

An Exploratory Investigation of Student and Teacher Perceptions of Student-Generated Affinity-Seeking Behaviors

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A sample of college students was surveyed to construct a list of mutually exclusive affinity-seeking categories. These categories identified affinity-seeking strategies used by students to attempt to influence their teachers. Another sample, consisting of college teachers, was surveyed to construct a list of teachers' perceptions of affinity-seeking strategies used by students. Twenty-six mutually exclusive categories were generated by the two groups. Results indicate that teachers and students agree that specific strategies are used most frequently: "conversational rule keeping," "elicit other's disclosure," "self-inclusion," and "requirements."

Keywords: affinity-seeking, student-teacher relationship, student-teacher communication

Researchers in instructional communication have learned that numerous teacher characteristics are linked to student affect toward both the instructor and the course material. Teachers' use of communication behaviors such as verbal receptivity (Robinson, 1994), social style (Robinson, 1994), humor (Gorham & Christophel, 1990), communicator styles (Norton, 1977, 1978, 1983, 1986; Nussbaum & Scott, 1979), immediacy (Andersen, 1978, 1979; Andersen & Andersen, 1982; Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Gorham & Christophel, 1990; Kearney, Plax, & Wendt-Wasco, 1985; Kelley & Gorham, 1988; McCroskey & Richmond, 1992; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987), self-disclosure (Nussbaum & Scott, 1979; Sorensen, 1980), and affinity-seeking (Frymier, 1992; Frymier & Thompson, 1991; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986) have been linked to students' affective and cognitive learning outcomes. Instructional communication researchers have identified a wide variety of teacher variables as important components of student learning and as facilitators of positive student-teacher relationships.

While research in the instructional domain has linked teacher characteristics and strategic behaviors pertinent to favorable student responses, little attention has been directed toward the strategic behaviors that students use in the classroom to obtain favorable responses (Bekelja & Dolin, 1993; Dolin & Wanzer, 1994; Wanzer, 1995). What kinds of communication behaviors do students use to increase the quality of their relationships with teachers? This study replicates and expands research in the area of student affinity-seeking behavior (Bekelja & Dolin, 1993; Dolin & Wanzer, 1994).

Previous studies have examined how those in higher or equal status positions

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utilize affinity-seeking strategies and the impact of such use (Beebe & Butland, 1994; Bell & Daly, 1984; Frymier, 1992, 1994; Frymier & Thompson, 1991, 1992; Gorham, Kelley, & McCroskey, 1989; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986; Richmond, 1990; Richmond, McCroskey, & Davis, 1986; Thomas, 1994). These studies provided valuable insights into effective communication skills for those in higher or peer positions, but neglected those in subordinate positions. Generalizing from the available research to suggest what people in subordinate roles can or should do with regard to seeking affinity would be unwise in the absence of directly relevant research.

Student Affinity-Seeking Strategies

Bekelja and Dolin (1993) were the first to focus on subordinate affinity-seeking. They investigated students' use of affinity-seeking strategies with their teachers. In their initial investigation students listed all of the strategies they used to establish affinity with their teachers, how frequently they used those strategies, and the effectiveness of each strategy. Fourteen different categories of student affinity-seeking behaviors were identified. Student affinity-seeking strategies included, among others: "completing course requirements," "humor," "favors," and "asking/answering questions." An exploratory factor analysis indicated that all 14 strategies were dissimilar, resulting in non-overlapping strategies. The strategies were compared in terms of frequency of use and perceptions of effectiveness.

In the initial study, many of the student strategies were similar to the original Bell and Daly (1984) strategies (e.g., "ask questions" similar to the Bell and Daly category "elicit other's disclosure"). However, other student-generated strategies emerged which did not fit the Bell and Daly typology (e.g., "complete course requirements," "flirting").

Students reported the most effective strategy for gaining liking from their teachers was to flirt or compliment the instructor. These highly effective strategies are used by students approximately 56% of the time. Moderately effective strategies such as self-presentation (dressing neatly) and listening were used more often by students to gain affinity from teachers (Bekelja & Dolin, 1993). Students indicated that passive strategies such as "complete requirements" and "class preparation" were effective strategies to use with teachers. Additional research is needed to validate the use and effectiveness of these strategies. Also, the student-generated typology could be further refined (Wanzer, 1995).

In a second student affinity-seeking investigation, students validated the use of the initial 14 student affinity-seeking strategies. Students indicated how frequently they used each strategy and perceptions of strategy effectiveness (Dolin & Wanzer, 1994). In addition, each student generated a list of behaviors he or she had exhibited intentionally or unintentionally in class which would cause the teacher to *not* like him or her.

Fifteen categories of negative student communication behaviors were drawn from the 800 student-generated responses. For the follow-up study, frequency and effectiveness ratings of the affinity-seeking strategies were similar to those obtained in the initial investigation.

Both student affinity-seeking investigations shed light on students' perceptions of effective and ineffective strategies that can be used to gain liking from an instructor. From an instructional perspective, these findings offer important information on student expectations of teacher behaviors. For example, students' high ratings of

relatively passive strategies may illustrate that they believe that their teachers expect relatively little from them in the classroom to gain high levels of positive affect. Thus, students expect more positive teacher responses from those strategies which were rated as effective (e.g., “flirting” and “compliments”). If student and teacher expectations are different, then it becomes important to study why certain strategies are viewed as highly effective by students but perhaps not viewed the same way by teachers (e.g., “flirting” and “complimenting”). Awareness of student behaviors and teacher perceptions of these behaviors can facilitate more positive classroom relationships.

This research compared teacher perceptions of student behaviors with student perceptions of their own behaviors. Several researchers have indicated discrepancies in students’ interpretations of teachers’ behaviors with teachers’ interpretations of their own behaviors (McCroskey & Richmond, 1983) and with teachers’ interpretations of their peers (Kearney, Plax, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1984). The behaviors that teachers report exhibiting in the classroom are not always the same as those the students report or even the teachers’ colleagues report. Several studies have illustrated this finding (see, for example, McCroskey & Richmond, 1983; Thomas, 1994). A clearer understanding of student and teacher perceptions of communication behaviors in the classroom could increase the chances for more successful working relationships.

In order to fully understand student affinity-seeking behaviors, the first study identified the affinity-seeking strategies that students used using constructivist procedures. The second study also utilized constructivist procedures to examine teacher perceptions of student affinity-seeking behaviors.

It was necessary to replicate and extend initial student affinity-seeking research in an effort to collect a broad range of student behaviors. Constructivist methodologies (Dillard, 1988; Seibold, Cantrill, & Meyers, 1985) enable the researcher to collect a wide assortment of responses. Additionally, constructivist methods safeguard against an item desirability bias (Burleson, Wilson, Waltman, Goering, Ely, & Whaley, 1986, 1988). Thus, the first research question was advanced:

RQ1. What affinity-seeking strategies do students perceive they use?

Next, the researcher was interested in the instructors’ perceptions of student affinity-seeking behaviors. What student behaviors do teachers recognize as strategic efforts to gain liking? Thus, the following research question was asked:

RQ2. What are teacher perceptions of student affinity-seeking behaviors?

Finally, a comparison between the two perceptions was warranted. Would teachers and students view certain strategies as being used more often? The following research question was advanced:

RQ3. To what extent do students and teachers perceive the same affinity-seeking strategies being used?

Method

Two studies were executed. Study One queried student perceptions of their own affinity-seeking behaviors while Study Two investigated teacher perceptions of student behaviors.

Study One

Participants in Study One were 212 undergraduate members of an introductory communication course at a large eastern university. The course fulfilled general education requirements across the university and provided a representative sample of students from a variety of fields. In order to get a wide variety of responses, students received an open ended questionnaire which asked them to list five examples of things that “you have done or said to get a teacher to like you.”

The investigator read through all responses ($n = 950$) to make sure that each student example included a singular phrase, sentence, or paragraph which described a conceptually distinct affinity-seeking behavior (e.g., Gorham & Christophel, 1990) or “unit.” Those responses which included multiple behaviors were separated into distinct units. For example, a student indicated that the student “compliments the teacher and goes to her/his office hours” in an effort to gain liking. This example included multiple behaviors/phrases (e.g., compliment and go to office hours) and was separated into two distinct and different units. This procedure resulted in a total of 970 distinct affinity-seeking units.

In the second step of coding, two coders placed the 970 units into similar groupings using the techniques of grounded theory constant-comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The units were placed in groups based on similar words or phrases. It was necessary to create preliminary categories to determine any initial similarities in responses and establish mutually exclusive groupings. Examples which were conceptually similar were placed in the same grouping. For example, the student responses “ask questions during class” and “ask questions about an assignment” were placed in the same grouping because they were conceptually similar. Examples such as “brown nosing” were discarded because they were ambiguous and the investigator could not determine what behavior was entailed. A total of 26 student affinity-seeking categories emerged from the coding procedures.

After all units were placed into groups, the primary investigator examined the groupings and determined that many of the groupings were similar to the Bell and Daly (1984) typology descriptions. For example, all student-generated responses which included the phrase “ask questions” fit the Bell and Daly category description “elicit other’s disclosure” which includes behaviors such as asking questions and inquiring about the other person’s views, feelings, and interests (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992). Four of the student-generated strategies did not fit the Bell and Daly (1984) category descriptions (“requirements,” “flirting,” “gifts,” and “achievement”). Of the 25 original Bell and Daly categories, 22 of the student-generated groupings overlapped.

After analyzing the student-generated examples and placing them into similar groupings, the investigator needed to be sure that these categories were mutually exclusive. The next step of coding was done by five trained coders. Five graduate students received course credit for their assistance in coding the student-generated affinity-seeking strategies. The five student coders were not dissimilar from those undergraduates who had completed the survey.

The trained coders independently coded the student-generated affinity-seeking strategies. They received a list of the category descriptions and student-generated examples and were asked to match the example with the appropriate behavior description. After completing a trial coding run, the coders had developed a protocol of coding procedures (see Wanzer, 1995) to use with the student affinity-seeking

typologies. After several more coding efforts, the five coders had perfected the coding protocol. The average inter-coder reliability for the five coders was .95. Thus, using the coders' descriptors, coding rules, and student-generated examples established in this coding step would elicit similar coding reliability responses in subsequent studies.

Using the coding protocol established by the five trained coders, two additional coders independently coded 15% of the affinity-seeking units (139 total units). Final inter-coder reliability between the two coders was .90.

Study Two

In order to get a wide variety of teacher responses, students enrolled in an introductory communication service course at a large eastern university were asked to approach one of their teachers and ask him or her to complete a survey and return it to the researcher through campus mail. Teachers received an open-ended questionnaire which asked them to list five examples of things that students "have done or said to get you to like them."

Surveys were distributed to professors and graduate teaching assistants. A total of 111 of 250 surveys (44%) were returned. Participants reported a total of 511 responses of affinity-seeking behaviors with a mean of 4.6 responses per individual.

The same coding procedures used in the first study were followed to develop categories from the teacher responses in the second study. The same five coders independently coded the teacher generated affinity-seeking strategies. Coders followed the coding protocol established in Study One. Inter-coder reliability for the five coders was 100%.

Again, following procedures used in Study One, two coders independently coded 15% (81 units) of the teacher-generated responses. Inter-coder reliability was .85. A total of 27 student affinity-seeking categories emerged from the coding procedures. Of the original Bell and Daly (1984) categories, 23 of the groupings overlapped. Similar to Study One, four new categories emerged (e.g., "requirements," "flirting," "gifts," and "achievement"). For a complete list of student affinity-seeking strategies and their descriptions see Table 1.

Results

The first research question sought to identify the affinity-seeking strategies that students reported using. Sixty-six percent of the entire sample fell into the five categories: "conversational rule keeping" (19%), "nonverbal immediacy" (13%), "elicit disclosure" (13%), "requirements" (11%), and "self-inclusion" (10%). The remaining 34% of the student-generated strategies fell into the other 21 categories (for a complete list of the student-generated affinity-seeking strategies and the percentage of responses constructed for each category, see Table 2).

The second research question sought to identify teacher perceptions of student affinity-seeking behaviors. Five teacher-generated student affinity-seeking strategies comprised 53% of the total sample. Teachers often viewed students using "self-inclusion" (16%), "conversational rule keeping" (14%), "achievement" (8%), "elicits other's self disclosures" (8%), and "self-concept confirmation" (7.5%). The remaining 47% of the teacher-generated responses fit into 21 other categories (for a complete list of categories and percentages, see Table 2).

The third research question sought to identify similarities in student and teacher

TABLE 1
STUDENT AFFINITY-SEEKING STRATEGIES AND DESCRIPTIONS

<p><i>Altruism.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him tries to be of help and assistance to the teacher in whatever he/she is doing. Examples: helped the teacher, did nice things for him or her, volunteering to run an errand, or check the teacher's mailbox.</p> <p><i>Assume Control.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him presents self as a leader or a person who has control over the classroom and what goes on in the classroom environment. Example: giving input on how to change or modify the classroom instruction to better understand the material.</p> <p><i>Assume Equality.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him presents self as an equal of the other person. Example: I am friendly with teacher (like a peer).</p> <p><i>Comfortable Self.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him acts comfortable with the teacher. He/she is relaxed, at ease, casual, and content. Example: be myself, act normal with the teacher.</p> <p><i>Concede Control.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him allows the teacher to take charge/control the conversation or activities. Examples: asking for assistance in completing assignments.</p> <p><i>Conversational Rule Keeping.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him follows the cultures' rules for how people socialize with others by demonstrating cooperation, friendliness, and politeness. The student works hard to say the right thing, act interested in the conversation, and avoid topics that are unrelated to the conversation. Examples: I gave relevant answers to questions and did not disrupt the classroom environment.</p> <p><i>Dynamism.</i> The student attempting to gain liking from the teacher presents her/himself as a dynamic, enthusiastic person. Example: being a lively and enthusiastic student, communicating in an expressive and excited manner.</p> <p><i>Elicit Disclosure.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him encourages the teacher to talk by asking questions and reinforcing the teacher for talking. Examples: asking about the teachers' feelings, views etc., make it a point to talk to the instructor on a more personal basis (where are you from, do you enjoy your career?).</p> <p><i>Facilitate Enjoyment.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him tries to make the time spent together enjoyable. The student does things that the teacher will enjoy and tells funny stories or jokes. Example: getting a laugh in class when the time is appropriate, telling funny stories or jokes.</p> <p><i>Inclusion of Other.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him includes the teacher in social events. Example: offered to buy the teacher a drink outside of class.</p> <p><i>Influence Perceptions of Closeness.</i> The student engaged in behaviors which led the teacher to believe that the student thinks the relationship is closer than it is. Example: I asked my teacher out on a date.</p> <p><i>Listening.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him pays close attention to what the teacher says and listens actively. Example: I listened attentively during lectures.</p> <p><i>Nonverbal Immediacy.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him signals interest and liking through various nonverbal cues. Example: When the teacher is lecturing, I follow her/him with my eyes and nod that I understand, I smile at the teacher.</p> <p><i>Openness.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like him/her is open. He/she may disclose information about his/her background, interests, and experiences. Example: telling the teacher personal issues.</p> <p><i>Personal Autonomy.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him presents self as an independent, free thinking person who speaks her/his mind regardless of the consequences. Example: contradicted the teacher, disagreed with her/his views.</p> <p><i>Physical Attractiveness.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him attempts to look attractive in appearance and/or attire. Example: showering, dressing nice for class.</p> <p><i>Present Interesting Self.</i> The student attempting to gain liking from the teacher presents her/himself as someone who would be interesting to know. Example: I talked to the teacher and tried to get them to remember me.</p> <p><i>Self-Concept Confirmation.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him helps the teacher to feel good about her/himself through complimenting. Example: I made the teacher feel that he/she is smart. Telling the teacher that you like her clothing, telling the teacher that her class is your favorite.</p> <p><i>Self-Inclusion.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him sets up frequent encounters with the teacher. Example: see teacher after class, go before or during office hours to talk with her/him.</p> <p><i>Sensitivity.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him communicates caring and concern, acts in an empathetic manner, and shows sympathy to the teacher's problems. Example: writing a professor a note when they have had a death in the family.</p> <p><i>Similarity.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him communicates similarities in attitudes, interests, etc., to the teacher. Example: If you know that the teacher likes hockey, discuss your similar interests/likes in hockey. Express interest in becoming a geologist (when the teacher is a geologist).</p> <p><i>Supportiveness.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him communicates in a supportive, reinforcing, and agreeable manner. The student is supportive of anything that the teacher does in the classroom. Example: I told other students to be quiet in the classroom while the teacher was lecturing. I laughed at the teacher's corny jokes.</p> <p><i>Trustworthiness.</i> The student attempting to get the teacher to like him/her presents her/himself as a trustworthy and reliable student. Example: I never cheated on a test or quiz.</p>

Table 1
(CONTINUED)

Requirements. The student attempting to get the teacher to like her/him completes all of his or her work on time, attends class, and follows the course guidelines printed on the syllabi. Example: The student fulfills the course requirements. The student hands in work on time. The student comes to class prepared.

Flirting. The student attempting to gain liking from her/his teacher is flirtatious and uses flirtatious behaviors with a teacher. Example: If it is a male/female teacher, flirt with them and smile a lot.

Gifts. The student attempting to gain liking from his/her teacher will give the teacher gifts. Example: give the teacher a Christmas gift.

Achievement. The student attempting to gain liking from her/his teacher shows evidence of hard work and achievement in the class. Example: making all "A's," attending optional seminars, doing extra credit papers.

TABLE 2
STUDENT AND TEACHER GENERATED AFFINITY-SEEKING STRATEGIES

Strategy	Students	Instructors
	% & Rank	% & Rank
1. Altruism	2.7 (10)	7.5 (6)
2. Assume Control	0.2 (25)	0.2 (23.5)
3. Assume Equality	0.3 (22.5)	0.2 (23.5)
4. Comfortable Self	0.5 (19.5)	0.0 (27)
5. Concede Control	1.4 (12)	1.5 (15)
6. Conversational Rule Keeping	19.0 (1)	14.0 (2)
7. Dynamism	3.4 (8)	2.8 (12)
8. Elicit Other's Disclosures	13.0 (2.5)	8.0 (3.5)
9. Facilitate Enjoyment	1.2 (13)	2.1 (14)
10. Inclusion of Other	0.4 (21)	1.0 (17)
11. Listening	4.5 (7)	2.8 (12)
12. Nonverbal Immediacy	13.0 (2.5)	5.8 (9)
13. Openness	0.3 (22.5)	1.0 (17)
14. Personal Autonomy	0.6 (18)	.2 (23.5)
15. Physical Attractiveness	0.7 (16.5)	.4 (20)
16. Present Interesting Self	0.5 (19.5)	.2 (23.5)
17. Self-Concept Confirmation	10.0 (5.5)	7.5 (6)
18. Self-Inclusion	10.0 (5.5)	16.0 (1)
19. Sensitivity	0.2 (25)	.2 (23.5)
20. Similarity	0.8 (15)	4.7 (10)
21. Supportiveness	3.0 (9)	2.8 (12)
22. Trustworthiness	0.2 (25)	.2 (23.5)
23. Flirting	1.0 (14)	.6 (19)
24. Requirements	11.0 (4)	6.0 (8)
25. Achievement	2.0 (11)	8.0 (3.5)
26. Gifts	0.7 (16.5)	7.5 (6)
27. Influence Perceptions of Closeness	0.0 (27)	1.0 (17)

Note. Percentages represent total number of communication units generated per category.

perceptions of student affinity-seeking behaviors. Strategies were rank-ordered based on the percentage of examples generated in each study. There was a strong relationship between the rank orders of strategies constructed by the students and teachers ($\rho = .83$) (for a comparison of rank orderings of teacher and student constructed affinity-seeking strategies, see Table 2).

Discussion

In the past, researchers have identified strategic communication behaviors that people use with peers (Bell & Daly, 1984) and in the context of superiors with

subordinates (Frymier, 1992; McCroskey & McCroskey, 1986; Richmond, McCroskey, & Davis, 1986). By using these strategic communication behaviors, researchers have found that people can increase liking (Bell & Daly, 1984), reduce the chances of conflict occurring (McCroskey & Richmond, 1992), and increase credibility (Frymier & Thompson, 1991). Students serve to gain in the classroom when they use affinity-seeking strategies.

The first research question sought to identify the affinity-seeking strategies that students reported using. Students generated examples of behaviors that they used to gain liking from their teachers. The largest percentage of student-generated examples (19%) fell into the category "conversational rule keeping." For the most part, students indicated that "being nice and friendly" or "being polite and courteous" were ways to gain liking from a teacher. Similarly, many student responses fell into the categories "nonverbal immediacy" (13%) and "elicit disclosure" (13%). A majority of the student responses could fall under one larger category labeled "general friendliness." Most likely, students who smile, are polite, and ask questions feel that they are being friendly in an attempt to gain liking from the instructor.

Although a number of categories discovered in this investigation were similar to the categories reported by Bell and Daly (1984), four new strategies emerged in this study. The most popular new strategy, accounting for 11% of the student sample, was "requirements." This strategy included responses such as "doing homework," "attending class," "coming to class on time," and "handing assignments in on time." Basically, students indicated that in following course guidelines, they were attempting to gain liking from their teachers. Similar to an employee in an organizational context, the students indicated that as long as they did their "job" and met the course requirements, the teacher would like them.

Two percent of the student sample felt that achieving good grades and showing evidence of hard work was a means of increasing affect ("achievement"). Similar to the new strategy "requirements," this "achievement" strategy can be applied to the superior-subordinate context. Students, like employees, go above and beyond the work requirements in an effort to gain liking and respect from their superiors.

The second research question sought to identify teacher perceptions of student affinity-seeking behaviors. Five strategies comprised 53% of the total sample ("self-inclusion," "conversational rule keeping," "achievement," "elicits other's disclosures," and "self-concept confirmation").

The third research question sought to identify similarities in student and teacher perceptions of student affinity seeking behaviors. Student and teacher rank orders of student affinity-seeking strategies were highly similar ($\rho = .83$). Thus, we can conclude that teacher and students constructively perceive students using the same affinity-seeking strategies. The largest number of responses constructed by both teachers and students fell into the categories "conversational rule keeping," "elicit other's disclosure," "self-inclusion," and "requirements." Students and teachers recognized that students used these affinity-seeking behaviors more often in the classroom than some others identified (for example, "assume equality," "reward association," and "optimism").

While further research is necessary to ascertain whether similarity in perception between teachers and students influences the perceived level of affinity between matched pairs of teachers and students, the present study provides a comprehensive typology of affinity-seeking strategies based on the perceptions of teachers *and*

students. This typology is important because it provides a foundation for assessing strategies used in teacher-student interaction which might influence levels of attraction.

Further research is needed to determine whether teachers and students agree not only on the frequency with which these strategies are used, but also on the duration each strategy is used, the speed with which students will modify or disengage particular strategies, and the extent to which strategy identification is a meaningful communication activity for students and teachers. The importance of understanding the relational component of human communication in the classroom is critical to developing a fuller understanding of the manner by which subject content is effectively communicated to students.

Finally, this research raises important concerns for student-teacher communication in the classroom. If, in fact, certain student strategies are more effective than others in gaining liking from instructors, should students be instructed on those behaviors to use (e.g., “conversational rule keeping” and “immediacy”) and avoid (e.g., “flirting”)? For the student who uses affinity-seeking behaviors appropriately and effectively with the teacher, what other kinds of relational rewards are obtained (e.g., “breaks” in handing in late work, called on more frequently in classes, and so on)? Finally, could it be detrimental for students to over-use affinity-seeking behaviors? How do teachers react to students who constantly use affinity-seeking behaviors (e.g., “complimenting”)?

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