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The Internet and sexuality: a literature review—1983–2002

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ABSTRACT *Internet sexuality has burst upon the scene in the last decade. Actually, articles concerning sex and the net have appeared since 1983 albeit sparsely. Serious theoretical considerations did not begin to be published until the mid-1990s and the initial research began to arrive after that. The trickle became a river. With the turn of the century, the river became a flood with five books being published in 2001. This article contains a review of the relevant literature over a 20-year period (1983–2002). Reviews of the literature are the basis of informed hypotheses and meaningful research and can assist clinicians in their understanding and integration of theory and fact in their interventions.*

Introduction

Internet sexuality is a ‘hot topic’ clinically and is in the early stages of developing a research base. Most research starts with a literature review. Such a perspective is also helpful to clinicians. Informed observers realize that the Internet itself is expanding almost without precedent. With the advent of the new century, the milestone of 1 billion web pages was reported (Inktomi, 2000). Less than 3 years later, a major search engine now examines over 3 billion web pages (Google, 2003). Whereas the field is literally exploding with books, a number of important articles existed prior to 2001. This paper reviews the early writings about the Internet and sexual activity from 1983 to 2002.

Early stage

Although the Internet was originally developed by the US Department of Defense as a communications tool in the event of a nuclear disaster, it quickly expanded into the academic arena. When the World Wide Web became established in 1983, it was not long before commentaries on sex and love on the Internet began to appear in the popular press as did warnings about child pornography (Van Gelder, 1985). Ten years later, in the early 1990s, there was speculation about whether the Internet was good or bad, a blessing or a curse, harmless or malevolent. Issues such as

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masturbation (Butterworth, 1993), misrepresenting one's sexual identity, and the vulnerability of children were discussed (Branwyn, 1993).

Psychological literature did not begin to appear in earnest until the mid-1990s. As with most emerging psychological phenomena, the initial reports appeared in presentations at national conferences. For instance, at the annual conference of the National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity in 1994, 'Rip' and Deborah Corley referred to online pornography as the 'crack cocaine of sex addiction'. In 1995, articles appeared that discussed the use of the Internet in relation to deviant sexual behaviour (Durkin & Bryant, 1995), sexual harassment (McGraw, 1995), and pornography (Rimm, 1995). The latter study was quickly critiqued online as conceptually, methodologically, and ethically flawed (Hoffman & Novak, 1995). A fairly well known book on the psychology of the Internet was written by Sherry Turkel (1995), *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*; a less popular book focused on sex and the net, *Net.Sex* (Tamosaitis, 1995); and an article appeared in an online magazine on Internet culture titled 'Tinysex is safe sex' (Benedickt, 1995).

Early research

In 1996, a small study was published identifying Internet sexual activity as addictive (Bingham & Piotrowski, 1996). Six patients in an out-patient sex offender programme were described as having inadequate social skills, obsessions with bondage fantasies, and online love affairs. Dr. Kimberly Young (1996) identified 'cybersex addiction' as a subtype of Internet addiction. Adams (1996) discussed changes in pornography online and Hapgood (1996) examined commercial aspects of net sexuality.

In the same year, a popular book was published, *Online Friendships, Chat Rooms, and Cybersex: Your Guide to Affairs of the Net* (Adamse & Motta, 1996), suggesting that sexual activity and romantic interactions were prevalent on the Internet. Another book explored sex on the net, *A Sexual Odyssey: From Forbidden Fruit to Cybersex* (Maxwell, 1996).

An online article appeared about pornography available on Usenet/newsgroups, raising legal and political questions about whether the freedom and anonymity available on the Internet was a problem (Bilstad & Godward, 1996). Other online material addressed 'cyberorgasms' (Hamman, 1996), 'the virtual body' (McRae, 1996), 'nattering' related to women, power, and cyberspace (Spender, 1996), and harassment (Spertus, 1996).

Journal special edition

Soon, the trickle became a sizable flow. In fact, in 1997, a professional journal, the *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, dedicated a special edition to sex and relationships on the Internet. Editor Dr. Al Cooper (1997) of Stanford introduced the edition and Dr. Sandra Leiblum (1997) proposed that a continuum of sexual and relational activities exists on the net ranging from curiosity to obsession. Although the journal did not report research results, theoretical and clinical issues and insights were addressed pertaining to online areas such as romance (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997), intimacy (Schnarch, 1997), infidelity (Shaw, 1997), paraphilias (Kim & Bailey, 1997), ego-

dystonic sexual interests (Newman, 1997), gender identity (Weinrick, 1997), and sexual education (Gotlib & Fagan, 1997). International perspectives were reported (Barak & Safir, 1997; Luni *et al.*, 1997) and ethical concerns identified (Plant, 1997).

Continuing the theoretical development of the psychology of the net and sexuality in another journal, Delmonico (1997) explained three basic forms of cybersex: (a) online pornography exchange, (b) real time sexual exchanges, and (c) multimedia software and connected these with four possible explanatory variables, that is, isolation, fantasy, anonymity, and low cost. He proposed research on 'cybersex addiction' and identified online recovery resources. Putnam (1997) established an online education centre and support group as www.onlinesexaddict.org that included the Online Sexual Addiction-Questionnaire (O.S.A.-Q) for self-assessment.

Bargainner (1997) speculated on the future of sexuality on the net for *The International Encyclopedia of Sexuality*. Research studies explored the content of pornographic images in newsgroups (Mehta & Plaza, 1997), sexual orientation (Sell, 1997), and the effects of online erotica on men's attitudes and behaviour towards women (Barak & Fisher, 1997). The former found that commercial websites were more likely to post explicit sexual material in newsgroups to attract new customers and the latter found no direct, negative impact of exposure to online sexual material on men's attitudes and behaviour towards women. Durkin (1997) identified the 'misuse of the Internet by paedophiles' as an emerging legal problem. Roffman *et al.* (1997) suggested the net had 'possibilities, prospects, and challenges' for adolescent sexual education. Shpritz (1997) elaborated the latter idea with a case report of an adolescent seeking sexual information on the Internet. Meanwhile, popular books, such as *Virtual Spaces: Sex and the Cybercitizen* (Odzer, 1997) and *The Women's Guide to Sex on the Web* (Seamons & Winks, 1999), continued to appear.

Interest in the Internet, its psychology, and its relationship with sexuality continued to flow. *Caught in the Net* (Young, 1998a) included online sexual pursuits as a subset of Internet addiction and a questionnaire on cybersex addiction was made available on Dr. Young's netaddiction website (Young, 1998b). Dr. Weiss (1998) developed a 'cybersex addiction screening test' which was made available online. *Psychology and the Internet* (Gackenbach, 1998) included chapters on gender differences (Morahan-Martin, 1998), the psychology of sex (Noonan, 1998), and disinhibition (Joinson, 1998). Books for the general public on Internet sexuality such as *The Joy of Cybersex: A Guide for Creative Lovers* (Levine, 1998) and *Online Seductions: Falling in Love With Strangers on the Internet* (Gwinell, 1998) came into print. Professional articles explored the value of the Internet for sex education and counselling (Acevedo *et al.*, 1998; Graugaard & Winther, 1998; Harry & Snobl, 1998), developing online, virtual communities for sexual minorities (Koch & Schockman, 1998), and how 'coming out' in cyberspace is 'demarginalizing' (McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

Cooper (1998a) indicated positive benefits to the Net in terms of promoting social contacts that de-emphasized distance and physical attractiveness, tending to increase and speed up self-disclosure, emphasizing good communication techniques (written words, reciprocal interactions), reducing isolation, connecting disenfranchised minorities, promoting virtual communities, and providing easy access to sexual information.

The 'dark side' of the Internet came under greater scrutiny. Durkin and Bryant (1998) examined the online writings of paedophiles who were apparently attempting to

justify their offending behaviour. Delmonico *et al.* (1998) included the three types of cybersex in their article on assessing sexual addiction. Professionals expressed fears about censorship (Portelli & Meade, 1998) and negative consequences to online sexual activities (Cooper, 1998b).

To account for Internet sexuality's dramatic growth, Dr. Cooper (1998b) hypothesized that the power of the net was driven by the 'Triple "A" Engine' of accessibility (any time, any where), affordability (as inexpensive as a local phone call), and anonymity (the perception that your identity is hidden).

Scientific data appears

A major leap forward in the scientific study of Internet sexuality came with the publication to two large online studies (Cooper *et al.*, 1999b; Greenfield, 1999a). Cooper *et al.* (1999b) conducted a sex survey during March and April, 1998, at the MSNBC website that included 9,265 respondents. The first major conclusion was that the vast majority of participants used pornography, sex chat, and other sexual activities as 'casual recreation'. The authors reported that 91.7% spent less than 11 hours per week on sexual activities and 46.6% did these activities less than 1 hour per week. In addition, 84% of men and 80% of women were satisfied with their online activity, and 87% never felt guilty or ashamed of it. The second significant finding was that 17% were 'at risk' for problems with their online sexual activities and 8% used online sex compulsively, that is, being online more than 11 hours per week and resulting in distress and interference with their lives. A third result was that men prefer visual stimuli (49.9% vs. 22.6% of women) whereas women prefer relational activities like sexual chat (48.6% vs. 22.8% of men). Of course, the other major effect of this research was moving our understanding of online sexual activities from the theoretical to the practical realm of objective data.

In the Autumn of 1998, Dr. Greenfield (1999a) obtained 17,251 responses to the Virtual Addiction Survey posted on the ABCNEWS website. He found that 6% of his subjects were Internet addicted. Among this Net addicted population, 62% (4% of the overall study) used pornography an average of 4 hours per week and 37% (2% overall) masturbated while online. Dr. Greenfield found 'a high correlation between on-line cybersex and subsequent real-time sexual behaviour. In addition, there was evidence to support the existence of disinhibition, accelerated intimacy, dissociation (timelessness), and what seems to be a unique on-line sexual behaviour pattern' (p. 410). In addition, he reported that 20% of the Internet addicts also admitted to being sexually addicted. In the same year, Dr. Greenfield (1999b) published *Virtual Addiction: Help for Netheads, Cyberfreaks, and Those Who Love Them*. In another piece of research, Barak *et al.* (1999), reporting on two studies, found that differential or substantial exposure to Net pornography did not impact men's attitudes towards women.

Another journal special edition

In addition to the above articles, a special issue, guest edited by Dr. Kimberly Young, of *CyberPsychology and Behavior* was devoted to Internet Addiction and included an article

by Delmonico & Carnes (1999) on 'virtual sex addiction'. Noting the emerging overlap between real-life sex addiction and online cybersex, the authors presented case studies and called for research. To facilitate the scientific study of online sexual behaviours, they included an 'Internet Sex Screening Test' (ISST) for cybersex addiction (Delmonico, 1999). Dr. Carnes indicated that 65% of his clients who scored high on his Sexual Addiction Screening Test (SAST) had problems with Internet sexual activity. Cooper *et al.* (1999a) elaborated on the MSNBC study (Cooper *et al.*, 1999b) by providing case examples of 'recreational', 'at risk', and 'compulsive' users of online sexual activity along with suggestions on assessment, treatment, resources, relapse prevention, and comorbid disorders.

On a more theoretical level, Cooper *et al.* (1999) identified sex and the Internet as 'the next sexual revolution' in a book on the scientific science of sexuality. The authors presented the 'Triple "A" Engine', commercial, positive, and negative aspects of online sexuality, recreational, at risk, and compulsive users, and romantic relationships on the Net. In their discussion of implications for mental health professionals, they identified a depressive type and a stress reactive type of 'at risk' user. In addition, they presented information and suggestions about online treatment, online sexuality research, ethical considerations, and speculations about the future. In a similar vein, King (1999) reflected on online experiences with gambling and pornography and called for more research. He also suggested that the Internet will require more individual responsibility for coping with dangerous situations online and that government will be able to protect consumers in the virtual environment. Binik *et al.* (1999) addressed ethical issues involved in online research on sexuality.

In the same year, Greenfield (1999a) reported on a study of 224 mid-sized businesses. He indicated that a number of problem behaviours were found relating to Internet activity. In these businesses, there were difficulties with the use of pornography (21%), inappropriate e-mail (19%), and shopping and gambling online during work hours. Of these firms, 60% reported disciplining employees for Internet behaviour and 30% had fired employees for their Internet behaviour. In addition, 83% had policies regarding Internet use but only 10% trained managers on how to deal with these problems. Finally, 83% of managers had written up employees for Internet behaviour, 57% were concerned about this problem, and 37% had monitoring software. Criminal activity on the Net was discussed by Deirmenjian (1999) in terms of stalking behaviours. Roberts and Parks (1999) examined 'gender switching' online.

Additional special editions of journals

The advent of the new millennium found two professional journals devoting special editions to sexuality on the Internet, a double edition of *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention* and *CyberPsychology and Behavior's* 'The Internet and Sexuality'. Cooper (2000) collected major contributors in the Internet and the sexual addiction communities to describe and discuss online sexual compulsivity (Cooper *et al.*, 2000): a qualitative study of cybersex participants

(Schneider, 2000a), cybersex effects on the family (Schneider, 2000b), online infidelity (Young *et al.*, 2000), children and teens online (Freeman-Longo, 2000), Web resources and behavioural telehealth treatment (Putnam & Maheu, 2000), treating virtual sex like other sex addictions (Orzack & Ross, 2000), and anonymous, fantasy online sex as dissociative reenactment (Schwartz & Southern, 2000).

The first article in the *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* special edition reported on a large scale study by Cooper *et al.* (2000). They found that 1% ($n=96$) of the survey respondents were 'cybersex addicts'. The classification of cybersex addiction was based on respondents spending 11 hours per week or more on sexual activity and obtaining a score two standard deviations above the mean on Kalichman's Sexual Compulsivity Scale. Women and homosexuals and bisexuals were somewhat over-represented in this small subset.

Schneider (2000a) reported on her 1999 survey of the effects of cybersex addiction on the family. This smaller sample of mostly women who identified their male partners as addicted to cybersex ($n=91$ women, 3 men) found 60.6% reporting that the problem activity was limited to cybersex, not offline sex. In this group, 31% reported that cybersex was a continuation of pre-existing sexual addiction. These partners indicated that they felt 'hurt, betrayal, rejection, abandonment, devastation, loneliness, shame, isolation, humiliation, jealousy, and anger as well as loss of self-esteem' (p. 38). However, only 22% were separated or divorced which suggested that the majority of these partners stayed with their cybersex addicted partners. The reported adverse effects on children include exposure to porn and objectification of women, involvement in parental conflicts, lack of attention, and separation and divorce.

Barak and King (2000), as editors of *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, took a broader view of Internet sexuality and brought together experts who examined both positive and negative aspects of online sexuality. Cooper *et al.* (2000) provided an overview. Griffiths (2000) reviewed the brief research, discussed pornography, examined children online, summarized online relationships, and described sex related Internet crime. Putnam (2000) articulated his views on and experience of online sex addiction with special emphasis on classical and operant conditioning as it applies to online sexual behaviour. Levine (2000) looked at online flirting and elaborated on how attraction occurs in cyberspace. Fisher and Barak (2000) summarized their experiences searching for sexual information online and described all that is available without much effort. S. K. Burke (2000) interpreted the results of their content analysis of online lesbian personal ads as indicating that two-thirds are seeking a meaningful relationship.

Likewise, Tikkanen and Ross (2000) described their findings from research on men seeking sex with men and commented that it is common for online contacts to become face-to-face sexual encounters. Ochs and Binik (2000) suggested that the Internet may be the appropriate environment for their sexual diagnostic and treatment system. Finally, Palandri and Green (2000) reported on their ethnographic study of the online bondage, discipline, sadomasochistic subculture which suggested that such online sexual activity may be freeing and helpful in terms of identifying and enacting parts of the person that would otherwise never have surfaced.

Other literature in 2000

Goodson *et al.* (2000a) described the development of a survey instrument, which was included in their article, to measure college students' online sexual and relational activities. They identified three main scales (with two subscales each): (a) seeking sexual information online; (b) establishing and maintaining relationships online; and (c) engaging in sexual gratification online. Their research indicated that 'frequent users differ significantly from infrequent users on their attitudes towards information seeking and towards sexual entertainment/arousal [stronger interest in both among frequent users]' (p. 139). In another article, Goodson *et al.* (2000b) reported on 'students' emotional arousal when viewing sexually explicit materials on-line'.

Professional articles examined special populations and issues in more depth. Adolescent online sexual education was reviewed by Flower-Coulson *et al.* (2000) who expressed concern as to whether teens were accessing the information that was available. Egan (2000) reported on a gay teen coming out and finding himself online. Zillman (2000) considered the effects of 'unrestrained access' to erotica on adolescents and young adults.

Romantic relationships online received increasing scrutiny including 'digital dating' (Merkle & Richardson, 2000), 'getting together and connecting' (Baker, 2000), and cyber affairs (Maheu, 2000).

Gender issues came into play from differing angles as authors commented on gender differences online (Sussman & Tyson, 2000), the victimization of women (Cunneen & Stubbs, 2000) as well as their liberation and empowerment (Doring, 2000; Morahan-Martin, 2000). Two sub-groups of women were highlighted, that is, lesbian fans and women's sports (Plymire & Forman, 2000) and pornography entrepreneurs (Podlas, 2000) reflecting the themes of liberation and empowerment especially for sexual minorities. Men were focused on in terms of new health risks created by the net (Bull & McFarlane, 2000; McFarlane *et al.*, 2000; Toomey & Rothenberg, 2000), especially for men having sex with men (Ross *et al.*, 2000). Klausner *et al.* (2000) reported on a syphilis outbreak traced to online contacts among gay men.

Child pornography was addressed from the social science perspective by McCabe (2000) and the symbolic interaction of net sex was discussed by Waskul *et al.* (2000). Resources for help with cybersex addiction expanded with an information statement from the National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity (NCSAC, 2000) and identification of web links (Sexual Addiction Recovery Resources, 2000).

Finally in 2001, books

Eventually, the river of information of sexuality and the Internet became a flood; special volumes of professional journals gave way to books about online sexual activities and dangers. These included: Schneider and Weiss' (2001) *Cybersex Exposed: Simple Fantasy or Obsession*; Carnes *et al.* (2001) *In the Shadows of the Net: Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Behavior*; Griffin *et al.* (2001) *Cybersex Unhooked: A Workbook for Breaking Free of Compulsive Online Sexual Behavior*; Young's (2001) *Tangled in the Web: Understanding Cybersex from Fantasy to Addiction*; and Maheu and Subotnik's (2001) *Infidelity on the Internet*.

2001, Articles

As the titles of the books published in 2001 indicate, much of the attention was on problematic Net sexuality. However, authors continued to explore the Net as a medium for sexual education (Barak & Fisher, 2001; Bay-Cheng, 2001) including special focus on women with disabilities (Pendergrass *et al.*, 2001), and families (Family Life Matters, 2001). Others addressed the Internet as a research environment highlighting the limited data (Binik, 2001), methodological concerns (Cooper *et al.*, 2001), collecting valid data (Mustanski, 2001), and availability of resources (Noonan, 2001). Adolescents (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001) and college students (Goodson *et al.*, 2001) received particular interest as researchers sought to explore the impact of Internet sexuality and the potential risks for these subgroups. Mehta (2001) reported on a content analysis of almost 10,000 pornographic images. Appelby (2001) used the Net to interview working class gay men.

The discovery of the Internet as a possible risk environment for STD/HIV continued to be expanded upon by a number of authors (Rietmeijer *et al.*, 2001). Following their 2000 article on risky Net sex, Bull *et al.* (2001) reviewed 'barriers to STD/HIV prevention'. Of particular concern were men seeking sex with men online (Bull *et al.*, 2001), Swedish men (Tikkanen & Ross, 2001), and gay men in London gyms (Elford *et al.*, 2001). Reeves (2001) wrote about 'how individuals with HIV/AIDS use the net'.

Cooper and McLoughlin (2001), Greenfield (2001), and Leiblum (2001) encouraged clinicians to be aware of Internet sexuality and its positives and negatives. Carnes (2001) addressed factors in addictive sexual desire including cybersex, courtship, and arousal. The US Department of Justice (2001) issued a report on cyberstalking as a new challenge for law enforcement and industry.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, Gabbard (2001) focused on transference issues whereas McKenna (2001) examined 'demarginalizing the sexual self'. Romantic relationships, especially the problem of misrepresentation, was the topic of Cornwell and Lundgren (2001). Seiden (2001) highlighted online romance with a 'net love story'. Finally, Mantovani (2001) examined 'strategic communication' in online relationships.

At 20 years, literature in the year 2002

Unlike previous texts which focused on online sexual problems, Dr. Al Cooper (2002) brought together an international group of experts to contribute to *Sex and the Internet: A Guidebook for Clinicians*. After highlighting the role of the Internet in the next sexual revolution (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002), Cooper established three main topic areas: populations of concern, online sexual problems, and areas of special interest. As they had in earlier articles, authors addressed the role of women (Leiblum & Döring, 2002), men who have sex with men (Ross & Kauth, 2002), disabilities and chronic illnesses (Tepper & Owens, 2002), and children and adolescents (Longo *et al.*, 2002).

When online sexual activity becomes problematic, it can impact the workplace (Cooper *et al.*, 2002) and requires special assessment skills (Greenfield & Orzack, 2002). More serious online problems that become sexually compulsive require specialized counselling (Delmonico *et al.*, 2002) and impact spouses and families

(Schneider, 2002). In addition, the online world presents difficulties as well as opportunities for people suffering from paraphilias (Galbreath *et al.*, 2002).

Cyberspace presents a new arena to improve sexual relationships (Cooper *et al.*, 2002), but also requires discussion and understanding in terms of ethics and regulation (Plaut & Donahey, 2002). The Internet offers new challenges and vistas for research into human sexual functioning (Ochs *et al.*, 2002). And, it is exciting but difficult to envision all of what the future may hold (Barak & Fisher, 2002).

Other articles in 2002

Education, and, more so, prevention continue to appear in the literature on sex and the Internet. Millner and Kiser (2002) identified Net resources for sexual information, and Kalichman, *et al.* (2002b) described how HIV/AIDS patients use the Net for health information. A particular focus of prevention work continues to be men who have sex with men (Benotsch *et al.*, 2002) and chat rooms (Hospers *et al.*, 2002). In addition to studying their use of a sexual health advice centre online (Hagley *et al.*, 2002), adolescents were the topic of STD/HIV prevention efforts (Keller *et al.*, 2002). McFarlane *et al.* (2002) continued to write about risk behaviours for STD/HIV online, this time with the population of young adults.

Researchers addressed a number of areas regarding online sexual activities including demographic information (Cooper *et al.*, 2002), men's personal ads (Phua, 2002), rape site content (Gossett & Byrne, 2002), lesbian clients in treatment with feminist therapists (Quartaro & Spier, 2002), sexual preference (Renaud *et al.*, 2002), and Net use by HIV/AIDS patients (Kalichman *et al.*, 2002a). Rhodes *et al.* (2002) compared a Net sample with a convenience sample of men who have sex with men and Wang and Ross (2002) compared Chinese men who have sex with men on chatroom and email sampling approaches.

Online sexual problems continued to get attention, especially the risks associated with Viagra (Solomon *et al.*, 2002). OSP at work and effective responses by human resource and employee assistance professionals were covered by Cooper *et al.* (2002). Delmonico (2002) wrote a chapter on cybersex addiction. Burke *et al.* (2002) tackled policing and treatment issues related to child pornography. Biber *et al.* (2002) examined gender and medium elements of sexual harassment online. McGarth and Casey (2002) presented forensic perspectives on online predators and 'obsessive harassers'. Waskul (2002) undertook 'being a body in televideo cybersex' for *Symbolic Interaction*. Spink *et al.* (2002) identified a trend 'from e-sex to e-commerce'.

Conclusion

Reviewing literature for some may seem like an arduous task, but it sets the stage for productive research and clinical work. Obviously, the Internet is becoming more and more a part of our culture. As most of the authors quoted above have noted, sexuality is an important aspect of Internet activity. Familiarity with theoretical constructs as well as empirically determined data on cybersex from this early era will inform clinical decision making and research hypotheses in future endeavours.

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