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# Development and Validation of the Digital Escapism Scale for Adults

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**Abstract.** Digital escapism refers to the use of digital devices and online platforms to avoid real-life stressors or responsibilities. Despite its growing prevalence, no culturally appropriate and psychometrically validated tool exists to measure digital escapism in Pakistan. This study focuses on the development and validation of the Digital Escapism Scale (DES) tailored for adults. The Psychometric tool was grounded in the Escapism Theory that is the tendency to avoid unpleasant realities or emotions by engaging in alternative activities. Digital escapism is a modern adaptation of this broader concept, using digital media as the alternative space for emotional relief or avoidance. The scale aims to measure the extent of digital escapism behaviors and their underlying factors. Literature was reviewed and focus discussions were conducted to generate items for the scale. The initial item pool of 67 items was generated through literature review and focus group discussions and categorized into seven domains. After expert review and pilot testing, 32 items were retained. Data were collected from 206 adults (74 males, 132 females) using convenient sampling. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) suggested a three-factor structure, reducing the scale to 22 items. The scale demonstrated excellent psychometric properties, including high reliability ($\alpha$ = .880), a significant Bartlett's Test of Sphericity ($p < .001$), and a Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy of .879. The DES provides a robust tool for assessing digital escapism in adults, contributing to research and clinical interventions in digital psychology.

**Key words**: Digital escapism, factor analysis, stressors.

## 1 Introduction

The concept of digital escapism has experienced exponential growth with the widespread adoption of digital technologies. Despite its considerably deeper roots the phenomenon of escapism has been investigated for more than 50 years in a variety of social sciences disciplines. The most widely accepted view of escapism holds that it is an automatic reaction for an individual to withdraw from the problems of real world and enter the world of illusions (Trufanova, 2014).

The term "escapism" refers to a psychological behavior that has long been seen in people. Escapism is turning away from reality when one is powerless to alter their current circumstances. "Escapism is a result of all kinds of voids and low self-esteem. It is the tendency to

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divert attention from issues in real life. It can also be thought of as eliminating meanings from the mind and releasing oneself from self-awareness. (Baumeister, 1991). This has become an indispensable part of our everyday lives since it makes people's lives easier (Ponsignon and Derbaix, 2020).

As the most effective means of transitioning from the "physical world" to the "virtual world," it is a crucial instrument for eradicating human geographical boundaries (Kumar and Mondal, 2018). Long-term repetition of the same routine work makes people seek change, which is frequently impossible in real life because of a variety of life constraints. Therefore, majority of people are nowadays spending more time on digital platforms due to the advancements in information, communication, and technology (ICT). People engage in a wide range of activities, such as gambling, video games, and entertainment, to find pleasure or to stay out of uncomfortable situations (Triantafillidou and Siomkos, 2018).

## 1.1 Escapism vs Digital Escapism

Escapism is the term used to describe escaping from challenging reality, or a tendency of distraction. It could be a connection to the virtual or fantastical worlds that are not a part of everyday life.

It is the self's escape from the melancholy and depression of the present. Internet addicts who spend more and more time on social media and lose sight of reality are engaging in digital escapism. Even they don't know what's going on with themselves, their family, or their peers.

## 1.2 Impacts of Digital Escapism

Human is a social animal and relates to the society for the different needs. They love to be in relation and social interactions to fulfil the needs and enjoy the life in its true essence. Moreover, various digital plat forms are source of global connection through multiple online platforms and apps. The Virtual Reality (VR) drastically impact daily life by providing an alternate online companionship in loneliness by providing different sources of entertainment. But, spending more time and excessive dependence on platforms invites negative issues like:escapism, belief in virtual association and ignoring the real world. The VR provides a platform of excitement and relaxation of mind which takes away people from their own family, peers and relatives and makes them escapist (Siricharoen, 2019). Playing online video games or other sports are the means of living virtually and escape from reality. These games offer a more interactive, competitive, and engaging experience compared to watching movies or reading books. With multiple series and evolving storylines, they encourage players to invest significant time, immersing them in a world of fantasy and imagination. While online gaming can serve as an innovative and skill-building platform, it also has the potential to foster psychological dependence if not managed properly.

Additionally, digital platforms allow users to create virtual identities, often as a means of escape or personal gratification. This digital immersion can lead to escapism, as individuals increasingly detach from reality. According to Lindon (2013), over one million users worldwide register in virtual environments, often as a response to avoiding real-life challenges. In earlier times, life moved at a slower pace, allowing individuals to find moments of peace and restfulness in their daily routines. However, the fast-paced, high-stress modern world has turned people into mechanized beings, constantly seeking digital distractions. Escapism can sometimes evoke feelings of guilt, prompting individuals to conceal their engagement in virtual worlds. To

cope with this guilt, many adopt a hidden, alternative digital persona, a phenomenon often referred to as "Second Life."

## 2 Literature Review

Redirecting negativity in life is becoming increasingly difficult every day. Every minute of our daily lives has been made possible by innovation, allowing us to be constantly available to come to work. Anxiety, despair, and stress are all on the rise. It is now more important than ever to find suitable forms of escape. There are several ways that people might remove themselves from the stresses and strains of the repetitive habit. These factors have led to a greater number of people turning to digital escape, which functions similarly to therapy (Wade, 2010). In this sense, mental disruptions make it easier to tolerate pain, which is not limited to a person's thoughts. The outcome demonstrates that in addition to being a psychological issue, there is a neurological process that can improve a person's mental health. In certain situations, it's a straightforward method to shift focus toward something entirely different in order to help people "cool down" and momentarily forget their problems, tension, and anxiety rather than enduring negativity or stress.

Escapist hobbies such as social media use, watching films on TV, and playing games can help people recover from psychological or mental illnesses like the ones mentioned above (Evans, 2001). People are loving their dream worlds because escapism can be quite beneficial, as imagination leads to innovation and progress. These escapist activities provide relaxation or break the repetitive pattern in daily life, stress relief, and pleasure seeking. Escapism so evolved into a form of therapy for avoiding negativity (Warmelink et al., 2009).

A number of important variables could suggest or compel them to shift their focus from the real world to the virtual one. The following are some significant factors that encourage users to participate in the virtual world. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, addiction is a chronic mental disorder characterized by compulsive drug-seeking behavior and habitual use, making it difficult to control despite its harmful consequences. Whilst most individuals initially choose to consume drugs or alcohol voluntarily, frequent use can lead to brain changes that weaken self-control and interfere with their ability to resist strong cravings. Many drugs directly impact the brain's "reward circuit," triggering the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter linked to pleasure and motivation. This process reinforces behaviors essential for survival, such as eating and social interactions. However, prolonged drug consumption can impair the brain's adaptive response, making the reward circuit less sensitive over time. As a result, individuals gradually experience diminished pleasure from activities they once found enjoyable, including food, intimacy, and social engagements. (Park et al., 2016).

Cybersex addiction refers to a specific form of internet addiction characterized by excessive engagement in pornographic content, adult websites, sexual fantasies, online chatrooms, and webcam services. These activities often serve as a means of escapism, leading users to become deeply absorbed in the virtual world while neglecting their real-life responsibilities and relationships. Over time, this obsession can significantly disrupt an individual's personal, social, and professional life (Subudhi, 2020).

Social media addiction is a form of behavioral addiction characterized by an excessive preoccupation with social media platforms, driven by an uncontrollable urge to log in and engage with online content (Aljuboori et al., 2020). Over time, it has evolved into a psychological disorder, similar to other behavioral disorders. The long-term psychological effects of social media

influence individuals' sense of self, though the full extent remains unclear.

Today, platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter have become powerful tools for building virtual communities, where users present idealized versions of themselves by sharing images and updates. However, this digital persona often leads individuals to disconnect from their physical reality, gradually prioritizing their online presence over real-world interactions. The influence of social media is particularly evident in how people express their emotions. For instance, when experiencing happiness or excitement, individuals frequently share their moments on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. However, during times of sadness or distress, they may unconsciously compare their lives to others, leading to dissatisfaction and a distorted sense of reality. As a result, many seek solace in the virtual world, using social media as an escape from real-life struggles (Thomas et al., 2016).

In today's world, computer and smartphone gaming has become a widespread addiction, available in both online and offline formats. This addiction is particularly prevalent among young individuals, who are deeply engrossed in their preferred gaming platforms. Gaming often serves as a means of escapism, helping individuals cope with negative emotions such as helplessness, anxiety, stress, and depression. Research suggests that these dysphoric moods are closely linked to gaming addiction (Wang et al., 2019). While excessive gaming is associated with diminished psychological well-being, it does not necessarily increase severe mental health disorders. However, prolonged gaming addiction has been shown to contribute to heightened anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Stockdale and Coyne, 2018).

Excessive mobile gaming, in particular, has been recognized as a significant concern, where individuals develop a strong dependence on portable games and struggle to control their gaming habits. Many players find themselves compulsively engaging in games repeatedly over extended periods, leading to potential negative consequences on mental and social well-being (Sun et al., 2015). Users tried to cope up with their emotional distress by playing games, but excessively addicted with online games for a longer period of time which separate them from their real- relationship or from real world. As a result, it is caused by severe psychological problems called Depression (King and Delfabbro, 2016).

The rapid digital transformation in Pakistan has profoundly impacted the behavioral patterns of its population, particularly among adults. With the proliferation of affordable smartphones, increased internet accessibility, and widespread use of social media platforms, digital interactions have become integral to daily life. These advancements, while beneficial, have also contributed to an increase in digital escapism a psychological phenomenon where individuals engage with digital media as a means to cope with real-life stressors or avoid personal challenges (Jamil, 2021). Despite its growing relevance, no culturally appropriate and psychometrically sound tool existed to measure digital escapism in Pakistan, necessitating the development and validation of the Digital Escapism Scale (DES).

Pakistan is a country characterized by a diverse demographic landscape, with significant variations in age, education, socioeconomic status, and digital literacy. The increasing digitalization has exposed its population to both the advantages and potential psychological risks of digital engagement. For instance, digital escapism may serve as a coping mechanism for stressors such as academic pressures, workplace challenges, or societal expectations (Wade, 2010). However, excessive reliance on digital platforms can lead to adverse outcomes, including addiction, reduced productivity, and impaired social relationships. Given these dynamics, a culturally sensitive tool is essential to accurately assess and address the nuances of digital escapism in the Pakistani context.

Existing measures of escapism and digital behaviors are primarily developed in Western

contexts, which may not fully capture the cultural, social, and economic realities of Pakistan. For example, family dynamics, collectivist values, and limited mental health awareness in Pakistan may influence how individuals use digital media for escapism. Additionally, the stigma associated with discussing mental health challenges often drives people to seek refuge in digital platforms, further emphasizing the need for a localized assessment tool.

From a practical perspective, the DES can inform interventions tailored to the Pakistani population. For example, mental health practitioners can use the scale to identify individuals at risk of maladaptive digital escapism. Similarly, educators and policymakers can leverage insights from the DES to design programs promoting balanced digital usage, particularly among students and young professionals who are most susceptible to digital escapism. Prior to this study, limited research existed on digital escapism in Pakistan. While global studies have highlighted its implications, the absence of a validated scale in the local context restricted empirical investigations and evidence-based interventions. This research aimed to fill this gap by developing a scale that reflects the unique sociocultural and digital realities of Pakistan and ensuring the scale's psychometric robustness through rigorous validation processes. By addressing the specific needs and challenges of Pakistan's digital landscape, the DES provides a valuable contribution to the fields of psychology, digital behavior, and mental health. It also sets the stage for future research exploring the interplay between digital media use and psychological well-being in culturally diverse settings.

Existing tools measuring escapism primarily focus on general avoidance behaviors without distinguishing digital-specific engagement patterns. Given the rapid digitalization in Pakistan and its psychological implications, a culturally relevant scale is necessary. Previous scales developed in Western contexts may not fully capture local sociocultural and economic realities, including family dynamics, collectivist values, and digital literacy gaps.

### 2.1 Research Objectives

The present study aims to develop an indigenous scale to measure people's Digital Escapism behaviour to avoid real life stress provoking situations. For this purpose, study was conducted in three phases (1) generation of item pool, (2) empirical evaluation of scale through factor analysis, and (3) Psychometric Validation. The study hypothesized that The Digital Escapism Scale will exhibit a multidimensional factor structure, reflecting key dimensions of digital escapism.

## 3 Materials and Methods Used

### 3.1 Research Design

The research design was based on a mixed method approach specifically aimed at generating items for the scale and validating the scale to measure Digital Escapism.

### 3.2 Sample and Sampling Strategy

The sample consisted of 206 participants from the twin cities of Pakistan. Sample was chosen with the help of convinient sampling technique. There were 74 males (36%) and 132 females (64%). The mean age of respondent was 24 years (SD = .660). Mean education of respondents was Bachelors (SD = 8.5). Fourty eight respondents had education level up to Masters (23%), 11 respondents had up Doctorate level (5%). Most of the respondents were students. The daily

usage of digital platforms of 92 respondents was 3-5hours and 59 respondents are more than 5hours.It was assumed that people of this age group will be more indulgent and inclined towards digital escapism. Moreover, the reason to use digital paltform was also an important component where 76 respondents use digital paltforms for Entertainment and 72 respondents for Information while 45 respondents used it for family networking.

### 3.2.1 Inclusion Criteria

- Age 18 years and above.
- Active users of digital devices for at least 3 hours per day.
- Provide informed consent to voluntarily participate in the study.

### 3.2.2 Exclusion Criteria

- Currently diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder and undergoing treatment.
- Limited or no access to digital devices or the internet.

## 3.3 Procedure


Figure 1: Procedure

### 3.3.1 Phase I

#### Generation of Item Pool

The scale's item pool was developed through a combination of literature review and focus group discussions.

#### Literature Review

An extensive review of existing literature, including books, research articles, the internet, and various other sources, was conducted for the scale's development. This review played a crucial role in identifying the components of the Digital Escapism Scale.

#### Focus Group Discussions

To generate the items, a series of focus group discussions were conducted. These discussions served as a structured platform designed to gather participants' perceptions, emotions, subjective experiences, opinions, and ideas on the topic. Additionally, focus groups offered a quick, practical, and direct approach to engaging with the target population. The following steps were carefully considered while conducting the focus groups.

### Step 1: Focus Group Guideline

A focus group guideline was developed based on an extensive literature review and input from subject experts to explore people's opinions on the topic. The guideline included brief statements and questions addressing the study's content and objectives. During its construction, key areas and issues were outlined, with specific probing questions incorporated under each major theme.

The questions covered various aspects, including how individuals define digital escapism, the most commonly used linguistic term for this behavior in Pakistani society, and the social, economic, and domestic factors that drive people to escape into the digital world instead of facing real-life situations. Additionally, the guideline examined significant contemporary institutional changes and their consequences for individuals engaging in digital escapism.

Most importantly, it included questions about the psychological, social, and economic outcomes of excessive digital escapism, as well as participants' perspectives on balancing its benefits and harms. The sequence of topics and questions progressed from general to specific to ensure a structured discussion.

### Step 2: Composition of Focus Groups

A total of four focus groups were conducted for this purpose, with a total of 20 participants. Each session lasted approximately one hour. The researcher carefully noted important points throughout the discussions. At the conclusion of each session, participants were thanked and acknowledged for their cooperation and participation. As a result of the focus group discussions, an item pool of 67 items was generated.

### Step 3: Categorization of Items

The item pool was classified into seven categories using a committee approach, consisting of three experts—two psychologists and an anthropologist—who had in-depth knowledge of the subject matter. Utilizing the committee approach, the items were carefully formulated as attitudinal statements in alignment with the seven identified categories.

Emotional Regulation (12 Items)
Avoidance Behavior (10 items)
Dependency and Compulsion (7 Items)
Time Management Issues (10 items)
Negative Consequences (12 items)
Recovery and Self-Awareness (9 Items)
Preference for the Virtual World (7 items)

### Scoring of Items

The initial version of the scale consisted of 67 items, with 10 items reverse-scored. The scale utilized a five-point response format: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5). Negatively worded attitudinal statements were reverse-scored to ensure consistency in interpretation. A higher mean score on the initial form of the Digital Escapism Scale (DES) reflected a more positive attitude toward digital escapism, while a lower score indicated a relatively less positive attitude.

### 3.3.2 Phase II

#### Pilot Testing for Linguistic Feasibility

The refined scale was pilot tested with a small sample of approximately 50 participants from the target population. This pilot test assessed the clarity of the items and the overall flow of the scale. Participants provided feedback on their understanding of the items and any difficulties they may encounter.

#### Item Reduction

Based on pilot testing feedback, items that were unclear or do not resonate with participants were rephrased or removed. The aim was to create a concise and focused scale that accurately captures the constructs of interest.

#### Pilot Study

Tryouts was conducted with the refined scale of 32 items involving approximately 50 participants to evaluate the psychometric properties of the instrument. This initial trial phase provided valuable insights into the reliability, validity, and overall effectiveness of the measurement tool. The items were further reduced to 22 items.

### 3.3.3 Phase III

#### Main Study

After finalizing the scale, data was collected using convenient sampling from a total of 206 participants. Respondents were approached individually at their homes, institutions, and workplaces, and data was gathered both in person and through Google Forms. Each questionnaire included written instructions, and informed consent was obtained from all participants through a consent form. Participants were assured that the information provided would be used solely for research purposes.

## 4 Results

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted to determine the factorial structure and assess the dimensionality of the initial form of the Digital Escapism Scale (DES). To verify the suitability of the data for factor analysis, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure were computed. The results indicated a KMO value of .88 for the Digital Escapism Scale, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p \leq .000$), confirming the data's appropriateness for factor analysis.

EFA was then performed using the Direct Oblimin method on 22 items through Principal Component Analysis (PCA). The analysis suggested the extraction of three major factors, with item selection based on a factor loading of .40 or above and exclusive loading on a single factor.

- Factor 1 had an Eigenvalue of 6.97, accounting for 34.87% of the total variance.
- Factor 2 had an Eigenvalue of 2.39, explaining 11.99% of the total variance.
- Factor 3 had an Eigenvalue of 1.58, contributing 7.92% of the total variance.

The findings demonstrated the construct validity of the scale. A systematic analysis of the item contents for each factor revealed that all items were theoretically consistent with the underlying constructs. Three factors are as follows.

**Emotional Escape:** Digital engagement as a stress-coping mechanism. **Avoidant Coping:** Using digital platforms to evade real-life responsibilities. **Time Displacement:** Loss of time management due to digital consumption.

Table 4.1: Results From a Factor Analysis of the Digital Escapism Scale (DES)

| | Factor loading | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| DES item no | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| DEs_1 | | 0.824 | |
| DEs_2 | | 0.733 | |
| DEs_3 | | 0.678 | |
| | | | |
| DEs4 | | 0.726 | |
| DEs5 | | 0.794 | |
| DEs11 | 0.656 | | |
| DEs12 | 0.774 | | |
| DEs13 | 0.768 | | |
| DEs14 | 0.631 | | |
| DEs15 | | | 0.646 |
| DEs16 | | | 0.79 |
| DEs17 | | | 0.74 |
| DEs20 | 0.568 | | |
| DEs21 | 0.51 | | |
| DEs22 | | | |
| DEs24 | 0.699 | | |
| DEs25 | 0.575 | | |
| DEs26 | | | 0.542 |
| DEs27 | | | 0.644 |
| Item19_R | | | -0.688 |

*Note. Factors loadings of only selected items mentioned. *p< .05, **p< .01.*

Hence, the final selected items in Digital Escapism Scale were 22; Item 7 was reverse scored. Factors were labelled in the light of literature review and committee approach consisted of subject matter experts and researchers.

# 5 Discussion

The findings indicate that the DES is a reliable and valid instrument for assessing digital escapism in adults. The three identified factors align with theoretical frameworks, providing understanding of digital escapism behaviors. Future research could explore the scale's appli-

cability across different cultures and its predictive validity concerning mental health outcomes. The DES addresses a gap in literature by operationalizing the construct of digital escapism a phenomenon increasingly relevant in today's digital age. Digital escapism, defined as the tendency to engage with digital media to avoid or cope with real-life stressors, is conceptualized in this study as a multidimensional construct (Apter, 1991). The validation process confirmed its underlying factors, such as emotional escape, social escape, and cognitive immersion. These dimensions align with established theories of escapism and media consumption, such as the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that individuals use media to satisfy psychological needs (Ruggiero, 2000).

This study advances the theoretical framework by integrating contemporary digital behaviors, such as excessive screen time and online interaction, into the construct. The findings emphasize the dual nature of digital escapism, highlighting both its adaptive (temporary relief from stress) and maladaptive (avoidance and dependency) aspects. The rigorous methodological approach employed in developing and validating the DES ensures its reliability and validity. The multi-phase process included:

The sample size and diversity in terms of age, gender, and socioeconomic background enhance the generalizability of the findings. By employing both self-reported measures and statistical rigor, the study establishes DES as a reliable tool for assessing digital escapism in adults.

# 6 Conclusion

The Digital Escapism Scale (DES) represents a significant advancement in assessing digital escapism behaviors among adults. With strong psychometric properties, DES serves as a valuable tool for researchers and clinicians aiming to understand and address the effects of digital escapism.

The development and validation of DES mark a crucial step in exploring the complex nature of digital escapism in today's world. The scale exhibits high internal consistency, as demonstrated by excellent Cronbach's alpha reliability scores. Its multidimensional structure, covering emotional escape, social escape, and cognitive immersion, aligns with established theoretical frameworks such as Escapism Theory.

Findings highlight DES as a reliable and valid measure of digital escapism in adults. It bridges a critical gap in the literature by defining digital escapism as a construct that encompasses both adaptive and maladaptive dimensions. While digital escapism can provide temporary relief from stress, it may also lead to avoidance behaviors and over-reliance on digital platforms (Jouhki et al., 2022). Escapism has long been a part of human behavior, serving as a means to temporarily disconnect from reality. While moderate escapism is not inherently negative, excessive engagement that diverts individuals from their primary life goals can have detrimental effects. The concept of digital escapism carries both positive and negative consequences for individuals and society.

People naturally seek happiness and fulfillment, preferring pleasure over discomfort. To avoid unpleasant situations, individuals engage in various activities such as gaming, watching movies, reading, online shopping, social networking, e-research, and virtual interactions with family and friends. These activities not only provide entertainment but also help people pass time meaningfully. Moreover, digital advancements such as remote work, online education, and digital banking have significantly improved convenience, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jouhki et al., 2022).

However, excessive reliance on the digital world at the cost of real-life engagement can have negative consequences. Overuse or digital addiction leads to reduced life satisfaction and mental well-being. Therefore, self-control and self-awareness are crucial in preventing harmful digital escapism. It is beneficial to engage with the digital world for productive and meaningful purposes rather than becoming a victim of digital dependency. Moderate and mindful digital escapism can enhance well-being, but when it turns into an addiction, it can disrupt one's personal and professional life.

# 7 Limitations and Recommendations

While this study provides a validated tool for measuring digital escapism, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases, including social desirability and response consistency issues. Future studies should incorporate objective behavioral data, such as screen time tracking, to complement self-reports.

Second, the use of convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of findings. A more representative sample, including participants from diverse socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, would enhance the scale's applicability. Additionally, while Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) provided strong initial validation, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) is recommended in future research to further refine the scale's factor structure and improve its robustness.

Finally, the study does not address the long-term psychological effects of digital escapism. Longitudinal studies should investigate whether prolonged engagement in digital escapism contributes to mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. Examining potential interventions for managing digital escapism will also be a critical area for future research. The DES offers a valuable framework for researchers and practitioners to assess and address digital escapism, paving the way for targeted interventions and promoting a balanced relationship with digital technology.

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