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Catfish: The TV Show: A Rhetorical Criticism

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University of Mary Washington, May 2021

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Keywords: catfishing; social media; online dating; reality-television

Abstract

In this research paper I articulate three common themes and motives in the popular MTV show *Catfish: The TV Show*. By conducting a rhetorical criticism on the show, I employ the research question, “What are some emerging themes and motives demonstrated in different episodes of *Catfish*?” In this paper, I uncover themes which reveal anxieties about digital technology, human vulnerability, and the convention that ‘the reveal’ transcends reality TV and human connection. I work towards connecting these themes across three specific episodes of the show *Catfish* and I engage in how the online phenomena of ‘catfishing’ is still prevalent today in this developing digital age and uncover ways that audiences can be familiar with and recognize certain motives that catfishes might have so we can prevent being victims to these unfortunate situations.

Introduction

“According to a 2019 study, almost half of U.S. online users have met or know someone who has met a romantic partner via a dating website or app” (Tankovska, 2021). Advancements in technology and online media platforms provide users with a plethora of ways to communicate with others and create meaningful online relationships. By having these tools so accessible at the tips of your fingertips, it is extremely easy to communicate with others no matter where in the world they are. While there have been many success stories of building intimacy and relationships online through dating websites and other platforms, there is another side to online digital identities and relationships that can be harmful involving mistrust and not being honest with who you really are. Behind a screen you can be anyone you want to be and can utilize these online tools to create a whole other online personality to misguide others into believing they are

talking to and in relationships with someone that they are not. These instances of manipulating others online and lying about identities are examples of what is defined as ‘catfishing’.

Because of such advancements and measures online with apps and social media platforms, it has proven to be easy for users to disguise themselves and succeed in catfishing others. Technology is advancing all the time and making it easier for one to lie about their identity online and allow them to build a fake life that seems real to an individual looking in. Examples of this include having access to others' public social media accounts and stealing photos of said individuals to use as their own and creating these alibis making it seem real and legitimate. In the same way that technology is making it easier for catfishes to deceive others, these technological advancements are allowing online users to express vulnerability online and become hopeful in finding love and creating these intimate relationships. Because these relationships are facilitated digitally you do not know who you are actually communicating with or who could be on the other side of the screen masking themselves for a variety of possible reasons. It might seem playful to catfish someone but it can be harmful and cause a lot of damage whether it be ruining one’s identity and persona, causing financial damage, or breaking up relationships, both online and in real life.

Preview

In this research paper, I first explore literature on digital phenomena that analyze technophobia, the beginnings of online relationships, distrust on the internet, and the introduction of the idea of catfishing. These literature review sources lay a foundation for the research that I uncover in this paper. I then define the term ‘catfishing’ and share the origin of the word with examples to better understand this concept. Next, I introduce my artifact and share my research question which points to my method of rhetorical criticism. I explore findings based on my

artifact and these findings reveal themes that are shared in this paper. Finally, I participate in a thoughtful discussion and answer questions regarding why this topic is important to study, especially as students of communication and viewers of reality TV shows that include aspects that are explored within this research.

Literature Review

Technophobia

Technology is advancing more and more and to some it may feel as if technology is taking over and that these improvements are not all positive. Ryan & Kellner (1990, p. 1) argue, “Science fiction films concerning fear of machines or of technology usually negatively affirm such social values as freedom, individualism, and the family.” Advancements and changes in technology can be viewed as symbols of modernity that represent change but this scholarly research suggests that films portray technology negatively which could impact one's feelings and opinions toward such changes. Ryan & Kellner (1990, p. 5) suggest, “It is a metaphor for a possibility of reconstruction that would put the stability of conservative social institutions in question.” This scholarly research on the idea of technophobia informs my research by sharing reasons why those are afraid of advancing technology and developments being made and how that is portrayed in filmmaking decisions. Due to the reconstruction that this article suggests, online users can feel understandable thoughts of vulnerability when putting themselves out there online which will be uncovered more throughout this paper.

Baym (2010, p. 23) states, “Most anxieties around both digital media and their historical precursors stem from the fact that these media are interactive.” Baym analyzes social cues, interactivity raises issues about authenticity of people, their interactions, and relationships that use new media. This scholarly research helps to shape anxieties that users may have with

technology and Baym (2010) mentions that these effects may be strongest because people do not fully understand the technology that they are using and instead of “using it”, these individuals are being “used by it.” By considering themes of domestication of technology, Baym (2010), identifies that earlier technologies have been domesticated and life without these technologies can become unimaginable. This research helps to support processes of new media and how these technological objects have been embedded into our daily lives and practices. This idea leads us to the beginning of relationships being created virtually.

Online Relationships Today

Communicating with one another online is a common way of life but it has not always been like that. Many digital advancements and improvements have made it easier to form online relationships and this idea of only knowing someone online is normal. Dating has arguably become easier because individuals do not need to go out to meet someone, they can do that digitally and meet using online platforms. These digital environments have been changing the way we interact with one another beginning with the early days of online chat rooms to the complex dating applications that we encounter today. Paska (2020) studies the implications of meeting potential partners online and takes a closer look at how online dating in the age of mobile applications is changing the field of intimate relationships, as well as noting the complexity of this phenomenon. In this research, Paska (2020, p. 2546) argues, “Dating applications have further contributed to the popularization of online meeting, making online dating less an exception and more a common channel of relationship formation.” This research adds to mine by helping define the use of online dating apps and how common they are in today’s digital age. Paska (2020) shares that before the age of digital media, romantic partners used to meet through personal social networks. This research analyzes the increase in

technological developments in recent years and this is reflected in the field of online dating with the switch from online websites to dating applications at the tip of your fingers on mobile platforms. Paska (2020) concludes that online dating apps are changing the way that romantic relationships are formed in the 21st century. There has been a lot of research on these particular topics and it is apparent that online dating is dominating how romantic relationships are formed. Many individuals do find true love online but many do not and they fall victim to internet distrust and online lies.

Internet Distrust

It is not uncommon for those to lie online about who they are on dating websites or social media. With so many recent digital advancements, it is easy to deceive others online and mask your true identity. With being vulnerable in putting yourself out there on such dating platforms you can easily be shot down by finding out who you are talking to and involved in a relationship with is not who they say they are. This can alter how users put themselves out there and perceive others on online platforms. Toma et al. (2008) focus on examining deceptive self-presentation in online dating profiles. In this research, a cross-validation technique for establishing accuracy was used and in this study eighty online daters rated the accuracy of their online self-presentation. Results indicated that participants reported being the least accurate about their photographs and the most accurate about their relationship information. Toma et al. (2008, p. 1) articulates, “In the absence of direct physical contact between daters, characteristics such as height and weight can be easily misrepresented, photographs manipulated, and status and income exaggerated.” Because it is so easy to manipulate such factors online, it is possible to create false identities and completely lie and deceive others. This research informs mine on the show *Catfish* because it begins to take a closer look at these online lies and why individuals are

not honest when engaging in online relationships. Online dating is vastly different from traditional in-person dating and users are able to take advantage of this and use these differences to get ahead. Toma et al. (2008) further explains this by sharing that the asynchronicity of computer mediated communication allows people to formulate their ideas and they can plan and edit their self-presentation, including deceptive elements. All of these factors affect users looking for online romance and create layers of deception and mistrust between the individuals.

Scholars have also considered dynamics of internet dating including motivation of daters, styles of courtship, and how they negotiated problems of trust and deception. Lawson & Leck (2006) employed in-depth interviews and participant observation with men and women who met one another online. The authors studied developments in trust between daters, the risks they assume, and lying online. In this study, some key findings were presented regarding motivations that the respondents had for becoming involved in online dating including companionship, comfort after a life crisis, control over presentation and environment, and freedom from commitment and stereotypic roles, for example. Lawson & Leck (2006) explains that the technology of the internet may present new challenges to building intimacy and trust and avoiding rejection. The researchers state, "New risks inspire new coping strategies to maintain an environment of trust" (Lawson & Leck, p. 200, 2006). Online users have been seen to create ways to establish trust with one another including using emoticons and specialized grammar. Even with these tips and trust indicators, there is still deception and untrustworthy accounts to look out for online. The researchers continue on to note that online, people commonly misrepresent their appearance to make themselves more appealing and flattering. Lawson & Leck (2006, p. 201) state, "Given the limited amount of information available to respondents about each other in Internet interactions and their transitory nature, deception is common."

Defining “Catfishing”

If you are being “catfished”, you are being led to believe that you are speaking to someone online who isn’t who they say they are. Catfishing is an online phenomena where individuals create online profiles and lure others in to believe that they are having a relationship with who they think is the person that they see on the profile of whom they are talking to. A catfish is defined as “someone who uses false information to cultivate a persona online that does not represent their true identity...[which] commonly involves using stolen or edited photos usually taken from and unwitting third party” (Vanman, 2018). Those whose photos are being stolen are usually not aware that this is occurring. These individuals stealing others identities are creating more desirable versions of themselves to create these online intimate relationships with others that they usually believe to have not been possible if using their own pictures and digital identities. The term catfishing is defined as a deceptive activity involving the creation of a fake online profile for deceptive purposes (Harris, 2013).

Catfishing is a popular concept and is not such an unusual occurrence. The act of catfishing can be very elaborate and can involve these individuals creating fake social circles to make the online identities seem more real and believable to the user being deceived. Those that are doing the catfishing trick others into romantic relationships with them. Because these users are not who they say they are, they will most likely avoid any possible meetups to make sure their identity remains a lie. These catfishes use stolen photos from random users on the internet or even people that they know or are close with. These pictures help create the image that the catfish wants to give off and make their online profiles seem real and believable. Instead of creating online profiles that are accurate and truthful, the catfish deliberately deceives online friends by fabricating personal facts, using someone else’s pictures, or creating many distinct identities in

order to ensnare a stranger into a romantic relationship (Kottemann, 2015). In some cases, the catfish may have multiple different profiles across social media platforms that they use to connect with and lure these strangers into believing they are someone else and ultimately starting intimate relationships with them through online communication.

Origin of the Term

A well known example of a public figure that was catfished is football player, Manti Te'o. During his senior season playing as linebacker for Notre Dame, Te'o was a part of a catfish hoax (Natta, 2021). Te'o was in what he thought was a serious relationship with a woman named Lennay Kekua who was said to have died from Leukemia in 2012. The story of Te'o and Kekua resonated across the nation, both in the world of sports and outside it (Smith et al., 2017). This was a story of loss, love, and heartbreak and many eyes were on Te'o after this news had broken. Little did Te'o know that this was all a lie. The Notre Dame player was ultimately a victim of a catfish scam. It turned out that Lennay was actually a California man named Ronaiah Tuiasosopo, who disguised himself by changing his voice and pretending to be a woman who Te'o believed to be in an online relationship with (Natta, 2021). This story brought a lot of attention to this online phenomenon and made many people familiar with the term 'catfish' and news coverage of this hoax made Te'o's name become deeply associated with catfishing (Kottemann, 2015). This case sparked future research on connections between collegiate athletes and the act of catfishing and this is not the only instance where an athlete has become a catfish victim or where coaches of athletes have set up fake identities and online personas to monitor their athletes.

Method

To conduct my research on *Catfish: The TV Show*, I completed a rhetorical criticism on the show. To better understand what a rhetorical criticism is, the Visual Communication Guy defines it as, “Rhetorical criticism is the process by which we discover how the things we see, hear, read, or otherwise experience affect us or those around us” (Guy, 2021). Author of the book, *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Sonja Foss shares that there are four steps to doing effective rhetorical criticism. Foss lays out the four steps as selecting an artifact to evaluate; analyzing the artifact with one or multiple rhetorical criticisms and analyses in mind; developing a research question; writing an essay (Foss, 2018). By following these given steps, I selected my artifact as *Catfish: The TV Show* and I chose to analyze three specific episodes of the show.

While watching I took notes on my observations and any important occurrences to note and while doing so I categorized my notes into sections including the backstory, the meetup, motives, and the aftermath. I then developed my research question, “What are some emerging themes and motives demonstrated in different episodes of *Catfish?*”, and finally began to write my research paper.

Catfish: The TV Show

Catfish: The TV Show is a reality TV show that began airing in 2012 to present. The show covers the truths and lies of online dating and the complexities of relationships in a digital world.

Catfish: The TV Show is co-hosted by Nev Schulman and former host Max Joseph, replaced by Kamie Crawford in 2020. In each episode they work towards catching individuals online pretending to be someone they’re not and they help those who suspect that they are being catfished. Schulman and Crawford investigate these online relationships and help individuals make contact with and coordinate in-person meet ups to reveal who they are in such relationships

with and uncover if they are who they think they are. The show began after Schulman was a victim to catfishing and it is based off of the film *Catfish*, a documentary that came out in 2010 following Schulman's online relationship with someone pretending to be someone they weren't. Nev suspected that he was being catfished and so he and his brother filmed the whole thing and turned it into a documentary to share with the world. "The movie gave its name to an Internet phenomenon: people who pretend to be someone or something they aren't" (Pennington, 2012).

Findings

Before starting my research, I did a Google search for "most popular episodes of *Catfish*" and I used this as rationale for the episodes that I chose to watch and analyze. In the following parts of my paper I organize my findings from the three episodes and share themes and observations that were identified.

Season 2, Episode 9: Artis and Jess

Backstory

This episode started off by introducing a young man, hopeful for love named Artis. Artis lived in a town in Illinois and began talking to a woman online that went by the name of Jess who claimed to live thirty minutes away from Artis. As an audience, we learn that Artis has three children and that both Artis and Jess are currently involved in other romantic relationships and their relationship with one another has been a secret to their significant others. Hosts Nev and Max said that they would not help Artis until he ended things with his current girlfriend. Artis stated, "She [Jess] just sparks up my day" (Schulman, 2013). Artis and Jess had never spoken on the phone or video called one another which began the suspicions of Jess being a catfish. Artis also only had one photo of Jess which was a red flag for being a catfish. A theme that emerged from meeting Artis

and hearing his story is that both him and Jess were seeking an escape from their current lives and wanted to leave their current relationships to be with one another. This idea can be noted in many other episodes of *Catfish* and can possibly be a reason that those being catfished are so hopeful, they are blind to the red flags and set on having a happy life with their online partners.

The Meetup

Nev and Max quickly came to the conclusion that whoever Jess is, is not the one in the pictures. The only question remaining then is who is it? The gang gets in contact with the alleged Jess and they set up a time to meet up with them at a park with Artis. When the *Catfish* crew shows up at the park they wait a while until finally a car speeds into the parking lot and a gentleman comes storming out clapping his hands together in Artis' face. Nev had to pull this man away from Artis and tell him to chill. The unknown man said with a harsh tone, "Don't touch me", (Schulman, 2013) to Nev. Everyone involved was seeming very confused and wondering who this guy was and what he was talking about. He admits to being Jess and tells the crew his name is Justin. Artis appears to be very shaken up and goes back to sit in the car while Nev and Max speak with Justin. The *Catfish* team quickly finds out why Justin was so mad and we uncover his motives and intentions.

Apparent Motives

Justin had unique motives that became apparent during the meetup between him and Artis. Justin had intentions of making the catfish Facebook profile to teach lessons to those in real-life relationships and use this power for good. Justin reveals that he started the account as a joke but then realized that he "hated cheaters" and wanted to rid the

world of infidelity with the use of this fake profile. Justin shares that he had no intention for a romantic relationship with Artis and that he actually has a girlfriend of his own. This motive is important to note because it is uncommon throughout episodes of the show.

The Aftermath

After the airing of the show, Justin and Artis have had no communication with one another. Artis explained everything that happened between him and Justin to the mother of his children and their relationship has since improved due to his honesty and transparency. Justin has refused to give a comment to the producers of the show.

Season 2, Episode 3: Ramon and Paola

Backstory

We meet Ramon at the beginning of this episode, a 19-year-old from Arizona. He met a 20-year-old girl from Florida, named Paola, on Facebook and he fell in love with her. Ramon states, “At the end of the day she’s [Paola] been the only person I really look forward to talking to” (Schulman, 2013). Ramon made it clear that he had suspicions of her being a catfish and his fear is that she’s not who she said she is. Ramon told Nev and Max that Paola always makes up excuses for not being able to meet which can be noted as apparent red flags of when someone is a catfish. Despite everything, Ramon was in love with her and wanted to meet with her in person to find out the truth. “When I wake up, she’s the one I think about”, we hear from Ramon (Schulman, 2013). Nev and Max uncover that Paola is not financially stable and it is shared that Ramon has sent over \$3,000 to her and even shared his bank information with her.

The Meetup

The *Catfish* crew got in contact with the so-called Paola and she agreed to meet and they set up a plan to travel to her house in Florida. When arriving at the door, Nev, Max, and Ramon are met with a young lady who was not the girl from the pictures. You could see the shock in Ramon's face as he said, "I have a lot to say to you... I don't understand" (Schulman, 2013). This girl was revealed to be a girl named Loyda, the catfish from the fake account using it to lie to Ramon. Loyda exclaims that she tried to come clean before to Ramon and he does not appear to want to believe anything she is saying. He was refusing to accept the truth that he was not in a relationship with Paola, the girl from the pictures.

Apparent Motives

Loyda shares with *Catfish* that she first started the account out of boredom. She claims she never meant to form a relationship with Ramon and that everything was real except for the appearance. Loyda also had financial motives with her online relationship and it was revealed that Ramon sent her over \$3,000 worth of gifts. A catfish asking for money and using people online to trick them into sending funds is a common theme that appears in episodes of the show and is a red flag to be aware of.

The Aftermath

After the show, Loyda deleted the fake Facebook account and shared that she is in a new relationship. She appeared to feel guilty for all of the trouble that she caused and she shared with producers that she is working on paying back Ramon for all of the money that he sent her. Ramon mentioned that he learned to be more responsible online and that was his main takeaway from everything that happened.

Season 2, Episode 16: Mike and Caroline

Backstory

In this episode we meet Mike, a young man from Florida, who has met a young lady named Caroline on a dating app. Caroline claims that she is from the same city as Mike, yet they have not met up. They have been talking for a year and a half and during this time Mike has tried to set up times to meet or video chat but Caroline always bails which led to the suspicion of Caroline being a catfish. Mike shares, “Caroline is the perfect person for me” (Schulman, 2013). Caroline shared with Mike that she has cancer and that is another reason why she has yet to meet up with him. From watching the show, viewers know that when a sickness is brought up like cancer, that is a huge red flag of a catfish and is a common theme that is detailed in episodes across the board. Nev and Max get to work with their investigation and find the real woman in the pictures and conclude that she is not who Mike has been in a relationship with. They were able to get the real Caroline to make a video stating that she is not the one who has been speaking with Mike so that he could get some sort of closure. The only question left is who has he been talking to?

The Meetup

Hosts Nev and Max reach out to the catfish through the phone number that Mike had for her and were able to set up a place and time to meet. The gang sets out for a meeting at a local park and see a young woman come out of a car and start to approach them. Mike immediately recognizes her and recalls that her name is Heather. He shares with Nev and Max that they had previously had a run-in on the dating app Plenty of Fish where he called her out for being a catfish.

Apparent Motives

During the meetup between Heather and Mike, Heather shares that she originally started up a fake account with a friend to help see if their other friend was being cheated on. She was talking to different people when Mike sent her a message. She confronted Mike about not being very nice when she came clean the first time saying who she really was and that is why she created the Caroline profile. “I originally did it to be mean because I was mad at you”, Heather expressed (Schulman, 2013). Her motives came from a malicious place and she wanted to get back at him. Heather did not mean for it to go as far as it did and explained that she did not mean to fall in love with him. She also was questioned about having cancer and she admitted that she was in fact lying about being sick. Heather’s motives are not uncommon in the world of *Catfish* and it is important to note that sometimes the individuals behind the fake profiles know the person on the other end and that is why they never want to meet up or agree to video chat because it would expose the truth.

The Aftermath

A month after the show aired, Heather shared that she has been making positive changes in her life and has plans to meet with a therapist. Heather took this experience to better herself and mentioned that she changed her eating habits and even started her own blog. Mike wishes Heather the best but has become way more cautious in these types of situations and does not have plans on keeping in contact with her. However, Mike has been in contact with the real Caroline and added her as a friend on Facebook and he shares with Nev and Max that they have been texting back and forth.

Pathos

“The concept of pathos as a mode of persuasion originated with the Greek philosopher Aristotle. In his book *Rhetoric*, Aristotle describes three primary modes of persuasion: pathos, egos and logos. Aristotle writes that pathos is a means of awakening people’s emotions in order to sway their opinion towards that of the speaker” (MasterClass, 2020). It is important to note that the show *Catfish* appeals to the audience's emotions and sways viewers into continuing to watch the show and be pulled in by the different aspects. While watching *Catfish*, viewers are persuaded to feel hopeful for those being catfished and we are internally rooting for them to find love. As we are watching different episodes, we go on a roller coaster of emotions due to all of the excitement, shock, surprises, and disappointment that we undergo. In most episodes, and in the three that I analyzed in this research, we see those individuals that are catfished being vulnerable with themselves on the internet and ultimately being disappointed and left with feelings of shock and disbelief. In another aspect, the viewers can feel emotions of hatred and being upset towards the individuals doing the catfishing because we were wanting a happy ending and for no one to get hurt. By focusing on these different emotional aspects, *Catfish* does a good job at keeping the audience engaged and invested in those lives that we are watching on the screen. For these reasons, audience members come back for more and continue to watch the show being hopeful for a love story. Touching on human vulnerability, we see all three of the individuals from the episodes analyzed, Artis, Ramon, and Mike, be vulnerable by putting themselves out there online and trusting those that they believed to be in relationships with. The show uses editing to keep the viewer engaged by creating a shock factor and making it intriguing to find out who the catfish is. A major part of reality TV shows including *Catfish*, is ‘the reveal’ aspect and uncovering something at the end of the show which in this case is who the catfish is exactly. The

audience waits the whole episode to find out this aspect which keeps them focused and curious. This 'reveal' is a way that reality TV shows incorporate themes of uncovering the truth which intrigues audiences and reels them in. With *Catfish*, truly anything can happen and there is shock and surprise at every corner, keeping the audience wanting more.

Discussion

During the present COVID-19 Pandemic, more people are putting themselves out there online and being vulnerable with dating apps and websites due to boredom and loneliness. Covid is prime time for catfish to prey on victims because everyone is at home and there is nothing better to do, right? This is where my research becomes prevalent and it helps explain why it is important to know the red flags and suspicions of being catfished and understanding the different motives and intentions that these catfish have. As noted in my research and findings, those who were catfished became more cautious after they were involved in these scams and were more careful with who they trusted online. *Catfish: The TV Show* also reveals human desires to connect with one another. Human connection is a natural thing and with this show we are seeing people be so vulnerable with wanting to have these connections and because of that they are informing bad decision making and not viewing situations clearly ending up with them being catfished. My findings allude to the fact that most of the time when someone is being catfished they are blind to it because they want to be hopeful for love and will do anything for who they believe they are in a relationship with, including sending money like we see from Ramon. This research is important to study because like I detailed in my literature review, there are so many technological advancements in the digital age and that is making it easier for those to connect online and not always be honest about who they really are. It is critical to understand what is

possible through digital media and be aware of potential harm and untruthfulness that might occur.

Conclusion

To conclude my research, *Catfish: The TV Show* has revealed emerging themes of anxieties of digital technology, human vulnerabilities, and the convention that ‘the reveal’ transcends reality TV and human connection. In my research, I discovered different themes and motives that catfish had including to teach lessons and be malicious, for financial reasons, and to get back at someone that they knew. Catfishing is a popular online phenomenon that is continuing to happen even after years of the show being aired and plenty of scholarly research being completed on the topic. The reason that catfishing is still popular could be because of the hopefulness for human connection that those on the internet searching for love have. As technology is advancing, there are a lot of ways to communicate with and form relationships with people online and this allows us to be vulnerable and hope to find love despite all of the red flags pointing at the idea that they are being catfished. As audience members of the show, we are pulled along for this emotional roller coaster and experience many different feelings including being excited for the idea of a happy ending and also feelings of shock when we find out those we were rooting for on TV are in fact being catfished. The conventions of the show and the appeal of emotion and pathos help to continue bringing in an audience and allowing us to look forward to ‘the reveal’ and become invested in others' romantic lives and stories. Future directions of this research could include analyzing more episodes and determining what episodes resulted in the person to not actually be a catfish and research how many success stories there have been, which isn't many. It would be interesting to discover what their motives were for being secretive and convincing who they were in a relationship with that they were a catfish even if they weren't.

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