The Lived Experiences of Anxiety and Depression Support Philippines' (ADSP) Members Amid Public Stigma: A Phenomenological Hermeneutic Study

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ABSTRACT

The study is a qualitative phenomenological hermeneutic that explored the lived experiences of Anxiety and Depression Support Philippines' (ADSP) members amid public stigma and the role of ADSP in these experiences. The main purposes of the study are (1) to fill the gap in the literature on the role of local mental health peer support groups in the lives of its members amid public stigma and (2) to highlight the role of local mental health support groups. Six participants were interviewed with a semi-structured interview protocol through Zoom. A step-by-step procedure of Creswell's thematic analysis was employed. The emerging themes and subthemes were the following: Major Textural Theme 1, Day-to-Day Personal Challenges (with subthemes, Somatic Symptoms and Costly Treatment), Major Textural Theme 2, Stigma Experienced from the Public (with subthemes, Invisibility of Mental Health Condition, Imposement of Spiritual Beliefs, Pill Shaming Phenomenon, and Deregatory Stereotypes), Major Structural Theme, Meaning (with subthemes, Shared Struggles, Acknowledgment of Proper Treatment, and Being Unbothered), and Major Textural Theme 3, Role of ADSP (Providing Emotional Support, Preventing Suicide, Assisting in Help-Seeking, and Actualizing Potential). Some of the recommendations were future research to examine and explore the structure and dynamics of Filipino-based mental health support groups to further address the needs of individuals with mental health conditions or psychological disorders (particularly anxiety and depression) and national-level encouragement of the development of accessible Filipino–based mental health support groups. The research will also contribute to the pool of local research exploring the same topic or related topics.

Keywords: *ADSP; phenomenological hermeneutic; anxiety and depression; mental health support group; public stigma.*

Introduction

Mental illness has become the third most common disability in the Philippines, wherein six million Filipinos live with anxiety and depression (Martinez et al., 2020, as cited in Maravilla & Tan, 2021). A study by Dizon and Mendoza (2022), revealed that about one in every three Filipino adults can be tested for moderate to severe anxiety. Baclig (2022) highlighted that the National Center for Mental Health (NCMH) documented a total of 1,145,871 individuals in the Philippines diagnosed with depressive disorder. With the increasing number of people diagnosed with mental health disorders, especially anxiety, and depression, research shows that the majority of the public holds negative attitudes and stereotypes towards mental illnesses–or what is called "public stigma". Many Filipinos still seem to disregard the seriousness of mental illness as an issue and tend to avoid discussing it, especially in their community (Mendoza, 2021). However, amid public stigma against individuals with mental illnesses, mental health support groups do exist. Several thousand of this kind of group are active worldwide. These were identified as options and enhancements to traditional

services, frequently with the aim of fostering empowerment and facilitating recovery (Markowitz, 2015). Locally, a well-known mental health peer support group called Anxiety and Depression Support Philippines (ADSP) continues to flourish. This is one of the organizations in the country that focuses on helping and guiding different individuals with mental health problems and psychological disorders (mostly anxiety and depression). The main purpose of establishing the support group lies in offering support to people with mental health issues/illnesses through an accessible social media platform–Facebook. ADSP mainly practices the following objectives: encourage emotional support, refer mental health services, and organize mental health-related events. Currently, it is composed of more than 3,400 members (M. Abrera, personal communication, August 13, 2022).

Research that emphasizes the lived experiences of mental health support group members amid public stigma was scanted. In addition, the role of mental health support groups appears to be given less importance in the research on mental health care in the Philippine setting. The lack of available studies indicates a gap in the literature on the said research topic. On top of that, there is an overall lack of research exploring and examining the role of support groups, thus there is a need to conduct systematic studies concerning the topic (Banfield et al., 2009; Ali et al., 2015).

The paper highlighted the lived experiences of ADSP's members as they are now facing unfortunate and ignored situations prevalent in society today. The role of ADSP in the experience of members amid public stigma was also explored. The paper presented the following sufficient reasons that supported the conduct of the study: (1) There is a scarcity of local research on this topic thus, there is a need to fill the gap in the literature on the role of local mental health peer support groups in the lives of its members in prevailing public stigma. In line with this, this may also serve as an original contribution to the knowledge of mental health and mental health care in the country. In addition, there are foreign studies suggesting further research regarding the topic and (2) Given the serious disregard for mental health conditions in the country, the heightening of public stigma, and the concerned response of affected individuals and groups, it became more significant to explore the experiences of individuals with mental health conditions (especially anxiety and depression) amid the phenomenon. Most importantly, the paper may highlight the role of local mental health support groups in the lives of its members facing public stigma.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

In the Philippines, the prevailing stigma surrounding mental health remains a significant barrier to addressing the country's overall mental health status. Business World Online (2017) and Tugade (2017) emphasized the widespread lack of proper information about mental health among Filipinos, leading to an increasing social distance between the public and individuals with mental illnesses. The underestimation and neglect of mental health conditions were reflected in alarming suicide rates, as highlighted by the National Center for Mental Health's statistics.

Antonio and Rivera's study (2017) delved into the rampant stigma towards mental disorders in the Philippines, permeating various aspects of life, including home, school, workplace, and healthcare settings. Stigma emerged as a significant barrier to the recovery of individuals with psychological disorders, necessitating interventions to increase public awareness through health education and promotion. New strategies, such as incorporating culture and arts and incentivizing companies to adhere to mental health policies, were recommended.

International perspectives, particularly from the United States and India, reinforced the notion of public stigma as a common hindrance to seeking mental health treatment. Cabassa and Parcesepe (2014) highlighted the widespread nature of mental health stigma in the U.S., emphasizing the need for research-based interventions and the integration of mental health awareness across various sectors.

Pescosolido (2013) described the persistent negative preconceptions and attitudes toward clinically diagnosed individuals, suggesting that while claims of stigma reduction exist, serious intervention efforts are crucial.

The recent and comprehensive study by Lloyd et al. (2018) entitled, "The effectiveness of support groups: A literature review" conveyed the nature of support groups and emphasized that these are essential for the recovery of people with anxiety and depression. The literature has explored the prevalence of support groups in mental health assistance provided to both caregivers and individuals receiving care. According to the analysis, support groups are characterized as gatherings of individuals sharing similar experiences, whether they are identified as caregivers for someone with a mental illness or individuals living with a mental health condition. There is a consistent pattern of evidence, over a long period, which confirms the effectiveness of mental health support groups for carers and people living with mental illness. The common among these were anxiety and depression support groups. Also, there is scientific evidence that shows the effectiveness of others like, support groups that are led by professionals and families, support groups for caregivers with a focus on psychoeducation, and support groups that are professionally facilitated and structured based on specific programs.

Barriage et al.'s (2020) study on youth with anxiety disorders further underscored the impact of mental health conditions on daily life, emphasizing the need for qualitative approaches to understanding their experiences with pain.

Klein and colleagues (2016) shed light on the subjective experiences of adolescents with depression, revealing an insufficient exploration and study in the field of health psychology. The delay in accessing treatment was attributed to factors such as not knowing what is "normal" and the absence of supportive adults encouraging professional help.

In a Philippine context, Clamosa and Magadia (2017) highlighted the superficial views on anxiety and depression, negatively affecting the daily lives and functioning of those diagnosed. Daniel et al. (2021) explored public stigma experienced by people with lived experiences of mental illness and their families in India, emphasizing the impact of cultural beliefs on help-seeking behaviors.

Matsuo et al.'s (2018) qualitative study in the Philippines on stigma experienced by persons with mental health problems revealed culturally and socio-economically specific contexts. Stigma was exacerbated when mental health care was not readily available, impacting individuals' affiliations, opportunities, and economic survival. The study suggested that context-specific strategies, focusing on environmental factors and messages about recovery, were essential for effective stigma reduction in the Philippines. Overall, these diverse perspectives collectively highlight the urgent need for comprehensive and culturally sensitive approaches to address mental health stigma in the Philippines.

Synthesis of the Reviewed Literature and Studies

Unfortunately, there were more foreign literature and studies compared to local ones. This solidifies one of the purposes of the study which is to fill the gap in the literature on the role of local mental health peer support groups. Studies about mental health support groups were scanted locally. Despite this shortage, all gathered local research and literature had promisingly provided rich data about the alarming public stigma on mental disorders nowadays. On the other hand, foreign research and literature offered a great amount of lived experiences reflecting the condition of persons with mental health issues/conditions.

Very few literature and studies focused on members of mental health support groups–mostly on non-members (ordinary individuals) with mental health issues/conditions. The majority of the literature tackled and explored the varied lived experiences of persons with mental health issues/conditions in general (not only focusing on anxiety and depression).

Methodology

The paper used a phenomenological hermeneutic approach under the qualitative method. The participant's existence and relation to the world around him are explored. In the study, participants shared and described their subjective experiences (phenomenology) and also the meanings they attached to these experiences (hermeneutic). The study employed semi-structured interview meetings with 6 participants through Zoom. The interview protocol was developed in a semi-structured format comprising open-ended questions that reflect the following main research problems: (1) What are the lived experiences of Anxiety and Depression Support Philippines' (ADSP) Members amid public stigma? and (2) How would they describe the role of ADSP in their lived experiences amid public stigma? It underwent a validation process by engaging professionals who have expertise in qualitative study.

The paper adhered to all the conditions prescribed in the ethical standards in the conduct of research. In line with this, the author sought the approval of the Research Ethics Board to ensure data collected throughout interviews will be handled with confidentiality.

The paper employed John Creswell's Thematic Analysis in the analysis of qualitative data. Creswell's Thematic Analysis consists of the step-by-step procedure: Bracketing, Horizonization, Textural and Structural Clustering, and Essence (Creswell & Moerer-Urdahl, 2004).

Results and Discussion

Lived Experiences of Anxiety and Depression Support Philippines' (ADSP) Members Amid Public Stigma

Following the familiarization and analysis of the significant statements describing the lived experiences of ADSP members, two major themes were formulated namely, Day-to-Day Personal Challenges and Stigma Experienced from the Public. These two sets of major textural themes and their subthemes accorded to the holistic presentation of the lived experiences of ADSP members amid public stigma.

Major Textural Theme 1: Day-to-day Personal Challenges

The first set of textural themes presents the day-to-day personal challenges of testing and stressing the participants. The major theme elaborates on the physical symptoms that scared the participants time and time again. Additionally, financial challenges associated with treatment fall under the theme. These personal obstacles were consistently encountered by participants while they were dealing with their condition. These experiences matter as they are and accurately describe their lives as individuals with anxiety or depression in public stigma. The theme is composed of subthemes, Somatic Symptoms, and Costly Treatment.

Mental health conditions can lead to significant physical symptoms, as described by participants who shared their experiences. These individuals faced daunting and vivid physical manifestations resulting from their conditions,

especially those diagnosed with anxiety. The participants acknowledged that these distressing physical symptoms became a daily challenge.

Physical manifestations caused by illness, particularly in the participants' point of view, manifested in the whole interview transcript. As mentioned by Bigaouette (2022), anxiety can create actual physical symptoms even though organs are completely doing fine. Some of these common physical symptoms include increased heart rate, hyperventilation, acid reflux, frequent weakness, and trouble sleeping.

In addition to coping with the condition itself, financial struggles added to the burden of seeking help. High costs of medications and consultations were a notable source of distress for participants, many of whom were unable to afford consistent access to antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications and professional consultations. This financial barrier was a painful reality they could not escape.

Financial obligations attached to having a disorder impede participants from securing a life where they can easily manage their condition. Concerning this, According to Cabico (2023), local mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) providers identified high costs of treatment and services (40%) as the primary obstacle to obtaining mental health care in the Philippines. Additionally, a social research report by Heartward Strategic (2022) supports the theme by revealing that people with mental health symptoms are twice as likely to be experiencing financial challenges.

Major Textural Theme 2: Stigma Experienced from the Public

The second major textural theme was composed of four sub-themes namely, Invisibility of Mental Health Conditions, Imposement of Spiritual Beliefs, Pill Shaming Phenomenon, and Deregatory Stereotypes. Participants narrated stigmatized impressions and superficial opinions blurted out by people who ordinarily misunderstood them. Misconceptions about the nature of the condition and how it should be properly treated arose explicitly from the interview transcript.

Participants recounted the challenge of proving the reality of their mental health conditions, as others often perceived illness as something visible. Despite not displaying visible signs of sickness, participants faced similar challenges to those with physical illnesses. The persistent notion that mental health conditions should be overtly observable hinders their acknowledgment and proper addressing. This is one of the many clear signs that having a mental disorder slowly appears to be a privilege; like, it is something you need to prove to be treated special. Living in a situation where people do not acknowledge your suffering is frustration at its finest.

The findings corroborated existing literature indicating that the manifestations of mental health disorders are essentially imperceptible to observers, including family members, medical professionals, and others, except for the individuals directly experiencing the mental illness. This invisibility usually leads to a feeling that others do not believe they are suffering and may also contribute to the nihilistic thought that their suffering is by the fault of themselves (Lynes, 2022).

Another factor that worsens participants' perception of their condition is being constantly reminded that it takes only a prayer away to cure anxiety or depression. The Imposition of Spiritual Beliefs, suggesting that surrendering to God can overcome mental illness, was a recurring theme. Participants found this advice invalidating, as it oversimplified the complexity of their conditions.

This result ratified Fonda's (2018) article on mental health illness being "In God's hands". According to her, the assertion that clinically diagnosed individuals do not need to seek help and that they should just surrender it to God remains a norm. It is saddening that this can exacerbate their condition by increasing guilt, stress, and anxiety.

The phenomenon of pill shaming was also prevalent, with individuals questioning the need for medication and suggesting alternative treatments. Shaming someone for taking medicines equates to invalidation of his true emotions, limitations in particular. Ridiculous as they found it; they just want to get well but at the same time, they are judged for taking medications. Medications are substitutes for what an individual with a mental health condition cannot do; one of those is to take full control of his condition specifically his healing. With this fact, medications are essential. Participants highly value their medicines and they consider them as their friend and life-saver.

In contrast to treatments for physical ailments, the diagnosis and treatment of mental illnesses continue to be associated with a sense of shame for numerous individuals. There is a common misconception that individuals who take medication for a mental health diagnosis are not as strong as they are expected to be (Gold, as cited in Holland, 2018). This obstructive phenomenon that often happens among persons with psychological disorders is called "pill shaming." This experience is one of the strongest discouragements for people wishing to continue medications for mental health disorders (Holland, 2018). Also, Davidow & Mazel-Carlton's article in 2019 tackled pill shaming and its two distinct forms. According to the article, pill shaming can be either suggesting someone to get over their disorder without taking pills or implicitly shaming them for taking them. Without a doubt, participants' narrative statements supported these two forms of phenomenon.

Such comments, including stereotypes like "going crazy," were hurtful and exacerbated the participants' struggles. The paper revealed that negative impressions and stereotypes surrounding mental health conditions, especially anxiety and depression, persist, hindering understanding and support for those experiencing these challenges.

The subtheme, Deregatory Stereotypes, is supported by the literature of Biddle and colleagues (2020) which asked a UK community about how mental health illness is understood and conceptualized. One of its findings is having a strong community stigma by viewing those persons with mental illnesses as "crazy" no matter what the context is. The

demeaning and hostile language will worsen the established stigma against mental health conditions and will make the affected individuals more ashamed and marginalized.

Major Structural Theme: Meaning

The only structural theme is composed of three subthemes that tackle how participants make sense of their experiences amid public stigma. These also subtly present the changes that happened around and within participants, as they lived while their condition was being misunderstood. There are certain reasons why they continue pressing on despite their present condition and situation. Three meanings they attached to their experiences were Shared Struggles, Acknowledgment of Proper Treatment, and Being Unbothered. The paper highlights the transformative impact of finding a supportive community for individuals facing mental health struggles. The subtheme, Shared Struggles, emerges from the participants' search for like-minded individuals who share similar challenges, leading to a comforting realization that they are not alone in their adversity. Despite the initial harshness of their experiences, participants find solace in the shared understanding of their struggles. This sense of camaraderie becomes a source of strength and resilience. The participants appeared on the journey from isolation to empowerment through shared experiences and a shift in perspective on mental health.

For decades, support groups have been meetings of individuals who share similar experiences in terms of mental health conditions. The main goal of these meetings is to provide support and a sense of companionship with each other (Ramjan et al., 2018 as cited in Agrawal et al., 2021). This literature supported the subtheme, Shared Struggles. What a relief to know that there are communities where they feel belong. They find comfort in the fact that they are not the only ones experiencing the same awful situation. This is emotionally empowering for participants.

Participants emphasized the importance of recognizing and treating mental health conditions on par with physical ailments, marking a significant shift in their perspective. It can also be inferred that they are now challenging the societal misconception that mental health conditions should be treated differently from physical conditions. They find personal transformation in understanding the necessity of seeking professional help and adhering to prescribed medications. This newfound awareness is seen as a crucial step toward healing, and participants express a hope that the public will become more enlightened about this truth.

The narrative statements of participants under the subtheme Acknowledgment of Proper Treatment were confirmed by this statement by Eldredge (2022), "Until we start to view mental illness as an illness that impacts your brain the same way we view an illness that affects your heart or your kidneys, we'll continue to face the devastating consequences caused by stigma." Mental health conditions like anxiety and depression should be seen and treated the same as physical illnesses. For the participants, it was comforting that their conditions should just be treated like any other physical conditions – and there's nothing wrong with it.

"*I don't care anymore*" is one of the most repeated statements manifested in the whole interview transcript. Thus, it perpetuates the development of the subtheme, Being Unbothered. The life of a person with mental illness is undeniably difficult; confronted with harsh words from the public may destroy them emotionally. But as the days went by, by coping with their conditions and contemplating their experiences, they mastered not caring at all. Participants indirectly conveyed that being unbothered stems from acceptance; being unbothered is being free from the burden of explaining your condition. Over time, the participants adopt a resilient attitude, choosing not to dwell on the judgments and misconceptions of others. They reach a point where they "don't care at all" about the damaging opinions of society, considering it individually empowering to dismiss these unmindful judgments.

To support this finding, Cueto et al., (2010) discussed how adults with severe mental illness deal with situations that may affect their condition. Acceptance and ignoring were two of the highlighted coping mechanisms that diagnosed adults used when they lacked control over or were not capable of effectively changing stressors at a particular moment. In addition, a local study came up with a similar finding. Filipino researchers examined the lived experiences of persons with depression by using phenomenological hermeneutic design as the research method. Some of the participants were members of support groups. The findings revealed that it was never easy to cope with depression. Acceptance (not being bothered) was one of the themes that emerged (Bormate et al., 2017).

Major Textural Theme 3: Role of ADSP

There are also four subthemes composing the last major textural theme. Subthemes under the major theme discuss the specific roles that were served by the support group during trying times in participants' lives. These made the participants realize how reliable the support group is.

The paper underscores the profound impact of the support group, ADSP, in providing comprehensive assistance and fostering a sense of belonging for its participants. ADSP effectively fulfills its ultimate purposes of offering emotional support, comfort, empathy, and a safe space for individuals grappling with mental health challenges.

Participants expressed delight as they described the emotional role of ADSP in their journey. Most of them are beyond grateful for the support group which acted as a safe space during trying times. The paper tapped the continuous need for support groups as the participants expressed their adoration for ADSP. The subtheme, Providing Emotional Support, was confirmed by Thrive Wellness's (2023) article. According to the article, support group members understand

and accept each one's experiences. Moreso, they promote and practice social integration, a sense of community, and companionship with one another.

The group goes beyond the conventional role of a "safe space" by becoming a crucial support system during moments when participants feel overwhelmed by life's difficulties. ADSP successfully saved some of its members' lives.

Gilat and Shahar's 2009 study highlighted the role of online support groups in preventing suicide among its members for decades. Some of the participants felt that the world would be a better place without them; the agitation inside that they can't seem to settle in total despair. The choice to end things rather than suffer till the very end – committed by one participant without wanting to be saved. On the other hand, one participant intentionally asked for help from ADSP when he felt like ending his life. It can be concluded that ADSP is ready for both – conscious choice or cry for help.

Notably, ADSP extends its support beyond emotional assistance. Participants express immense gratitude for the group's role in facilitating access to medication and professional consultations, demonstrating a commitment to addressing the practical needs of its members. This aspect of ADSP proves instrumental in making the participants' burdens more bearable.

Furthermore, ADSP emerges as a guiding force, encouraging participants to broaden their horizons, excel in their respective fields, and strive toward personal growth. The support group facilitates this through various means, including providing seminars, offering retreats for emotional well-being, and promoting business ventures to address economic needs. Participants appreciate ADSP's efforts to contribute to their intellectual, emotional, and economic development.

Meiring and her colleagues (2017) presented a study about the value of community-based support groups to its members. One of the findings revealed that these are successful in assisting the participants to cope with their symptoms, socialize with others, and engage in purposive activities that will bring out the best in them.

Overall, ADSP has a multifaceted role in enhancing the lives of its members – from emotional support and practical assistance to fostering personal growth and success. The group's ability to go above and beyond expectations is a testament to its significant and positive impact on the well-being of members facing mental health challenges.

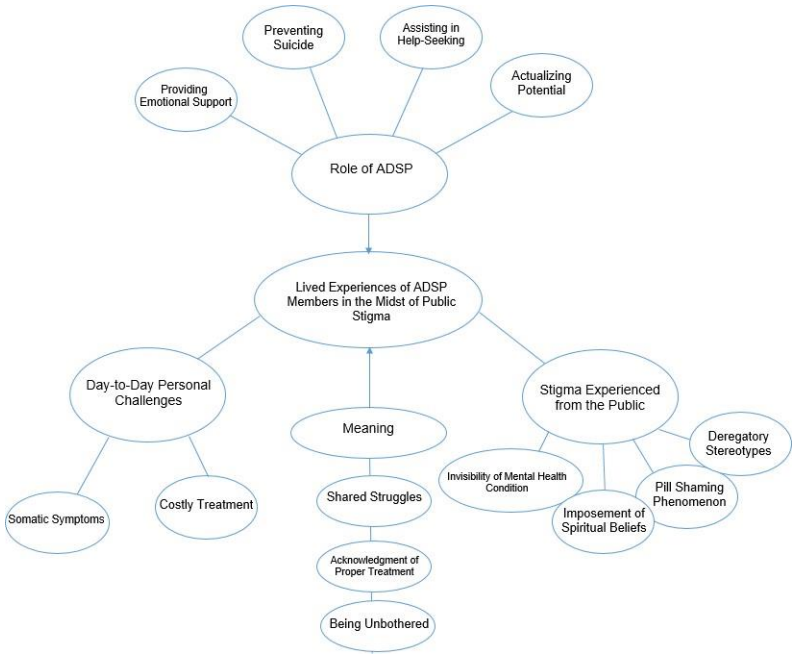

Figure 1: Figure of Themes

Essence

Participants had a lot of experiences with people who misunderstood their condition and their condition itself. But in the midst of it, ADSP became in the service by providing a supportive environment which led to establishing connections and instilling understanding between its members. The support group had also gone beyond the bare minimum to help members sharing the same mental health sufferings. The essence of the participants' subjective experience is enduring personal suffering but at the same time receiving unwavering emotional presence from ADSP that encourages them to continue living.

Conclusions

Participants' lived experiences are multifaceted. It can be viewed from the participants' external world and internal world. Their external world demonstrates a quite far from in-depth understanding of the nature and treatment of mental health conditions. On the other hand, since they become immersed again and again in their world, this makes them the best ones who can explain what exactly they are experiencing. Thus, the interplay of these two worlds should be examined. To achieve a thorough understanding of the true condition and situation of individuals with mental health conditions, especially anxiety and depression, awareness of the strength of stigma-related opinions (external world) and discernment of their subjective experiences (internal world) should both be deemed important.

ADSP stepped up to provide emotional support, prevent suicide, assist in help-seeking, and actualize the potential of its members. It was realized that ADSP's exemplary influence speaks volumes on how a reliable support group should function. Though stigma in society remains, participants can find purpose from shared experiences, become enlightened about their healing, learn to be still; accept what they have become; and live their lives unfazed by the opinions of others.

Recommendation

The study highlighted the significance of local mental health support groups. An increase in research interest in Filipino–based support groups was recommended. Specifically, future research can examine and explore the structure and dynamics of Filipino-based mental health support groups to further address the needs of individuals with mental health conditions or psychological disorders (particularly anxiety and depression). National-level encouragement of the development of accessible Filipino–based mental health support groups was also recommended.

Contributions of Authors

The paper has only one author.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest.

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