PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS' ACRONYMS

Reham M. Khalifa
University of Port Said, Egypt

ABSTRACT: *Social networks have a growing presence in modern communication. They have their own remarkable features. Online communication led to the development of English language acronyms which are considered a common feature in social networks. The present study aims at exploring the most frequently used acronyms in social network communications and the pragmatic functions of these acronyms. A questionnaire was conducted to elicit the acronyms and their usage from the participants' point of view. To validate the results, a thousand-line corpus of social network utterances was created and analyzed using text analysis software. The results indicated that there are about 30 acronym which are used in different situations by social network users.*

KEYWORDS: pragmatic functions, Acronyms, Social networks

INTRODUCTION

The advent of social networks has been one of the most exciting events in the last two decades. Social network sites have grown rapidly in recent years across the world. These sites have quickly and deeply penetrated its users' everyday lives because of the increasing proliferation and affordability of internet enabled devices such as personal computers, mobile devices and other more recent hardware innovations such as internet tablets (Aggarwal, 2011 & Narasimhamurthy, 2014). Social networks offer new and innovative ways to communicate with others in a quick and easy manner. Consequently, individuals are using social media websites at increasing rates and visiting them quite frequently (Sponcil & Gitimu, 2013).

The language used online is that of real people of great diversity, whose output is largely unedited by proofreaders or publishers. Therefore, grammar and spelling become problematic in online communication (Nazaryan and Gridchin, 2006). Tagliamonte and Denis (2008) suggest that this phenomenon simply represents contemporary slang, Crystal (2001:17-24) goes further to suggest that Netspeak, online language, is not a linguists vandalism but is best viewed as a new species of interaction, a genuine "third medium" (besides the written and oral forms of English), which is evolving its own systematic rules to suit new circumstances.

Hamzah, Ghorbani and Abdullah (2009) emphasized the idea that Language is not deteriorating by the use of electronic communication. They studied the linguistic features of e-mails and short messages. Their results suggested that language use is adapted creatively to the particular needs of the electronic communicators to reduce time, space and effort. Hamzah, Ghorbani and Abdullah pointed out a number of linguistic features and strategies such as abbreviations, spoken-like spelling, less attention to punctuation and capitalization, as well as syntactical and lexical reductions.

Varnhagen et al (2010) analyzed the written communication in electronic messages and they referred to the extensive use of acronyms and abbreviations in online messaging. AbuSa'aleek (2013) pointed out that the English vocabulary has changed due to the influence of acronyms used in electronic communication. The emergence of numerous acronyms shows the creativity and insight of participants in electronic communication who use these acronyms to express their ideas and insights.

Nazaryan and Gridchin (2006) emphasized that online communication is rich in acronyms and symbols to reduce time and effort used for communication. Nazaryan and Gridchin concluded that linguistics should study NetLingua because one must know where and when to use it. Howe et al (2010) referred to the importance of common understanding of the shared context. They found out that shared context-awareness is a key foundation for successful and effective communication. So, the current research aims at studying the pragmatic functions of the most frequently used acronyms in social networks. This will help the users of social networks avoid communication failure. Social networks are defined within this research as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Examples of thee networks include LinkedIn, Facebook, Cyworld, Reddit, Ask and Twitter (Barbulet, 2013).

Purpose of the research
This research is an attempt to answer the following questions:
-         What are the acronyms used in social media communications?
-         How frequent are these acronyms in social media communications?
-         What are the pragmatic functions of these acronyms?

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected through a questionnaire (figure 1) directed at a random sample of social network users to get the most commonly used acronyms and the context in which these acronyms are used.The questionnaire has three open-ended questions; "What are the acronyms that you usually use in your social network comments, posts, tweets, and chats?", "What is the reference of the acronym?" and "when do you use the acronym?" Open-ended questions are used to give the participants the freedom to write the acronyms that come to their minds through their experience in social network messaging. Also, open ended questions lead to deep response that help in analyzing the situations in which the acronyms are used (Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec & Vehovar, 2003).

The questionnaire included a closed question; "How often do you use the acronym?", to get specific responses about the frequency of using the acronyms (Krosnick & Presser, 2010). A three-level scale is used to determine the frequency of using the acronyms from the view of the participants. The scale ranges from frequently to rarely, passing through "to some extent".

	How often do you use the acronym?			What is the reference of the acronym?	When do you use the acronym?
	Frequently	**To some extent**	**rarely**		
What are the acronyms that you usually use in your social network comments, posts, tweets, and chats? 1. ………………… … 2. ………………… … 3. ………………… … 4. ………………… … 5. ………………… …					

Figure 1.Questionnaire directed to the users of social networks

The questionnaire was sent electronically to 300 users of Facebook, twitter, Instagram, Reddit and Ask. These networks are considered the most commonly used platforms because they are free and easy to sign up (Ahn, 2011 & Boyd & Ellison, 2007). This sample was chosen randomly and it included users from different cultures. Only 165 responded to the questionnaire and sent it back.Then, to validate the results of the questionnaire, a corpus of about 1000 lines (12 000 words) was collected from chats, comments, tweets, questions and posts of social networks. This corpus was analyzed to find out the pragmatic functions of each acronym. A text analysis software, Maxqda 11 was used to find out the frequency of using the acronyms in social network communications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After sending the questionnaire electronically to social network users, the participants reported 30 acronyms. Table (1) indicates the acronyms, sums, means and the frequencies of using the acronyms from the perspectives of the users of social media.

Table 1: Acronyms used by the users of social media

No.	Acronym	Sum	Mean	No. of participants				No.	Acronym	sum	Mean	No. of participants			
				3	2	1	0					3	2	1	0
1	LOL	321	1.94	58	53	41	13	16	BTW	247	1.50	31	59	36	39
2	BC	308	1.86	54	57	32	22	17	RN	247	1.50	35	49	44	33
3	BFF	283	1.72	35	65	48	17	18	FYI	244	1.48	34	46	50	35
4	AFAIK	270	1.63	37	54	51	23	19	HBD	242	1.47	37	45	41	42
5	BFN	266	1.61	32	70	30	33	20	IMO	241	1.46	25	56	54	30
6	TY	265	1.61	42	48	43	32	21	IG	240	1.45	26	57	48	34
7	TBH	264	1.60	31	57	57	20	22	IDK	238	1.44	30	46	56	33
8	OMG	263	1.59	39	49	48	29	23	BRB	237	1.44	37	38	50	40
9	Ur	261	1.58	28	64	49	24	24	AMA	223	1.35	16	60	55	34
10	ZZZZ	257	1.55	31	58	48	28	25	TYT	216	1.31	3	73	61	28
11	NVM	256	1.55	27	61	53	24	26	TTYS	212	1.28	20	51	50	44
12	JK	255	1.54	29	61	46	29	27	HAK	17	0.10	2	4	3	156
13	IDC	254	1.53	31	60	41	33	28	IRL	16	0.10	0	7	2	156
14	TTYL	252	1.52	36	54	36	39	29	HW	11	0.07	0	5	1	160
15	YW	250	1.50	31	52	53	29	30	CTN	8	0.05	1	2	1	161

The acronyms reported by all of the participants are put together. When an acronym is not used by a participant, it is graded "0". So the responses are graded from 0 to 3. The results indicated that about 26 of the acronyms are used by most of the participants (321>sum>212, 1.94> Mean >1.28). However, there are 4 acronyms; HAK, IRL, HW and CTN, that are used by a small number of the participants (sum <20, Mean<0.15). The most frequently used acronyms are: LOL, BC, BFF,GB, AFAIK,BFN, TY,TBH, OMG, Ur, ZZZZ, NVM, JK, IDC, TMI, TTYL, YW, BTW, RN, FYI, HBD, IMO, IG, IDK, BRB, AMA, TYT, and TTYS. Based on the sum and means, Acronyms are arranged in table (1) in a descending order.

A corpus of about 1000 random utterances of social networks; Twitter, Instagram, Reddit and ASK, was created. Maxqda 11 software was used to analyze the **s**ocial **n**etwork **c**orpus (SNC). This software makes it easy to explore the vocabulary used in a text as well as to find out which words can be found in which texts or text passages. It helps also make the differences between the vocabularies of the various texts within one project visible. Then the SCN was analyzed. Table (2) presents the frequencies and percentages of use for each acronym.

Table 2. Percentages and occurrence of acronyms based on MAXQDA text analysis

NO	Acronym	Times of occurrence	Percentage	NO	Acronym	Times of occurrence	Percentage
1	UR	50	0.41	17	NVM	28	0.23
2	BC	48	0.39	18	YW	28	0.23
3	LOL	44	0.34	19	IG	26	0.21
4	IRL	44	0.34	20	TTYL	25	0.20
5	BRB	42	0.34	21	ZZZZ	24	0.19
6	IDC	36	0.29	22	JK	23	0.18
7	IMO	36	0.29	23	TBH	20	0.16
8	AFAIK	35	0.28	24	OMG	20	0.16
9	IDK	34	0.27	25	FYI	19	0.15
10	TY	33	0.26	26	AMA	17	0.14
11	BTW	31	0.25	27	NA	17	0.14
12	RN	31	0.25	28	TYT	15	0.12
13	HW	31	0.25	29	BFN	13	0.10
14	BFF	29	0.24	30	HAK	11	0.08
15	HBD	29	0.24	31	CTN	5	0.02
16	TTYS	29	0.24				

Text analysis results revealed that acronyms are used in the SNC with a ratio of 40.9% of the total corpus. The results are discussed in the following.

The acronym "LOL" occurred about 44 times in the SNC, with a percentage of 0.34%. LOL can be used to mean "laugh out loud" and it could be written as Lol, Lolol, LoooL or Lolololol. LOL is mostly used in Facebook and twitter. Markman (2015) found out that LOL is used by females more than males. O'Neil, (2010) and Varnhagen et al (2010) outlined that LOL can be used to express happiness or a desire to share with someone his/her happy feelings [EX1]. In this case LOL is considered a textual onomatopoeia or a soundless representation of a paralinguistic cue. Also, it can be used to mean lack of laughter or fake laughter, to alleviate awkwardness, or when there is nothing valuable to contribute to the conversation [EX 2]. Furthermore, it can be used to ridicule or make fun of some comments, posts or tweets [EX3].

EX1 Person1 : LOL!! My birthday party is tonight
    Person 2: great

EX2 Person1 : Hi

    Person 2: Hey

    Person 1: umm..

    Person 2: LOL

EX3 Person 1: I got fired from my job today, and I'm probably gonna kill myself tonight

    Person 2: LOL

Results of the questionnaire indicated that LOL is the most frequently used acronym by the participants. However, the corpus analysis illustrated that LOL occupies the third position. This disagreement could be attributed to participants' awareness of the multiple meanings of this acronym. LOL is used in different situations and sometimes it is used to mean the involvement of the interlocutor, just as one might say mm-hm in the course of a conversation as in [EX 2] (Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008). Bc occurred 48 times in the SNC, with a percentage of 0.39%. It is used in social media communication to mean "because". It can be used at the beginning, middle or at the end of the sentence [EX 1]. When Bc is used in the negative form it is written as b/c [EX 2].

EX 1 - I'm so glad my hair looks good bc I'm in love with it honestly.

EX 2 - Not b/c they're Mexicans but bc they are masters of their craft.

BFF is used 29 times in the SNC with a percentage of 0.24%. BFF is a phrase that means "best friends forever". Users of social media use this acronym to describe a type of friendship which is characterized by intimacy and trust [EX 1, 2 & 3]. BFF is used as a noun.

EX1 - when the person who you hate talks to your Bff.

EX2 - When you don't even give blood but pass out anyway because your Bff does.

EX3 - HBD to my Bff.

The frequency of using "AFAIK" in the SNC is 38, with a percentage of 28%. AFAIK is an acronym which is used in most social networks to mean as far as I know, as far as known, or as far all I know. It is used when the speaker provides information about a specific idea and he/she is not sure that it is correct. "AFAIK" can be used at the beginning [EX 1] or at the end of the sentence [EX 2].

EX 1 - AFAIK the only medical expenses deduction is limited to uninsured out-of-pocket expenses over $10 or so.

EX 2 - They will reconsider this for sure. Number of fighters in Kobane wasn't the main issue, issue was weapons and ammo AFAIK.

BFN occurred 13 times in the SNC, with a percentage of 0.10%. It is used to mean "bye for now". It's used in most cases to end a conversation and it comes at the end of the sentence [EX 1]. However, it can be used as a noun and it is used to mean wait for some time [EX 2].

EX 1 - I shall start watching BFN

EX 2 - Person 1: How does this new electronic queue management system work?

    Person 2: I have been waiting for over 15 minutes in the BFN branch!

TY recurred 33 times in the SNC, i.e. 0.26%. TY is put for "thank you". It's used in Twitter more than in any other social network. It's mostly used to express thanking someone or some people [EX 1]. However, sometimes it's used an irony that everything is not in order because of someone, some people or something [EX 2].

EX 1 - TY my funny, sweet friend for the cup BFF.
EX 2 - my birthday was the worst ever, TY bad organizers.

TBH appeared 20 times in the SNC, with a percentage of 0.16%. TBH is used to mean "to be honest". It's mostly used in Facebook and twitter. The sender in social networks usually utilizes this acronym to flatter the addressee [EX 1]. It can be used to advise the addressee [EX 2]. Sometimes it is utilized to deliver negative opinion [EX 3].

EX 1 - TBH, you look nice and beautiful
EX 2 - TBH, you should eat healthier food.
EX 3 - I really don't think that dress looks good on you, TBH.

OMG appeared 20 times in the SNC, with a percentage of 0.16%. OMG is an old phrase that was used first on the 9th of September 1917 by Admiral John Arbuthnot to Winston Churchill. Admiral Arbuthnot wrote: […I hear that a new order of Knighthood is on the tapis — O.M.G (Oh! My! God!)— Shower it on the Admiralty!!] (Usher, 2014, letter No. 026, p. 76). It was used to express surprise and excitement. Nowadays, this acronym is used by the users of social media to express excitement [EX 1], surprise [EX 2], embarrassment [EX 3], or disgust [EX 4]

EX 1 - I finally met them OMG I love them,
EX 2 - OMG Ur just a good talk show guest
EX 3 - My hair is not in form today OMG
EX 4 - John's words have ill implications OMG I couldn't hear him.

Ur occurred 50 times in the SNC, with a proportion of 0.41%. Ur is the short form of "you're" or "your". Ur is not used in formal posts or tweets, but it indicates a close relationship between the interlocutors [EX 1]. Results of corpus analysis indicated that Ur is the most repeated acronym. Ur stands for a personal pronoun which is supposed to be excessively used because social networks are based on bilateral conversations which are built on addressing styles.
.
EX 1 - I loved Ur stealing money from me

ZZZZ is used 24 times in the SNC, with a proportion of 0.19%. ZZZZ is used to mean "sleepy" or "very tired". It's usually used in social networks to end conversations [EX 1]. It could be used to express tiredness [EX 2]. Also, it could be used to refer to "boredom" [EX 3].

EX 1 - I need to stop staying up so late ZZZZ
EX 2 - there really isn't enough coffee in my system right now zzzz.

EX 3 - nothing new with Ur words ZZZZ.

NVM was used 28 times in the SNC, with a ratio of 0.23%. NVM is an acronym which means "never mind". It is used s as a verb [EX 1], and as a noun [EX2]. It is usually used among close friends. NVM is used to mean "don't bother yourself" [EX 3] or "ignore it" [EX 4].

EX 1 - I can't NVM
EX 2 - I am NVM.
EX 3 - NVM, I found it you're in safe
EX 4 - please pass the salt, NVM, I'll get it myself.

JK was used 23 times in the SNC, with a ratio of 0.18%. JK means "Just kidding". It's used usually at the end of a sentence to make it completely void, therefore contributing nothing to the conversation [EX 1]. Using "JK" is considered a way of escaping from embarrassing conversations. Also, it can be used a type of apologizing for inconvenience in conversation. Sometimes, it is related to "hahah" [EX 2].

EX 1 - Liam is a person who asks questions and never replies or even talks about it anymore.. jk jk
EX 2 - I bet you understand nothing, hahaha JK.

IDC is reiterated 36 times in the SNC, with a percentage of 0.29%. IDC is a phrase which means "I don't care". It's used in social network communications to express the indifference of the speaker about a specific person, situation or words [EX 1]. IDC could be used to embitter the other partner in the conversation [EX 2].

EX 1 - Yes, I smoke and IDC if U don't like it.
EX 2 - whatever you wear IDC

TTYL was repeated 25 times in the SNC, with a proportion of 0.20%. TTYL is an acronym that stands for "talk to you later". It is used to end a conversation [EX 1]. It is commonly used when someone has a conversation with more than one person [EX 2].

EX 1 - Now I'm off to lunch, TTYL.
EX 2 - Off to the talk with my girlfriend, TTYL.

YW was repeated 28 times in the SNC, i.e. 0.23%. YW is an equivalent to "you're welcome". It's used in social media to express welcoming of someone in a conversation. It's usually used after TY [EX1]. Also, it can be used to express an offer to other people [EX 2].

EX 1 - speaker 1: TY for sharing
      Speaker 2: YW.
EX 2 - here you can get free gifts, YW.

Both BTW and RN are used 31 times in the SNC, with a percentage of 0.25%. BTW stands for "by the way". It is used to express an incident idea or action that comes to the mind within the course of the conversation [EX 1]. RN is the shortened form of "right now". It's used in social media communication between close friends to describe actions, feelings or desires at the moment of speaking [EX 2].

EX 1 - BTW, this is a cool job if you're in college/have a flexible work schedule.
EX 2 - I'm actually scared RN.

FYI is repeated 19 times in the SNC, with a proportion of 0.15%. FYI is a phrase which means "for your information". It's used to attract the attention of the reader to the importance of the following passage [EX 1].

EX 1 - FYI wearing athletic clothes doesn't make you athletic.

HBD was used 29 times in the SNC, with a ratio of 0.24%. HBD is a shortcut version of "happy birthday". It's usually used among friends on Facebook and twitter [EX 1].

EX 1 - HBD to my best friend Indy Mac!

IMO occurred 36 times in the SNC, with a ratio of 0.29%. IMO is a shortened form of "in my opinion". It's used to safeguard the speech from being taken as a fact. Also, it could be used to emphasize that these are the speaker's words not anyone else's [EX 1].

EX 1 - Idk about y'all but I think engagements are personal & there's no need to publicly announce it to your twitter followers IMO

IG was repeated 26 times in the SNC, with a ratio of 0.21%. IG is the short form of "instagram", a new form of communication where users can easily share their updates by taking photos and tweaking them using filters (Hu, Manikonda & Kombhampati, 2014). IG is used in social network communication as an invitation to see some photos on instagram [EX 1].
EX 1 - Niall's friend posted this photo on IG

IDK was used 34 in the SNC, with a percentage of 0.26%. IDK is a shorthand form of "I don't know". It's excessively used in social network communication to escape from a specific answer [EX 1] or when the speaker doesn't know something [EX 2].

EX 1 - IDK whether I love u or not
EX 2 - I hate it when Idk what to tweet.

BRB, TYT, and TTYS are acronyms which are used when the speaker wants to leave the conversation for some time without offending the interlocutors. BRB is used 42 times in the SNC, with a ratio of 0.34%. BRB stands for "be right back" [EX 1], while TYT, the short form of "Take your time", repeated 15 times in the SNC with a proportion of 0.12% [EX 2].

On the other hand TTYS, which was used 29 times in the SNC with a percentage of 0.24%, means "talk to you soon" [EX 3].
EX 1 - My mum has just woke up I'm gonna beg her for tickets brb,
EX 2 - TYT Community returns tonight at 8 PM!
EX 3 – Person 1: Happy Valentine's Day buddy.
 Person 2: Have a great weekend TTYS.

AMA was used 17 times in the SNC, with a ratio of 0.14%. AMA is the shortened form of "ask me anything". It is commonly used in Reddit and Ask. The users are mostly professors, promotional representatives, editors and etc [Ex 1].

EX 1 - 10 things we learnt from Edward Snowden's Reddit AMA.

IRL was repeated 44 times in the SNC, with a percentage of 0.34%. IRL is a phrase which is used to mean "in real life". However, the participants of the questionnaire indicated that their use of IRL is limited. This inconsistency might be related to the participants' feeling of the net world as their world because they spend a considerable portion of their daily life interacting through social media (Ahn, 2011). So, they think they do not need to refer to the real world. However, users of social networks use IRL unconsciously to differentiate between the incidents of the real life and of the net world. So, IRL is used among teenagers to stress that what they are talking about is in real life and not in the internet [EX 1].
EX 1 - I'm socially awkward IRL.

HW was iterated 31 times in the SNC with a proportion of 0.25%. HW stands for "homework" and it is used among students and teachers [EX 1]. However, in some few cases HW may stand for "how" [EX 2]. The results of the questionnaire indicated that HW is rarely used by the participants. However, the corpus analysis revealed that HW is used to a considerable extent (31 times). This could be attributed to the fact that most of the social network users are adolescents who are still in the studying ladder, therefore they use the acronym HW to discuss their homework together. Participants feel that it is rarely used because they usually discuss the homework while engaging in other activities online at the same time (Varnhagen et al, 2010)

EX 1 - thinking of all the HW have to do is annoying.
EX 2 - HW many children do u have?

NA is a phrase which is used in social network communication to mean "not available". It occurred 17 times in the SNC, with a ratio of 0.14%. This acronym is usually used with negative feelings; to say someone is not responding [EX 1] or some people are not carrying out their jobs [EX 2]. Also, it can be used to indicate the end of a love relationship [EX 3]. This may explain the absence of this acronym in the questionnaire. Participants do not find it preferable to use such an acronym.

EX 1 - 3 missed calls NA
EX 2 – We need an action not just your voice, Chowkidaari ur usually NA
EX 3 – In happy times Ur NA, our love should stop, I can't continue like that

Some acronyms are not widely used in social network communications such as HAK and CTN. These acronyms are confined to specific groups. For example, HAK, "hugs and kisses", repeated 11 times with a ratio of 0.11%. HAK is used at the end of loving couples' conversations [EX 1]. Furthermore, CTN, which means "can't talk now", was repeated 5 times in the SNC with a ratio of 0.08%. CTN is used by people having work while messaging on social networks [EX 2].

EX 1 - see you tomorrow HAK
EX 2 - CTN, I've a lot of work

CONCLUSION

The advent of social network communication has changed the way people speak and write English drastically. These electronic networks have allowed the users to conduct electronic communication in different styles that is formal and informal and use many types of electronic communication such chats, posts, tweets, comments and discussions. Electronic networks acronyms are one of the most remarkable features, which save time, space and energy. So, successful communication requires awareness of the pragmatic functions of the acronyms used in social network conversations

Taken together the findings of the questionnaire and SNC analysis permit us to make a number of observations. The analysis of about a thousand-line corpus revealed that acronyms occupy about 40% of the corpus text. So, acronyms are not a small part and should not be overlooked. This result coordinates with the results of AbuSa'aleek (2013) and Crystal (2001:84). However, this result contradicts the results of Tagliamonte and Denis (2008). They found that the use of acronyms and abbreviations is about 3% of their data and they attributed their results to the conservativeness of the students who participated in their study.

The results of the questionnaire revealed 30 acronyms which are used by the participants. Four of these acronyms; CTN, HW, IRL and HAK, are reported as infinitesimally used. The results of the corpus analysis underlined the occurrence of these acronyms but with a difference in the frequency of using some acronyms. For example, LOL is set by the participants at the top of the list of the most frequently used acronym, while Ur occupied the top of the list in the SNC. Also, HW is found to be rarely used by the participants, while it is used to a great extent in the SNC. Similarly, IRL occupied the fourth position in the SNC but it was shown to be limitedly used by the questionnaire participants. Furthermore, NA is an acronym which is found in the SNC, while it disappeared in the list stated by the participants.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The current research was an attempt to avoid miscommunication resulting from misinterpretation of acronyms used in social media. This research offered the interpretation and the pragmatic functions of the most famous acronyms used in social network communication.

The use of each of the specified acronyms may differ from one age group to another. Adults are different in their use of social networks from youth and teenagers. So, a fascinating future research project is to study the influence of the age on the use of each acronyms.

Also, gender influences the use of acronyms as found in the study of Markman (2015). However, she concentrated on only one acronym which is "LOL". Therefore, studying the gender differences in using each acronym could be an interesting field for further research.

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