below shows 11 pull factors that drive respondents to become involved in same-sex activity.

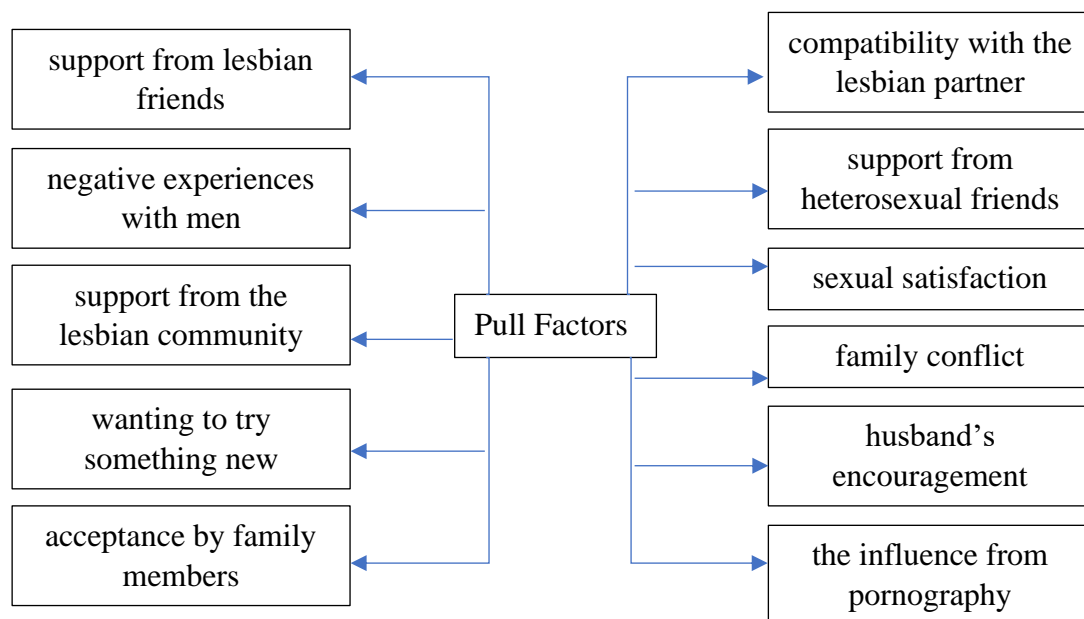


Figure 1. Pull Factors – Involvement in Same-sex Activity

### Implications

Implications from this study include the need to form suitable and effective interventions for lesbians. According to Parsons, Jorgensen and Hernandez (1994), social workers should form interventions as soon as possible, i.e. be proactive, positive and encouraging of social happiness. Apart from this, interventions are also specific actions by social workers that is based on values of professionalism, knowledge, skills and creativity with the aim of bringing change to an individual's situation. In this matter, the formation of interventions needs to be responsive to the development of an individual's sexual identity and the challenges related to living as a lesbian. Based on this study, factors that motivate involvement in same-sex activity include support from lesbian friends, compatibility with their lesbian partners, negative experiences with men, support from heterosexual friends, support from the lesbian community, sexual satisfaction, wanting to try something new, family conflicts, acceptance from family members, husband's encouragement and the influence of pornography. All these factors have a correlation with the influence of social support from the respondents' surroundings such as lesbian friends, heterosexual friends, family, lesbian couples, heterosexual couples and the lesbian community. Interventions that focus on restoring family institutions have shown that family issues have a big impact on the formation of the respondents' sexual identity, i.e. conflict, sexual abuse and emotional abuse.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, respondents have attributed a plethora of factors to their motivation to continue being involved in same-sex activity, including support from lesbian friends, compatibility with their lesbian partners, negative experiences with men, support from heterosexual friends, support from the lesbian community, sexual satisfaction, wanting to try something new, family conflicts, acceptance from family members, husband's encouragement and the influence of pornography.

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