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Michelle Drouin

Parkview Health, Michelle.Drouin@parkview.com

Irum Abbasi

Jayson L. Dibble

Brandon T. McDaniel PhD

Parkview Mirro Center for Research and Innovation, brandon.mcdaniel@parkview.com

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Examining the roles of marital status and sex on communication with backburners on social media

Michelle Drouin ^{a,b}, Irum Abbasi^c, Jayson L. Dibble^d, and Brandon T. McDaniel ^b

^aDepartment of Psychology, Purdue University Fort Wayne, Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA; ^bHealth Services and Informatics Research Division, Parkview Mirro Center for Research and Innovation, Fort Wayne, Indiana, USA; ^cDepartment of Psychology, San Jose State University, San Jose, California, USA; ^dCommunication Department, Hope College, Holland, Michigan, USA

ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined the prevalence of and communication with backburners (romantic alternatives) within a sample of both married ($n = 188$) and casually dating ($n = 230$) men and women in the United States. We also examined the roles of relationship length, commitment, sex, and marital status in the number of backburners reported and their communication with backburners, generally, as well as their communication with their most desired backburner. Extending previous studies using undergraduates, we found that commitment level was unrelated to the number of reported backburners. However, commitment was negatively related to the amount of communication with all backburners. Meanwhile, married individuals reported having more backburners than those who were only casually dating, but they also reported communicating with their most desired backburner less frequently and seeing them less often. Finally, men reported significantly more backburners with whom they would have a sexual relationship and also interacted with their backburners more frequently than did women. Thus, although marriage and commitment do not keep individuals from having backburners, they do appear to provide some buffer against communicating with backburners on social media and seeing them in person.



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Backburners or romantic alternatives are individuals with whom people keep contact with the prospect of a future sexual or committed relationship (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015). The maintenance of backburner relationships is not a new phenomenon. However, with the advent of social media and computer-mediated technologies, individuals have a convenient and covert way of keeping in touch with backburners (Dibble & Drouin, 2014). In contrast to 30 years ago, when backburners would likely have been maintained through phone calls to landlines, letters, and/or face-to-face visits, our connected world allows individuals to maintain backburners electronically, through instant messages that can be hidden within one's phone or social messaging platform. According to researchers who have investigated the maintenance of these backburners via social media, keeping in touch with backburners is common among college students, and college students in committed relationships are just as likely to have backburners as those who are single or in dating relationships (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015, 2018; Drouin et al., 2014). Specifically, this research has found that the number of backburners college students report does not differ significantly based on relationship status (committed, dating, or single; Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015, 2018), and the number of romantic backburners one has is unrelated to an individual's level of commitment (Drouin et al., 2014).

CONTACT Michelle Drouin  drouinm@pfw.edu  Department of Psychology, Purdue University Fort Wayne, 2101 E. Coliseum Blvd., Fort Wayne, IN 46805.

Thus far, the research focused on communication with backburners via social media has focused solely on college students. However, older adults, including married adults, are using social media, too, and they may consider some of their social media contacts for future sexual or committed relationships. It is currently unknown the extent to which they do so or whether their commitment level or marital status affects how many backburners they have on social media or whether this affects the tone or frequency of their communication with these backburners. Elucidating these trends was the goal of the present study.

Relationship research has shown that the mental machinery used to identify prospective partners is dampened while in a committed relationship (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Maner et al., 2008; Plant et al., 2010); but it never really switches off (Fletcher, 2002; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Thus, individuals in all types of romantic relationships, even long-term marriages, might be thinking about or communicating with their romantic backburners. According to the investment model of relationships (Rusbult, 1980), the extent to which partners find romantic backburners appealing might vary greatly, based partly on relationship satisfaction and investment. In turn, all of these variables (perceived quality of one's sexual and/or romantic backburners, satisfaction, and investment) influence relationship commitment and persistence in a relationship (Rusbult, 1980). Satisfaction, which is a common focus of much relationship research, reflects one's fulfillment within a relationship. In contrast, commitment reflects not only one's desire to maintain the relationship but also the ways in which people act to maintain their relationship (Schoebi et al., 2012). This behavioral aspect of commitment predicts both divorce rates and the manner in which individuals act towards their partner (Schoebi et al., 2012). More specifically, when commitment is high, individuals often engage in acts that are beneficial to the relationship (Rusbult et al., 2006) or *relationship maintenance behaviors* (Canary & Dainton, 2006). Those high in commitment are also likely to devalue romantic alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Maner et al., 2008; Plant et al., 2010).

Applying this theory to the context of backburner relationships, it would be expected that individuals with a greater number of backburners, or those who report communicating more often with backburners, would have lower levels of commitment. However, this has not borne out in previous research that has examined the maintenance of backburners on social media. In recent studies with college students, those in committed relationships reported having just as many backburners on social media as did singles (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015, 2018), and level of commitment (as measured by the investment model subscale) was unrelated to the total number of backburners, the number of backburners they communicate with platonically, or even the number of backburners they communicate with in a romantic/sexual way (Dibble & Drouin, 2014). Therefore, at least among college students, commitment did not appear to buffer against the maintenance of and communication with backburners via social media.

Until now, the research on this topic has been conducted with only college students, whose commitment levels may not equal, or carry the same meaning as, those of couples in longer-term or married relationships. Indeed, college students typically have fewer barriers to leaving their relationship (e.g., children, financial dependence) and usually have access to a large number of available alternatives (Vennum et al., 2017), which may equate to lower levels of commitment and a greater likelihood of establishing and maintaining backburner relationships. College students are also unlikely to be married, and marriage may create an additional hurdle to the maintenance of backburner relationships as it typically entails structural boundaries that would decrease the likelihood of making and maintaining backburner relationships, such as cohabitation and time constraints (Dibble et al., 2018). Moreover, previous investigations have focused primarily on either number of backburners (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Drouin et al., 2014), the frequency of communication with "at least one" of the backburners (Dibble et al., 2015), the sexual/romantic or platonic nature of the communication (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015), proclivity for women to consider their best male friend as a romantic backup plan (Wedberg, 2016), or the maintenance strategies used in the relationship (Dibble et al., 2018). A shortcoming of this previous work is that none of these studies focused on the *most desired* backburner. Thus, it is possible that commitment is not related to simply having or

communicating with backburners in general, but instead commitment may be related to communication with the most desired backburner.

Therefore, the present investigation extended previous research in two key ways. First, we used a non-college sample comprised of adults in dating relationships and marriages to examine more explicitly the role of commitment and marital status in the maintenance of backburners via social media friends lists. We expected that married individuals should average more commitment to their spouses than should unmarried people to their partners and should therefore pay less attention to their romantic alternatives than unmarried people. Thus:

(H1) we predicted that married people would report fewer backburners on average than would unmarried people.

Second, we refined the measurement of the communication with these backburners, focusing on the most desired backburner and communication with that person. Just as people work to maintain other kinds of romantic relationships, we expected that people would spend some effort maintaining connections to their romantic backburners on social media; however, married individuals generally expend less effort than do singles because of the emotional and structural features of marital relationships (Dibble et al., 2018). Thus:

(H2) we predicted that married persons would interact less frequently with their most desired backburner than would unmarried persons.

We also examined the role of sex in these relationships. Previous studies have shown that men report more sexual backburners than do women (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015; Drouin et al., 2014; Rusbult et al., 1998), and men also use more assurances in their communication with their back burners (Dibble et al., 2018). In line with these findings, we expected that:

(H3) men would report more sexual backburners and communicate more often with their most desired romantic backburner than would women.

Finally, as an exploratory aspect of this study, we wanted to examine:

(RQ1) to what extent do marital status and sex predict the maintenance of backburners on social media and communication with these partners?

Method

Participants

Participants were 418 adults (291 women, 127 men) in the United States between the ages of 18 years to 82 years ($M = 29.48$, $SD = 12.86$) who were either married ($n = 188$; 139 women, 49 men) or casually dating ($n = 230$; 152 women, 78 men) a current partner. The average relationship length in the entire sample was 6.86 years ($SD = 9.00$ years). Most participants were in a heterosexual relationship (94.7%), while 3.3% reported having a same-sex relationship, and 2% reported having a bi-sexual or other type of relationship. The participants resided in 40 different states across the U.S. In terms of ethnicity, slightly more than half of the participants were White (53.1%), followed by Asian (18.7%), Hispanic (20.8%), African American (5.7%), Native American (1.0%), and African descent (0.7%). The sample was diverse with regard to the highest level of education completed: 0.02% reported no high school degree, 17.5% had completed high school, 47.4% attended/were attending college (not graduated yet), 9.3% had an associate degree, 17.5% had a bachelor's degree, and 8.2% were attending or had completed graduate school.

Procedure

An institutional review board (IRB) at a U.S. public university approved the current study, which consisted of an anonymous online survey administered through SurveyMonkey. In Spring and Fall 2017, the survey link was shared on the approving university's official research webpage, posted as a human interest task for Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) worker pool, and posted

on social networking sites (i.e., Whats-app, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn). Participants in the MTurk worker pool received participation credit from Amazon (no monetary compensation), students at the approving university received 30-minute credit towards their psychology-1 course for participation, and all other participants were volunteers. According to previous research, participants recruited through MTurk are slightly more demographically diverse than typical Internet samples, and are remarkably more diverse than the typical US college participants (Buhrmester et al., 2018).

We added attention-check questions to ensure high quality data per the recommendation of researchers concerned with MTurk data quality (Aust et al., 2013). All participants who consented to participate were directed to the main survey, which included a battery of scales and hypothetical and real-world scenarios where they were asked to think about their backburners.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire

Participants indicated their age, sex (coded as 0 = *female* and 1 = *male*), ethnicity, education level, occupation, relationship status (coded as *casually dating* = 0 and *married* = 1) relationship length, state of residence, and sexual orientation.

Number of sexual/committed backburners

Participants were presented with two scenarios corresponding to each of the potential relationship types (sexual and committed relationship): “Consider this hypothetical situation. You are currently not in a committed or marital relationship. You are looking for a romantic partner. Please check your social media account(s) and accurately report the total number of people from your social media friend’s list that you would consider having a potential (sexual relationship/committed relationship) with.” The forward slash indicates how the wording varied across the scenarios. Participants answered by providing whole numbers. The number of individuals participants indicated they would have a sexual relationship with was coded as “sexual backburners,” and the number they would have a committed relationship with was coded as “committed backburners.”

Frequency of interaction with sexual/committed partner backburners

For each of the scenarios (sexual and committed backburners), participants indicated how often they interacted with the potential partner(s) using a 6-point Likert scale (0 = *Never*, 5 = *Very frequently*). These two scaled responses for sexual and committed backburners were averaged into a single composite variable reflecting the general frequency of interaction with all potential partners ($r = .64$, $p < .001$).

Nature of communication with most desired sexual/committed partner backburner

To examine the tone of the communication with their most desired backburner, participants were asked: “Now, think about the person from your social media friends list with whom you would MOST like to have a (sexual/committed) relationship with if you were single. What is the nature of the conversation(s) or interaction(s) with the most desired person?” The forward slash indicated how the wording varied across questions. Participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = *Always platonic*, 3 = *Always romantic or sexual*). Participants’ responses to these two scenarios (sexual and committed backburners) were averaged into a composite variable reflecting the nature of interaction with the most desired partners ($r = .73$, $p < .001$).

Frequency of seeing most desired partner in person

For each of the hypothetical scenarios (i.e., sexual/committed), participants were asked “How often do you see the most desired person in real life?” Participants responded using a 6-item Likert scale (0 = *Never*, 5 = *Very often*). Participant’s responses on these two items were averaged to

create a composite variable of the frequency of seeing most desired partner in person ($r = .75$, $p < .001$).

Commitment scale

The seven-item commitment subscale Rusbult et al. (1998) assessed romantic relationship commitment. The responses were anchored on a 9-point Likert scale ($0 = Do\ not\ agree\ at\ all$; $4 = Agree\ somewhat$; $8 = Agree\ completely$) for items such as “I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future.” Cronbach’s α for this scale was .79.

Results

In terms of general descriptive trends, married individuals were significantly older ($M = 38.68$ years, $SD = 11.70$) than those in dating relationships ($M = 20.60$ years, $SD = 4.99$), $t(242.41) = -19.76$, $p < .001$. On average, married individuals had also been in their relationship longer ($M = 13.27$ years, $SD = 10.02$) than those in dating relationships ($M = 1.59$ years, $SD = 1.96$), $t(198.75) = -15.73$, $p < .001$. We report adjusted t-values and degrees of freedom here as the Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances indicated that the variances were not equivalent across groups. Regarding differences between groups, as Table 1 shows, men reported more sexual and committed backburners, more interactions with backburners overall, and more sexually-toned conversations and face-to-face meetings with their most desired backburner than did women. Additionally, married people reported fewer sexual backburners, fewer interactions with potential partners overall, and less sexually-toned conversations and face-to-face meetings with their most desired partner than did dating individuals. However, married and dating individuals reported similar numbers of individuals with whom they would entertain engaging in a future committed relationship.

As a preface to our predictive analyses, we examined the zero order correlations between our variables of interest, separated by sex because of the differences between men and women on their backburner measures. As shown in Table 2, there were positive relationships between the number of sexual and committed backburners women reported and the frequency of their interaction with all backburners as well as the sexual nature of the conversations with their most desired backburner and frequency of seeing their most desired backburner in person. Additionally, for women, age, relationship length, and level of commitment were inversely related to interactions with alterative partners (frequency and sexual nature). Meanwhile, for men, those who had more sexual backburners reported that their interactions with their most desired backburner were more sexual; however, number of backburners (sexual or committed) was not significantly related to any of the other interaction variables. Additionally, although among men age was inversely related to interactions with backburners (frequency and sexual nature) and current relationship length was negatively related to the amount of sexual content in interactions with the most desire backburner, these were the only significant relationships. Notably, commitment among men was not related to any of the backburner interaction variables.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for dating and married men and women on the outcome variables of interest.

	Dating			Married		
	Women <i>M (SD)</i>	Men <i>M (SD)</i>	Total <i>M (SD)</i>	Women <i>M (SD)</i>	Men <i>M (SD)</i>	Total <i>M (SD)</i>
Number of sexual backburners	5.56 (11.20)	21.68 (70.31)	11.03 (47.50)	4.43 (21.35)	15.24 (32.69)	7.25 (25.17)
Number of committed backburners	4.32 (7.49)	9.68 (14.76)	6.13 (10.81)	9.28 (52.41)	10.84 (30.39)	9.69 (47.59)
Freq. interact w/all potential partners	3.18 (1.40)	3.66 (1.27)	3.34 (1.37)	2.49 (1.40)	3.47 (1.43)	2.74 (1.47)
Nature interaction w/most desired partner	1.84 (0.80)	1.97 (0.88)	1.88 (0.83)	1.21 (0.46)	1.60 (0.85)	1.31 (0.61)
Freq. see most desired partner	2.94 (1.39)	3.37 (1.25)	3.09 (1.36)	2.21 (1.34)	2.92 (1.59)	2.40 (1.44)

Dating women $n = 152$. Dating men $n = 78$. Married women $n = 139$. Married men $n = 49$.

Table 2. Correlations for backburner interaction, age, relationship length, and commitment for men and women.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	–	.82***	.24**	–.08	–.03	–.25**	–.30***	–.29***
2. Relationship length	.84***	–	.31***	–.08	–.08	–.17	–.25**	–.16
3. Commitment	.26***	.28***	–	–.03	.09	–.01	–.13	–.11
4. Number of sexual backburners	–.11	–.11	–.13*	–	–.01	.04	.19*	.15
5. Number of committed backburners	–.03	–.06	–.03	.40***	–	.08	.13	.11
6. Frequency of interaction (all potential backburners)	–.25***	–.27***	–.25***	.19***	.20***	–	.50***	.76***
7. Sexual nature of interactions (with most desired backburner)	–.36***	–.33***	–.23***	.23***	.19***	.45***	–	.50***
8. Frequency of seeing (most desired backburner)	–.20***	–.20***	–.17**	.14*	.16**	.72***	.40***	–
<i>Men</i>								
Mean	27.67	5.52	42.00	19.20	10.13	3.59	1.83	3.20
SD	11.17	7.16	9.98	65.28	22.03	1.33	0.89	1.40
<i>Women</i>								
Mean	29.20	7.44	44.41	5.02	6.69	2.85	1.54	2.59
SD	13.02	9.65	9.73	16.81	36.64	1.44	0.73	1.41

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Correlations for men are displayed above the diagonal, for women below the diagonal.

Table 3. Standardized betas for regression models of backburner interaction predicted by gender and marital status.

	Model 1: Number of sexual back- burners	Model 2: Number of committed backburners	Model 3: Frequency of interaction (all potential backburners)	Model 4: Sexual nature of interactions (most desired backburner)	Model 5: Frequency of seeing (most desired backburner)
Intercept	4.14	1.32	2.88***	1.72***	2.81***
Relationship length	–0.07	–0.17**	–0.20***	–0.12*	–0.07
Commitment	–0.05	–0.02	–0.11*	–0.07	–0.07
Gender	0.16***	0.04	0.21***	0.13**	0.17***
Marital status	0.03	0.17**	–0.02	–0.24***	–0.16*
<i>F-value</i>	3.67**	2.46*	14.96***	19.99***	10.90***
<i>R</i> ²	0.03	0.02	0.13	0.16	0.10

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. Gender is coded 0 = female and 1 = male; marital status (1 = married, 0 = dating). Sexual nature of interactions is coded as 1 = *always platonic* to 4 = *always sexual*. Relationship length and commitment were grand mean centered.

In order to delineate the roles of commitment and marriage in the maintenance of backburner romantic relationships to address our exploratory research question more directly, we conducted a series of linear regression models, including relationship length and commitment as control variables. We also tested the interaction between relationship status (i.e., married or dating) and sex, but it was not significant; therefore, we excluded the interaction between these variables from our models. Regression analyses showed that commitment was predictive of only one of our backburner measures: frequency of communication with all backburners. In this case, those reporting higher levels of commitment reported less frequent communication with all of their backburners. (see Table 3). Those in longer relationships had a lower number of committed backburners, interacted less frequently with backburners, and perceived their interactions to be less sexually-toned than did those in shorter relationships. Marital status predicted the total number of committed backburners (married individuals reported more), the nature of communication with the most desired backburner (married individuals reported that it was more platonic), and the frequency of seeing one's most desired backburner face-to-face (married individuals met theirs less often). Additionally, sex emerged as a significant predictor in these models: men reported significantly more sexual backburners, interacted more often with their backburners, had more sexually-toned conversations with their most desired backburner, and saw their most desired backburner more often face-to-face than did women.

Discussion

According to relationship theories like the investment model (Rusbult, 1980), level of commitment to one's partner should be related to valuations of, and in turn, communication with, backburners (Rusbult et al., 2006). However, surprisingly, this has not been found in college samples (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015, 2018; Drouin et al., 2014). For a variety of reasons, both emotional and structural, we expected different trends to emerge among older, married couples, whose relationships, on average, should be characterized by higher levels of commitment.

Overall, we did find different patterns in backburner communication, but these differences were based on marital status rather than self-reported commitment. Married adults differed from dating adults on every backburner measure, and even after we controlled for level of commitment, marital status predicted the nature of the communication with the most desired backburner and seeing them in person. Clearly, some married individuals have sexually-toned conversations and meet up with their back burners; however, overall, marriage appears to provide somewhat of a buffer against sexual conversations and face-to-face meetings with backburners. Perhaps the legal commitment dissuades partners from communicating in sexual ways and in person with their backburners. This may be due to stiffer penalties for extra-relational sex for married individuals, both within the relationship and in the case of relationship dissolution. It may also be due to the heavier investment that typically characterizes marriage as compared to dating relationships. Recall that married individuals had been in their relationships significantly longer than those only dating and likely had more resources invested in the relationship. Meanwhile, the lower rates of sexual conversations among married individuals might also be a function of age. Those who were married were significantly older, on average, than those only dating, and age has been shown to be inversely related to Internet infidelity (Abbasi, 2019, 2019). Alternatively, it could be due to physical space and time constraints that restrict married individuals from engaging in sexual conversations and face-to-face meetings (Dibble et al., 2018).

That said, the average married person in our sample still reported having 7.25 sexual backburners, on average, with whom they were connected on social media. On average, they also reported that their messages to their most desired backburner were not entirely platonic and that they occasionally saw their most desired partner face to face. Additionally, married individuals reported having more *committed* backburners (i.e., those with whom they would consider having a future committed relationship) than did those who were only casually dating. This was driven mainly by the married women in our sample; the dating women reported far fewer backburners with whom they would have a committed relationship than did the married women. Thus, marriage does not exempt one from viewing current social connections as future sexual or committed partners, nor does it prevent sexual communication. In fact, perhaps the experience of marriage opens women up to the possibility of alternative committed partners in a way that does not occur when they are only dating. This is a promising direction for future research.

Considered together, these findings give a somewhat conflicted picture of the inoculating effect of marriage. On the one hand, married individuals' conversations with their backburners may be less sexual than those of their casually-dating counterparts, but on the other hand, they also have more people whom they would consider a potential committed relationship partner with whom they communicate. However, here, we must consider that backburners are only considered as such in the mind of the admirer, and thus people could have many people whom they admire from afar but toward whom they make no romantic gestures. Thus, there is a distinction between intention and behavior, and married individuals appear to direct fewer relationship maintenance behaviors towards their backburners.

Regarding sex differences, in line with previous work (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015; Rusbult et al., 1998), men, as compared to women, reported more sexual backburners, communicated more often with backburners, interacted with their most desired backburner in a more sexual way, and saw their most desired backburner more often. Thus, although women do report having maintaining

backup partners (see also Wedberg, 2016), adult men in relationships, both dating and married, appear to direct more relationship maintenance behaviors towards their backburners. It is also notable that numbers of sexual backburners and committed backburners correlated positively for women, but not for men, which is consistent with research showing that women may overestimate men's commitment (Haselton & Buss, 2000) and/or that men are more likely than women to separate sex from commitment (Olmstead et al., 2017). Although these findings are not novel, our study provides another example of the ways in which sexual communication and relationship maintenance behaviors may differ between men and women. Moreover, because these backburners were identified through social network friends lists, it shows that these sex differences exist even when the interactions are facilitated through the Internet and social media.

Limitations and conclusions

As with all studies, our work does have limitations that need mention. First, this study was limited in scope, as we focused on only U.S. adults and on only three aspects of interaction with the most desired backburner – frequency, nature (sexual communication or platonic), and seeing the backburner in person. Future studies should explore the topic of backburners in international samples and use more nuanced measures of interaction including the interaction medium (e.g., social media, text message, voice calls) and the nature of the face-to-face meetings (e.g., platonic or sexual). Second, our focus was on marital status and commitment; however, we acknowledge that there might be other factors (e.g., relationship satisfaction) that might predict relationship maintenance behaviors with both committed and extradyadic partners. Again, this is ripe for future study.

Regardless of these limitations, this study extends the literature on the topic by providing evidence that married adults do keep in contact via social media with backburners with whom they can envision future sexual and/or committed relationships. Although married individuals may communicate with these desired backburners in more platonic ways and see them less frequently than do casual daters, these backburners are still there, on social media friends lists, providing a convenient opportunity for the development of backburner relationships. As technologies continue to develop more and easier ways for covert communication, it will be important to reexamine the role of commitment and marriage in the maintenance of backburners.

ORCID

Michelle Drouin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0010-9260>
 Brandon T. McDaniel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0743-0367>

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