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Commodification of Women in Pakistani Newspaper Matrimonial Advertisements: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Jang and Dawn Newspaper Classifieds

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Abstract

This paper explores how Pakistani newspapers construct and commodify women in their matrimonial advertisements, the matrimonial classifieds in the Jang (Urdu) and Dawn (English). Based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study explores how adjectives and descriptors such as fair, tall, educated, doctor, and homemaker reduce women to a list of commodifiable characteristics and propagate and reinforce patriarchal, colourist, conservative, and classist ideologies. The advertisements were collected through a qualitative purposive sampling method and were analysed thematically to identify recurrent words and the social significance of these linguistic patterns. The results show that women are mainly judged on physical appearance, morality, housewifery, and social standing. Simultaneously, there is a gender imbalance, with men referring to financial stability and social standing. The study also shows that colourism and the symbolic status of education and profession as indicators of class have become normalised. The patterns indicate that matrimonial advertisements are the ideological instruments that propagate structural inequalities and cultural rules about marriageability and femininity subtly and unconsciously. The study will contribute to feminist media studies and discourse analysis by anticipating the deliberate use of print matrimonial advertisements as an important but under-explored theme of gendered social practice, and by learning from media literacy and gender sensitisation programmes.

Keywords: Rishta Culture, Matrimonial Advertisements, Commodification of Women, Colourism, Classism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Pakistan, Dawn Newspaper, Jang Newspaper.

1. Introduction

The advertisements through marriage in Sunday newspapers in South Asian societies, specifically in Pakistan, where marriage is not a personal preference but rather a firmly institutionalised societal act, hold a unique socio-cultural position. Matrimonial advertisements in newspapers like Jang (Urdu) and Dawn (English) are popularly mediated and tend to take the form of a semi-public negotiation of gender roles, family demands,

and social hierarchies. These adverts, which typically appear under the "Classified" section, make women sound within a minimal set of words, like fair, tall, educated, doctor, or homemaker, etc, which simplifies the multidimensional human beings into marketable attributes. According to Fairclough (1995), the said linguistic framing mirrors the women as commodities by evaluating them based on their physical appearance, professional standing, and home appropriateness as a representation of bigger regimes of patriarchy, colourism, conservatism, and social class division. Bourdieu (1984) argues that the commodification of women through the discourse of matrimony is not a new phenomenon. Still, the current media's esteem raises the contentious issues of gender inequality and symbolic power. According to feminist thinkers, language is key to creating and sustaining unequal social relations, especially in ordinary texts that always seem cultural or apparently harmless. Cameron (1992) suggests that the ads of matrimony may be viewed as one such example in which intuitions of fairness, height, and professional status are naturalised to support ideologies of colourism and class-based hierarchies. Lazar (2005) states that the common focus in the Pakistani situation on the importance of keeping fair skin revisits colonialism and internalised racial hierarchies in terms of which a light skin is something that implies beauty, goodness, and a high social position. Ali (2017) highlights that, on the same note, the use of words like 'doctor' or 'educated' is usually meant to reflect less on women's agency and more on symbolic capital that enhances the social worth of a family in the marriage market.

According to Hunter's (2007) study, it is relevant because of its critical analysis of media sources that inform social consciousness. Although matrimonial advertisements have high consumption levels and are socially accepted, they have not been widely discussed in Pakistani academic literature, most likely due to a lack of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and an enlightened feminist perspective on them. The current literature on gender representation in South Asian media is mainly concentrated on television dramas, films, or social media, and print matrimonial discourse is thus now somewhat peripheral. Zia (2015) emphasises that, however, such advertisements have strong normative power in moderating normative femininity by determining the idealised ideals of womanhood- fair-skinned, domestically proficient, prudent, and socially obedient.

According to Lazar (2007), not only do such representations confine women in terms of identity, but they also reproduce gender, class, and colour structural inequalities. This paper will examine the manner in which language in matrimonial advertisements commoditises women and strengthens socio-cultural hierarchy. Through an analysis of adjectives and descriptions commonly used in the "Classified" sections of *Jang* (Urdu) and *Dawn* (English), the study aims to identify the covert ideologies in these texts. The study seeks have a trifold nature; in the first place, the researcher is interested in determining recurring lexical patterns employed in a description of women; in the second place, the study examines how described women are constituted as objects in the marriage market, and, in the third place, studies the way the specified linguistic usage can reinforce colourism, classism, and gender expectations. Based on critical discourse analysis, the paper locates matrimonial advertisements within the larger power formations that shape the nature of gender relationships in Pakistani society.

This article is restricted to only print matrimonial adverts that appear in the Sunday editions of the *Jang* newspaper and *Dawn* newspaper that serve the Urdu and English readerships, as well as different socio-economic segments. By emphasising publications that are widespread, the research offers a glimpse of mainstream cultural practices alongside marginal or alternative practices. Finally, this study has a role to play in feminist linguistics by showing how seemingly neutral media sources can participate in the symbolic

commodification of women and reproduce ideologies grounded in discriminatory principles in the name of tradition and social acceptability.

Scope of the Study

The research is restricted to matrimonial advertisements in the Jang (Urdu) and Dawn (English) newspapers, appearing in the Sunday classified sections. The analysis is based on ads that target only female marital partners. The paper examines the use of words and adjectives, and not images or graphics. The study is limited to the Pakistani social culture. It is not a deliberation over the intentions of people who create advertisements, but rather about the textual and ideological implications. The period in which the data would be collected is restricted to specific Sunday editions of a specified duration. The results would not be expected to be extrapolated to other similar South Asia cultural situations.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To critically examine how matrimonial advertisements in the Sunday newspapers of Jang and Dawn linguistically construct and commodify women within the Pakistani marriage market.
- ii. To analyse the use of descriptive adjectives (e.g., *fair, tall, educated, doctor, homemaker*) in matrimonial advertisements and how they reduce women to marketable attributes.
- iii. To explore how such linguistic representations reinforce colourism, classism, and traditional gender roles in Pakistani society.

2. Literature Review

Gender representation in the media has been studied to indicate that, although media texts are not directly reflective, they actively construct social meanings and reproduce dominant social hierarchies (gender, class, and beauty standards) (Fairclough, 1995). According to van Dijk (2001), discourse analysis shows that language in the media plays a core role in shaping people's views of gender roles and identities. Within a narrow scope of individual ads (matrimonial advertisements), the recent research suggests that these ostensibly banal texts contain strong cultural codes that commodify women by addressing physical features and social identities. In their article, Sarwar, Naveed, and Irshad (2024) find that matrimonial advertisements often degrade women by focusing on beauty, height, and education, thereby reinforcing conventional gender roles in society. According to Sher & Saleem (2023), matrimonial advertisements also show not just gender norms but also well-established colourists and classes animals. According to the research on the South Asian wedding business, terms such as *fair, tall, and beautiful* support the beauty norms that were constructed as social values based on colonial racial hierarchies and class privileges.

The language sexism of Pakistani newspapers has also been critically examined in the case of the *Rishta Culture*, which demonstrates how the usage of adjectives and lexical features is a systemic method of support of expectations and bolstering of a patriarchal definition of marriageability. In addition to matrimonial advertising, research on print media in Pakistan in general provides background on gender stereotypes. Indeed, as an example, Karim, Fatima, and Niaz (2023) demonstrate that women are frequently represented in discriminative and biased images that support an inferior role in society. In the same respect, Said and Ullah (2025) reveal that commercial advertisement exerts false beauty ideals and power disparities that contribute to the detrimental gender stereotypes.

The critical discourse analysis of Pakistani and Indian advertisements proves that the texts provided in the media tend to reproduce the negative images of women and contribute to the reinforcement of the typical gender expectations. Sumaira, Hussain, and Khalil (2025) emphasise the influence of Pakistani advertisements on the development of cultural norms regarding physical appearance and the position of

women in society, in accordance with cultural and regional beliefs about femininity. Scholars of media studies who consider the representation of gender and ideology reveal that advertising is not only about selling goods but also about selling culture. The authors of this article employ the concepts of gender performativity (Butler) and CDA (Fairclough), indicating that advertisements both promote and undermine common beliefs about the role of women in society.

Khan et al. (2023) note that semiotic analyses also provide insights into how visual and textual signs are used in the construction of normative femininity. Television and print advertisement literature in Pakistan suggest that there is continuous objectification and stereotyping of women and association with conventional roles, which reinforces bigger systems of patriarchy and consumer culture. International studies about beauty standards and marriage cultures further quadruple these findings. As an example, Rabi, Sharma, and Iyer (2025) in the Indian context establish that colourism and body surveillance through media representations of matrimonial and beauty campaigns cause direct effects on arranged marriage norms and thus gender roles of building identities. Marriage markets have also been criticised in global feminist media studies for reproducing hegemonic femininities.

An analysis of Mulvey (1975) and Bordo (1993) reveals that matrimonial advertising tends to mirror inequalities that extend beyond local settings, in line with feminist critiques of commodification and objectification. Although research on gender representation in advertisements and the media has been conducted, some gaps remain. The majority of research studies focus on ads in commercial and television media, but not on print advertisements in matrimonial services, leaving the newspaper classified sections underexplored. In addition, although there appears to be some research that currently recognises gender bias in matrimonial advertisements, only a few studies systematically analyse how the descriptors enforce colourism and classism as ideologies embedded in linguistic decisions. The particular nexus of language, commodification, and social norms within Pakistani newspaper matrimonial advertisements is not a topic on which much academic study focuses, nor is it to which critical discourse and feminist analysis would be directed.

3. Methodology

The research design used in this study is qualitative, as it aims to analyse the linguistic construction and commodification of women in matrimonial advertisements published in Pakistani newspapers. The use of a qualitative approach is appropriate for this data, as it does not quantify variables but concerns the analysis of language, meanings, and the underlying ideologies embedded in the textual data. The study is based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which views language as a social practice and examines how power relations, ideologies, and inequalities are constructed and reproduced in discourse.

Research Design

The paper applies critical discourse analysis as the main analytical framework, with specific reference to Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse (1995, 2010). This model focuses on (a) the textual (lexical choices, adjectives), (b) the discursive practices (production/consumption of matrimonial ads), and (c) the larger social practice (patriarchy, and the hierarchy of classes). This research is appropriate within CDA, as matrimonial adverts do not possess the characteristic of neutral texts; instead, they support and propagate the prevailing cultural values related to gender and marriage.

Data Source

The data for this research were collected from the classified pages of Sunday issues of two widely circulated Pakistani newspapers: *Jang* (Urdu) and *Dawn* (English). The study used six classified sections from the *Jang*

Urdu newspaper and six classified sections from the *Dawn* English newspaper. In total, eight classified sections (four from *Jang* and four from *Dawn*) published on December 7, December 14, December 21, and December 28, 2025, and four classified sections (two from *Jang* and two from *Dawn*) published on January 4 and January 11, 2026, were accessed and analysed. These newspapers were selected because they cater to diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic readerships, which allows for a broader understanding of mainstream matrimonial discourse in Pakistan. The focus on Sunday editions is justified by the fact that marital advertisements are significantly more numerous on that day.

Sampling Technique

The relevant matrimonial advertisements were selected by a purposive sampling method. The sample contained only the ads whose objective is to find a female spouse. Ads that mentioned they wanted to find male partners, remarriage offers, or advertisements that did not describe their features were filtered out. The number of adverts sampled was fixed, drawn from a set of Sunday editions within a specified time, to make the data manageable and controllable. The sampling was done on ads with descriptive adjectives related to physical appearance, education, profession, domestic roles, and religious attributes.

Data Collection Procedure

The e-print of the chosen newspapers used to collect matrimonial advertisements was handheld. The transcriptions were collected and compiled into a corpus for analysis. The use of common adjectives and phrases, such as fair, tall, religious, educated, doctor, and homemaker, was also considered, given the research's focus. The gathered data were coded into themes to support a systematic analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

Thematic and lexical analysis in the context of CDA were used to analyse the data. The study aimed to define common linguistic trends, evaluative adjectives, and implicit presumptions about the worth and desirability of women. These trends were further explained to have been in respect of broader socio-cultural ideologies like patriarchy, colourism, religious conservatism, and classism. The discussion aimed to discover how women are commoditised by language as objects to be traded in the marriage market, devalued into a number of marketable attributes.

Ethical Considerations

Since the research is based on publicly accessible newspaper texts, no personal identities were revealed or manipulated. Nevertheless, ethical responsibility was ensured through a critical and respectful analysis of the data, without sensationalism or misrepresentation. The study is set to criticise societal practices, not specific advertisers.

4. Analysis and Discussion

A comparison of matrimonial adverts in the classified sections of *Jang* (Urdu) and *Dawn* (English) shows that language is significant in constructing women as products in the Pakistani marriage market. By the use of repetitive lexical structures and appraisal adjectives, women are not described as being independent actors, but rather as masses of admirable qualities that can be evaluated, measured, and even traded. In this section, the findings are explained in the context of established literature and how advertisements propagate gendered ideologies, colourism, and class-based hierarchies.

4.1 Textual Analysis: Lexical Choices and Representation of Women

At the textual level, the analysis focuses on the language used in matrimonial advertisements, including vocabulary, adjectives, and evaluative phrases, to reveal how women are represented and valued.

4.1.1. Commodification of Women Linguistically

The most outstanding observation of this research is the consistent use of market-oriented language to characterise women. Adjectives like fair, slim, tall, beautiful, and well-settled are used repeatedly in consumer-facing advertisements and reflect the language used on the consumer side, rather than in human interaction. Bourdieu (1986) and Lazar (2005) highlight similar results as the criticisms offered by feminists who contend that marriage within patriarchal societies is mostly a type of socio-economic exchange where the standards of looks and usefulness define the value of women. The matrimonial advertisements dehumanise women into a set of attributes in which women are being classified in a manner of commodities in a market; they are selected, ranked, and rejected depending on their favorability. This conclusion confirms the previous work of Sarwar et al. (2024) and Sher and Saleem (2023), which emphasise that wife talk deprives women of nuance and uniqueness. Although men can be targeted by their income, stability, and property ownership, women are nevertheless characterised by their body and the home as the primary relational characteristics. This kind of asymmetry is indicative of gendered power relations, in which men occupy the position of choosers and women occupy the position of the chosen.

4.1.2. Lexical Choices as the Strengthening Strategy of Colourism

One of the key ideas that has surfaced during the analysis is the normalisation of the concept of colourism; specifically, the adjective 'fair' was and continues to be used quite frequently. The favour of fair skin is also seen in newspapers, which means that the problem of colourism does not have any linguistic boundaries and is highly rooted in Pakistani social consciousness. This observation echoes Hunter's (2007) contention that skin colour is utilised to create symbolic capital, which shapes social mobility and potential marriage partners. The close focus on justice, reiterated, underscores the aesthetics of a racialised beauty rooted in colonial pasts, in which light complexion is equated with purity, decency, and categorisation within the upper classes (Ali, 2017). With such choices in the matrimonial advertisements, newspapers play a role in reproducing discriminatory beauty ideals that discriminate against darker-skinned women. Notably, the advertisements in question usually justify or explain this preference only briefly, suggesting that colourism is a social norm and self-evident. The silencing of this bias is as much a part of its existence in the critical discourse viewpoint as its presence. The inexplicable recurrence of the word fair institutionalises the discrimination based on colour and disguises it as preference but not inequality. This observation not only confirms existing sources but also points to a gap: although the idea of colourism has been widely debated in relation to beauty products and media images, little is known about how colourism is linguistically reinforced in print matrimonial discourse.

4.2. Discursive Practice: Class, Education, and Construction of Femininity

At the discursive practice level, the focus shifts to how texts are produced, interpreted, and circulated, including how readers and advertisers participate in constructing meanings and social expectations.

4.2.1. Classism and Symbolic Value of Education and Profession

The other important discovery concerns the role of education and occupation in shaping women's worth in marriage. Adjectives such as doctor, educated, MBBS, and professional are commonly used in advertisements. Nonetheless, these qualifications do not mean empowerment of women or their desire to pursue a career; instead, they tend to be indicators of family prestige, allowing them to have a better social standing. The analysis is based on the Bourdieu concept of cultural and symbolic capital (1984, 1986), which points out that feminine education is already commodified in the marriage market rather than appreciated as personal growth and independence. It is consistent with Zia's (2015) past research that professional

designations in matrimonial advertisements frequently coincide with expectations of home obedience, indicating a conditional acceptance of female education.

Meanwhile, Jang advertisements also tend to prioritise the features of a homemaker more often, which places the spheres of class and language in collision. Though English-language advertisements are likely to favour professional backgrounds, Urdu-language advertisements tend to reinforce conventional domestic roles. This contrast implies that class ideologies not only define but also shape the representation of femininity across readerships.

4.2.2. The formation of Idealised Femininity

This analysis also demonstrates that the matrimonial advertisements create a limited model of romanticised femininity that is balanced and lacking neither beauty, obedience, nor utility. Women are supposed to be physically present, morally upright, learned to an extent, non-aggressive, and homemakers. This is a combination of the ideal and what Lazar (2007) calls patriarchal bargaining, in which limited empowerment is allowed to persist so long as old gender hierarchies remain intact. The discovery is similar to Mulvey's (1975) theory of objectification, which positions women as primarily judged by men. This gaze is extended to families and social networks in matrimonial discourse, upholding collective surveillance of women's bodies and behaviours. The use of adjectives like simple, modest, and respectable three or four times further shows that there are moral controls in which women are evaluated solely on how they fit, not who they are.

4.3. Social Practice: Gender Ideology, Power, and Social Consequences

At the social practice level, the analysis examines the broader social, cultural, and ideological implications of the discourse, including how matrimonial advertisements reproduce gendered, class-based, and colourist power structures.

4.3.1. Consequences of the Gender Ideology and Social Practice

These findings not only have implications for media representation but also for social practices in general. Matrimony advertisements are cultural scripts that shape expectations for marriage, gender roles, and social mobility. Such texts promote the normalisation and value of discriminatory preferences and restrain women from acting freely and deciding on marriage. In feminist media studies, Cameron's (1992) research shows that the continued existence of such discourse can be interpreted as evidence of the power of ordinary texts to form ideology. In contrast with rather blatant sexist text, matrimonial adverts work covertly, incorporating discrimination into a socially approved culture. This renders them highly immune to criticism and change.

4.3.2. Alternative Interpretations

Matrimonial advertisements reflect society's tastes rather than serve as a gateway to shaping societal preferences. In this view, newspapers can be seen as neutral platforms responding to consumer demand. Other people would call descriptors like 'fair' or 'educated' pragmatic in a competitive marriage market. According to Fairclough (2010), CDA, however, does not grant this neutrality, since it highlights that representation is never passive. Media institutions are involved in constructing social norms rather than reflecting them by repeating specific descriptors and making them normal. Moreover, something shaped as a preference is often the expression of historically established power relations, not a choice.

Contribution to the Existing Literature

This work contributes to the literature review by attempting to forecast print matrimonial advertisements as a site of gendered discourse in Pakistan. Although earlier studies have concentrated on television, electronic media, or commercial advertisement, the study points in favour of the fact that traditional print media still reproduces patriarchal, colourist, and classist ideologies. The integration of feminist theory and

CDA in the study gives a rather delicate insight into the ways women are commodified in language and oppressive social systems perpetuated.

5. Findings

The review of matrimonial ads placed in the Classified sections of Jang (Urdu) and Dawn (English) reveals several noteworthy trends that commodify women's language and reinforce socio-cultural inequalities. The key results of this study are highlighted below.

5.1. Commodification by Descriptive Adjectives

Among the main discoveries is that women are consistently described in a narrow range of terms regarding their physical appearance, education, occupation, and roles at home. The discourse is dominated by words like fair, tall, beautiful, educated, doctor, and homemaker. These adjectives also serve as judgmental indicators that reduce women to commodifiable attributes, hence the reinforcement of the idea that marriage is a business deal and not a loving relationship.

5.2. Normalisation of Colourism

The careless use and undisputed usage of the word fair depict the socialisation of colourism in wedlock talk. The inclination toward fair skin seems to be a self-evident measure of desirable appearance, enshrined alongside racial and colonial values. This observation means that discriminative beauty standards not only exist socially but are also reproduced through institutions via print media.

5.3. Strengthening of Class and Social Allotment

The research concludes that academic and work designations are signs of status in class, not a type of independence among women. Family prestige is frequently reinforced by professions such as those of doctors and other professionals, whereas the domestic role of a homemaker promotes noncompliance with classical gender roles. This dualism underscores the role that women are supposed to juggle between contemporary qualifications and conventional roles in the home.

5.4. Gendering Power Relations in Matrimonial Discourse

Another important observation is the unequal representation of men and women in matrimonial advertisements. Whereas we usually talk of men as financially stable and socially positioned, women are judged mainly by looks, morality, and home fitness. This unproportionality also shows patriarchal disparities whereby the men are the pickers and the women the picked.

5.5. Language as an Ideological Mode of Production

Another interesting result of the study is that matrimonial adverts also act as an ideological instrument and reinforce the gender conventions, class structures, and standards of beauty in a very subtle manner. Such advertisements acclimatise discriminating tastes and shape them as societal norms in choice-making. This indicates the strong influence of the everyday media texts on the perpetuation of structural inequality.

Importance of the Results

The results of this study are of great importance, as they reveal that newspaper matrimonial advertisements cannot be considered neutral or informative texts. They, instead, are front and centre in perpetrating patriarchal, colourism, and classism. The study advances feminist media studies and critical discourse analysis. It highlights the need for greater attention to the commodification of women through linguistic means, as a critical analysis of the daily ways in which the media operates can shift how society perceives gender and marriage.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore how matrimonial adverts in the Jang and Dawn Classified sections of marriage advertisers build and market women in the Pakistani marriage industry. Using the Critical Discourse Analysis and feminist theoretical positions, the study has found that the matrimonial discourse dehumanises women in a systematic way, where they are assessed using a limited number of evaluative competencies regarding their physical appearance, education, occupation, and housewifing. Fair, tall, learned, doctor, homemaker are some of the adjectives whose role is to shape women as objects of trade and not as social beings. Matrimonial ads contain religious terms, and this helps promote acceptable femininity ideals. Prayer-observant, observes purdah, religiously educated, and humble are terms that indicate a culture of religious conservatism, assessing the value of women as a means to apparent moral and behavioural conformity rather than their agency. Although they appear as virtues, these descriptors are gendered forms of moral control that practise masculine ideals of modesty, obedience, and submissiveness. This results in the commodification of religiosity as well as physical looks and social status of classes, reducing the definition of marriageability among women in the Pakistani matrimonial domain even further. These data indicate that such ads contribute to upholding colourism and its principal manifestations, such as the normalised preference towards fair complexion, which is characterised by the deeply rooted colonial and racialised beauty ideals.

Furthermore, the positions of education and profession show how class-based ideologies result in the use of women's educational levels to promote family prestige. Yet, women remain lower in traditional household demands. The unequal representation of both men and women also shows the underlying relations of power favoured by the patriarchy in making choices, and women being the commodities to be measured up. The potential use of that research may lie in its contribution to feminist media studies and critical discourse analysis, because print matrimonial advertisements are already a potent source of underexploited ideological reproduction. This work would make readers, media professionals, and policymakers more aware of critical perceptions by revealing how disciplinary norms are legitimised through the simplest forms of media messages in the name of tradition and social desirability. It also draws on the fact that ethical recovery should be practised within media institutions to address the uncontrolled replication of gendered and colourist choices. In real-life applications, the results can inform media literacy programmes, gender sensitisation programmes, and academic discourses on marriage, gender, and representation in South Asia. Newspaper companies and authorities can also use this study to refresh their editorial policies on matrimonial adverts, thereby enhancing more modest and fair portrayals. The study has shortcomings in addressing a particular cultural context and print media, although it brought a lot. The analysis might be further expanded to include online matrimonial websites and social media in future research, where there will be patterns of commodification in other areas and ways, although in a more complex form. Comparative analyses of matrimonial discourse across regions, languages, or time periods could shed further light on its changes. Also, it would be interesting to include audience views or interviews with advertisers, as they might offer more insight into the production, interpretation, and negotiation processes of these texts in real life. Conclusively, this paper highlights that matrimonial advertisements are not merely functional documents; they are powerful discursive locations that govern gender conventions and social beliefs. It is crucial to challenge and rebrand those images to create a fairer vision of marriage and women's identity in contemporary Pakistani society.

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