Older people’s use of Social Network Sites while participating in local online communities from an ethnographical perspective

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Abstract: Social Networks Sites (SNS) are attracting a lot of public and academic interest. However, despite an increasing uptake of Information and Communication Technologies amongst the older population, very little is known about how older people use popular SNS, such as Facebook. We focus on older people’s use of SNS with the aim to gain an understanding on how they can be used to foster involvement of older people in online and offline local communities. We have conducted a 17-months ethnographical study with c.55 older people in a local physical community in Barcelona, Spain. We address the evolution of their interests in SNS and concerns over time, the type of their participation in online communities, and the importance of trust, together with the strategies they adopt to build trust online.

Keywords: older people, online communities, social network sites, community networks, ethnography

Introduction

In the last two decades a growing interest has been put on applications of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) aimed at the local level, often known as community networks. The main focus of much of previous research has been on understanding whether and how community networks reinforce local social ties and foster involvement of their members into the local (offline) communities. Yet, and despite an increasing number of governmental policies, which encourage the involvement of older people in local communities, very few studies have regarded older people as users of community networks.

As Social Network Sites (SNS) have been widely adopted in current society, and have a great potential for enabling online communities among neighbours, we focus on popular SNS to understand how this technology can support the participation of older people (60+) in local online communities. As we argue in the section of Related Work, very little is known about this topic, despite being a timely and important issue to be addressed. In working towards this goal, we considered that exploring older people’s use of popular SNS, such as Facebook and YouTube, over an extended period of time, in a concrete and already established local offline community, was a key step. This paper reports the findings of a 17-months ethnographical study of SNS use by c. 55 older people we conducted in the Àgora community (Barcelona, Spain). The study is framed within Life2.0\(^1\), an EU project aimed at making the local network of social interactions more visible to older people. Life2.0 provides them with

\(^1\) Life 2.0: Geographical positioning services to support independent living and social interaction of elderly people (CIP ICT PSP-4-270965), [http://www.life2project.eu/](http://www.life2project.eu/)
a community system, consisting of a web page and an iPad application, through which they can, for instance, see which services are offered in their neighbourhood, who can help them with simple tasks, which the main events in the local area are, as well as offering their help to other peers and proposing activities. The objective of the system is to strengthen, encourage and facilitate informal care and mutual support practices in neighbourhoods, thereby fostering the involvement of older people in local communities, which, we consider, is crucial in promoting active and positive ageing. We conducted several project-related activities that allowed us to explore further the participants’ attitude towards and use of the Life2.0 community network.

**Related Work**

**Creating and participating in online communities through popular SNS**

Much of previous research into online communities with older people, e.g. SeniorNet (Wright, 2000, Pfeil, 2009a), GreyPath (Burmeister, 2012) and OldKids (Xie, 2008), has overlooked how they use popular SNS, such as FaceBook and YouTube, to create and participate in online communities. Since social digital inclusion, i.e. using technologies that others (e.g. their children and grandchildren) use, is an important issue amongst older people (Sayago, 2010), in this paper we focus on popular SNS, and we review and discuss next previous studies that have addressed them with older people and that are related to the objectives of this paper.

(Sayago, 2012) explored the use and sharing practices of YouTube by older British people. (Pfeil et al., 2009b) compared the use of MySpace amongst young and older people. (Brandtzæg, 2010) investigated the content sharing and sociability of Facebook by young and adults (40-62 years old), and (Gibson, 2010) explored concerns of older people towards MyFriendsOnline and Facebook. Common to these studies is the fact that those older people who participated in them were reluctant to create content in online communities. However, we are witnessing a growing tendency towards promoting the active participation of citizens in online communities. Noteworthy examples of this tendency are (Macintosh, 2004; Kirk, 2011). Thus, understanding better the (lack of) active participation of older people in online communities is timely and important.

**Type of participation in online communities**

(Bloch, 2011) conducted in-depth interviews with 18 older people to understand their engagement in the civic online spheres, and found that none of them created content on the Web. However, they reported being avid information consumers and regarded the use of SNS as trivial. Other studies have explored the introduction of online platforms in local communities (e.g. Capace, 2011; Hampton, 2003) suggesting that these might enhance community involvement. However, none of these studies have addressed the question of whether (and how) older people (would) participate in and benefit from such online communities. An exception is (Karahasanovic, 2009), who explored the use of proxy technologies in a suburb of a Belgian city in order to gather social requirements from older people related to consumption, sharing and co-creation of content in new media. This study found that older people were motivated to create content in an online platform provided that, for instance, the content was relevant for them and for others, such as documenting the history of their neighborhood and sharing their memories in offline get-togethers. Similarly, (Carroll,
2005) shows that senior citizens of a local community enjoyed posting and annotating memories in Blacksburg Nostalgia (a Web-based forum).

Thus, very little is known so far about how older people use, or could use, SNS to create and actively participate in neighborhood online communities. We address this question by adopting an ethnographical approach, which is discussed in the section that follows.

**Methodological approaches to study online communities and SNS**

Social Network Analysis (SNA) has largely been used to explore relationships and interaction between people in both offline and online communities. (Pfeil, 2009a) have used this method to analyse communication and social network patterns of an online community targeted at older people. (Zaphiri, 2006) conducted it to compare newsgroup’s use by teenagers and older people. SNA has been complemented with self-reported questionnaires (Schrammel, 2009) and substituted with qualitative analysis of sample online conversations (Wright, 2000). However, these approaches suppose that older people are active content creators (i.e. comment, reply or post message) and, as we have described in the previous section, older people are not as active in generating content as they are in seeking information (Bloch, 2011; Sayago, 2012).

Others studies with older people have adopted a qualitative approach, mostly based on interviews and intervention study (Lehtinen, 2009), in-depth interviews and usability tests (Brandtzæg, 2010), in-depth semi-structured interviews (Bloch, 2011) and ethnographical interviews (Gibson, 2010; Xie, 2008). Fewer studies have adopted an ethnographical approach, an exception being (Sayago, 2012), despite the fact that it has been conducted and encouraged in previous studies with other group of users (see (Boyd, 2008); (Lange, 2007); (Hampton, 2003)).

We have conducted an ethnographical study, which has adopted a mixed strategy, combining *in-situ* participant observations and conversations with participants while they were taking part in several online communities and using SNS over a prolonged period of time. We also read the online messages they wrote in Facebook and kept track of the evolution of their profiles.

**Description of the ethnographical study**

**The setting**

We conducted our study in Àgora, a 26-year-old adult educational centre in Barcelona (Spain). Àgora aims to promote access to ICT among groups of people who are at risk of social and digital exclusion, such as immigrants and older people. This is achieved through informal learning in courses (e.g. computing, languages or literature). Around 1000 people (using Àgora’s terminology, ‘participants’) take part in them monthly. All these activities are free, and most of them, supported and encouraged by local authorities. The ICT courses are mostly attended and managed by older people. The participants are encouraged to play an active role in the association. For instance, they are encouraged to give their opinions on aspects of the centre which need to be addressed in monthly public meetings, and to make decisions regarding future plans of the centre and its participation in research projects, such as Life 2.0. Agora is situated in the highly populated suburb of La Verneda (29.389 people in 1.1 Km², 24.2% over 65) within the district of Sant-Marti in Barcelona, wherein most of the social impact of Àgora takes place. The community of La Verneda is characterized by high
level of social activities organized by the numerous local associations that are present in the territory.

The participants’ profile

Our study involved around 55 older people, aged 59-80 (15% 59-64, 70% aged 65-75, 15% over 75). All the participants live in flats that are relatively close to Àgora (max. 4 Km) and are familiar with basic ICT-related tasks (e.g. left and right clicks, folders and documents management). 45% of them are familiar with more advanced tasks, including Internet-related tasks, and reported having been using computers for at least the past 4 years. Around 70% of the participants have low levels of educational attainment (i.e. primary school). Most of the participants, 70%, know each other as a result of having participated in courses in Agora, and have been maintaining regular contact over the past 2-3 years. All the participants lead an independent life and are active, e.g. they participate in social activities on a weekly basis and around 50% look after their grandchildren.

Methods

Our ethnographical study, which started in January 2011, adopted a classical approach (Fetterman, 2010), combining in situ participatory observations with informal conversations over an extended period of time. Since then, we have participated in 7 ICT courses, wherein the participants used quite a few different communities technologies: Facebook, Twitter, Picasa, YouTube, Panoramio, Blogger, GoogleMap, Spotify. Each course lasted 3 months and was divided into a total of 12, 2-hour sessions (one session per week). 18 participants were enrolled in each course. Around 15 participants took part in all the courses, while the others were enrolled in 1 or 2 courses.

The participants decided what they wanted to learn during the course, and Facebook attracted a lot of attention. Thus, we set up a Facebook Group among the course’s participants, in which researchers and participants shared information about the courses and other topics of interest for them. The group was set up by the main author in October 2011 and has 34 members, 4 of which are researchers. The first author has established Facebook’s friendship with 41 participants – 34 were members of the group, 6 were participants of other courses - with the aim of understanding the interplay between online and offline spaces, in and out of Ágora.

In addition to conducting traditional ethnographical research methods (i.e. observations and conversations), we have also conducted the following activities (c.20 participants took part in them) to explore further the participants’ attitude towards and use of online neighbourhood communities:

- 2 participatory workshops, which were aimed at eliciting ideas for the concept of the Life2.0 online platform
- 2 co-sketching sessions, which were designed to identify relevant elements for the user interface of the Life 2.0 platform
- 15 semi-structured group discussions in which we addressed expected functionalities and problematic issues of the Life2.0 platform, and its use in wider contexts, i.e. their neighbourhood.
Until now\(^2\) (May 2012), we have gathered over 220 hours of fieldwork. We took most of our field notes at the end of the different activities described above, since our direct involvement in them hindered taking detailed notes while being there.

**Analysis**

We have analysed our field notes and the content posted by the participants in their Facebook Wall and in the Facebook Group by extracting the main categories and subcategories from the entire body of collected data, and defining the relations between them. We did so by reading the notes and contents, and conducting qualitative data analysis techniques (open, selective and axial coding). The core categories that emerged from this analysis are:

- **Interest and concerns over time**: feeling included, privacy, gossiping, unacceptable behaviours, perception of usefulness
- **Type of participation**: information seekers, trusted interaction, face-to-face reciprocity, sharing (trusted people, friends’ interest, cultural tradition)
- **Trust**: recipients control, offline contacts, find strategies, removing friends, restricted social circles, rely on social circle, membership control.

**Findings**

**Online communities and related SNS: interests and concerns over time**

**Interest in participating in online communities, with some important concerns**

Contrary to stereotyped views of older people being uninterested in ICT, all the participants were keen on knowing more about SNS. 85% of the participants reported having heard of Facebook and 20% of Twitter in conversations with their children, “The other day, my daughters were talking about some photos they had put on...how did they call it? [think] Facebook? What do I have to do in order to see these photos?” The participants’ willingness to feel more socially included, together with their curiosity to learn ICT, both exemplified in the “What do I have to do in order to see these photos”, was a strong motivation for them to explore SNS.

However, their interest in participating in online communities and using SNS was not free from concerns, which were mostly related to a perception of:

- A lot of gossiping, “This is for knowing what your friends are doing and gossiping. Everyone knows what you have had for lunch today!”
- A lack of privacy and trust, “why does this person write on my Facebook? She is my daughter’s friend, but I would swear that she is not in my friends’ list. Can she read my posts?”
- Unacceptable behaviour, “I saw my granddaughter’s photos...and I don’t even want to tell you what I saw...”
- A lack of usefulness, “Why should I use it? It is a waste of time, I prefer to use Internet for reading newspapers, not for reading these silly things”

\(^2\) The study is ongoing and expected to last until end of 2013.
• Being glued to the computer, “I don’t want to create an account...My husband spends hours on Facebook!! At the beginning he had just few friends but now he is always there...I don’t know what he does!”

Unacceptable behaviours and privacy concerns have also been highlighted in previous studies involving different SNS, such as YouTube (Sayago, 2012), Netlog (Lehtinen, 2009), MyFriendsReunited and Facebook, (Gibson, 2010). A perception of a lack of usefulness and unwillingness to be glued to the computer screen have not been reported in any of these studies, except (Sayago, 2012), who discuss usefulness within the context of video-content generation.

Evolution of interests and concerns over a prolonged period of time

The long-term aspect of our study allowed us to observe how attitudes towards and adoption of SNS evolved over time. Although their concerns about privacy and gossiping never disappeared, they did not limit the adoption of SNS amongst most of our participants.

They perceived the usefulness of using SNS over a relatively prolonged period of exploration (7 months) of both what they could do with SNS, “I was on holidays last week, and the people working at the hotel asked me whether I was in Facebook. They told me that they would upload photos of the hotel to Facebook. When I got home, I logged in my account and could see the photos! This is great! Facebook is very useful for sharing photos!”, and of how to do it. At initial stages of learning to use Facebook, all of them accessed it by clicking on links embedded in notification e-mails. When they became more confident with this SNS, they started to access it by typing the URL in the address bar of Internet browsers, as they do to check their e-mail, and to adopt it gradually. 7 participants (of 15) reported using Facebook every day, and 5 did so once per week. These findings indicate that Facebook is starting to be part of the everyday ICT activities of c.12 older people, and we show more details of their use in the sections that follows. These results also suggest that concerns and perceptions are much better understood over an extended period of time.

Types of participation in online communities and in related SNS

Profile pages are empty, but they are there! Active consumers of local information

Whereas the profile page of most of them (36 of 41) was almost empty, they used Facebook frequently (at least once per week). Our observations and informal conversations revealed that they read content which was relevant to them. A noteworthy example, with implications for effectively using SNS in communities, is the use a participant made of Facebook to know what was going on in their local area. Namely, she became fan of the Facebook Page of the Neighbours Association, because “they post a lot of information here...I often look at it to see if they organize something in the weekends”. This type of use is difficult to gather in Social Network Analyses, as they tend to focus mostly on users’ profiles (e.g. Pfeil, 2009a).

Posting and replying to messages happen in face-to-face conversations

Rarely did our participants post messages or update their profiles. 2 participants posted messages once per week; 3 did so once or twice per month, while the others never posted any

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3 2 participants claimed not to use Facebook because their initial concerns regarding gossiping and unacceptable behaviours did not make them feel comfortable enough to use it
message. Information sharing was mostly conducted in face-to-face conversations with people they knew, as showed by this conversation: “[Researcher]: next time bring your camera because we will use it in class! We will post a message on the Facebook Group to inform people who did not come to class today. [Participant A]: don’t worry, I’ll tell [participant’s name]”, and in this exemplary face-to-face conversation between two participants:

[A]: “Have you seen the photos of [name of village] I uploaded on Facebook?”
[B]: “Of course I’ve seen them! I was thrilled to see my hometown in your photos! Did you like the town? My house is close to the cathedral that appears in one of your picture”.

Similar strategies have been found in how older British people comment videos on YouTube (Sayago, 2012), but differ considerably from (Zaphiris, 2006), wherein it is claimed that newsgroups for older people are more responsive, i.e. fewer non-replied messages, than those of younger people. This might be due to the fact that in our study, and in (Sayago, 2012), the community had a strong face-to-face element, i.e. older people met up regularly, and therefore our participants do not show reciprocity, i.e. replying to messages online in SNS, and do not expect their friends to do so, whereas in Zaphiris, the physical component of the community might be much less strong. However, proximity and face-to-face contacts are key elements of neighbourhood communities and, in our opinion, they should be more considered when designing online community networks.

**Content creation and sharing with trusted people**

Our participants posted links to YouTube videos which had some relationship with their cultural traditions, “Look the video I’ve posted, it is the Jota aragonesas [Aragon Region’s traditional dance]. We [she refers to herself and another participant] dance the Jota every week in the Aragoneses Center”, or they thought of as funny, “Have you watched this video? It’s a parody on how young people deal with love relations in Facebook... it’s so funny!! I’ve put it on the group [Facebook Group]! All you have to watch it!” We observed that the videos were mainly posted on their friends’ wall. They did so because the videos were targeted at them, “Look this video that I posted on [name’s] Facebook! He loves these things... it is about the popular dance of his hometown”. 4 participants, the most active and with more experience with ICT, uploaded photos and videos they create and they think their friends might be interested in, “Can you help me to upload these photos on Facebook. I went on holiday to the [name of participant’s] village and I want to share these photos with her. I hope she likes the photos!” or representing moments shared with their friends “Last Saturday I took a video while we were having lunch with the group of dance classes. I want to share the video on Facebook”.

These results highlight the importance of trust in the concerns outlined before, and we elaborate further on it in the section that follows.

**Trust is a key issue in online communities and use of related SNS**

**Trust at different stages: learning and using SNS**

When learning to use SNS, one of the main concerns for our participants was whether people they do not know could read their messages or see their photos/videos. For instance, learning to manage the list of friends is key in order use Facebook, and our participants often asked us how to remove so-called friends from their list. We observed, and participants confirmed, that they remove people they do not know very well, e.g. people with whom they had had just few interactions with, indirect friends (i.e. friends of their friends), and users who
post frequent and irrelevant contents, “this guy is ridiculous. He sends a bunch of bullshit...moreover, he sends them in the morning when he is supposed to be at school! Can I remove him?”

Our participants also showed concerns about trust when they became more confident with SNS, and this confirms the time-persistence of this important concern (see Evolution of interests and concerns over time). We observed that no participant wrote comments on YouTube, or in any other public networks (e.g. online newspapers). Informal conversations with them revealed that this was due to their unwillingness to take part in virtual discussions with people they do not know, “I don’t know if people who are writing these comments are experts at classical music [the video she was watching was about a classical concert]. Sometimes, I read of people saying that they are music professors. How can I know if this is true? I don’t know this person and if he is not expert he could say a lot of stupid things! I don’t want to waste my time in replying to people I don’t know!” Similar concerns were raised in Twitter, “I am not the person who would answer to public tweets. You know... I don’t know the people who are writing these things. What if they are very expert and I say something stupid?”

These results disagree with previous works, which show how older people interacted with people they never had face-to-face contacts before (Wright, 2000, Burmeister, 2012). This might be due to the fact that our participants feel part of a local physical community and do not feel the need to create new social ties (neither strong nor weak) online, as we argue in the Discussion section.

**Developing trusting strategies: one-to-one or one-to-few, rather than one-to-many**

Trust concerns did not put our participants off participating in online communities. On the contrary, we observed, and participants confirmed, that they developed their own strategies for building trust online. Contrary to what we observed in YouTube, none of our participants uploaded videos to this SNS, our participants did upload and share photos in Picasa, because they felt more in control of the people who would have access to this content, “You mean that I just have to add his e-mail address in this box and he will receive all the photos? It is like if I was writing an e-mail to him”. 5 participants uploaded their videos and photos to Facebook but they often asked us what they had to do to send them only to one person. Overall, they prefer selectively sharing of information, “Why should I post a message on the Wall if I want to show the video only to him?”. Despite the heterogeneity of older people, this strategy is very similar to the one adopted by a different cohort of older people in Scotland to share videos in YouTube: e-mails sent to people they know and that could be interested in the video (Sayago, 2012).

**Cross-cultural trust in creating an online community from scratch**

Not only is building trust important in popular SNS, but also when creating a community network from scratch. By observing and discussing with the participants during the pilot phase of the Life2.0 project, we found that the participants are unwilling to share contact information (especially their home address) among neighbours they do not know, unless these are shared for a specific and agreed purpose, such as sharing contact data to get in touch with other platform members who are asking for or offering help. The role of members of their social circle appeared to be vital for recommending trusted users, “I’ll tell you what I would do...It’s simple! If I don’t know the person, I would ask [participant name] if she knows him. If she does not know him, then I would ask other friends and if none know him, then I would come to Agora and ask at the secretary...because the secretary should know him, isn’t it?”
The same result was found in the other Life2.0 pilot locations, i.e. Aalborg, Milan, Joensuun (Peterson, 2012). In Aalborg, for example, the participants pointed out that they would like to know the area where a person lives so that they could gather information about her/him in the local area before getting in touch with him or her.

The participants in the four settings suggested strategies for building trust. Common to the four locations was the need to have an external association serving as administrator and coordinator of the online platform. Having a real place where older people can report to in case of need emerged as an important feature in order to support the take-up of the CT among our participants. The participants pointed out that the administrator, who preferably is part of a local association, should control the membership of the online platform, i.e. users who want to have an account should attend an interview with the local administrator to have their accounts approved. The local administrator should also help older people get started, i.e. register them in the platform and verify that all the information is correct, hence functioning as supporter. Periodic face-to-face meetings coordinated by the administrator have also been suggested as a way to increase trust among users.

**Discussion**

We have reported key findings of an ongoing ethnographical study which has hitherto looked into the use of SNS amongst older people who belong to a local community with a strong physical component. We have addressed i) the evolution of their interests in participating in online communities supported by popular SNS and their concerns about taking this step further, ii) the type of participation in online communities, focusing of profile pages, content consumption and creation, and iii) the importance of trust, together with strategies they adopt to build trust online.

We considered that looking into older people’s use of popular SNS was an important previous step towards addressing the key question of our research: how SNS can facilitate and support the participation of older people (60+) in local (neighborhood) online communities. The results show a number of relevant aspects to consider towards achieving this goal.

Despite initial concerns, and contrary to stereotypes, our participants express a clear interest in knowing more about SNS. Their desire not to lag behind and to being socially included suggests that ‘felt included’ is a useful construct to the Technology Acceptance Models, which have been often used to predict older people adoption of social network technology (Karahasanovi, 2009; Ryu, 2009; Chung, 2010), but that have not addressed this construct so far. The results also show the importance of understanding online communities over time, because older people need to i) feel in control of the technology and ii) explore the tool to understand if it addresses their interest and needs, and this takes time. Moreover, the type of participation might be different from that of younger generations, but an overall lack of content creation does not necessarily mean they do not participate in the community. Rather, we have shown that they develop their own strategies, and these strategies could (and should) be better supported by SNS if they are to be effectively used by older people in close-knit communities.

Àgora is a community with a strong face-to-face dimension, which pervades our results. Thus, more research with different types of local communities is needed, and this is part of our next work. However, we consider that it would be a mistake not to consider the introduction and use of SNS by older people in local communities similar to Agora, and our results suggest that in these types of communities, promoting the uptake of online communities among older people is largely dependent on facilitating trust mechanisms online, as well as enriching the face-to-face strategies in the online.
Finally, and with respect to the methodology, our results also show that examining SNS and online communities’ use by older people could go beyond data analysis of profiles or uploaded content. There are other important aspects for understanding their use of SNS, such as offline interactions promoted by the online ones, along with considering that older people might be active consumers of information, which we saw thanks to adopting an ethnographical approach, combining traditional ethnographical research methods with others, more related to online netnography, such as reading online comments.

Conclusion and future work

In this paper we have focused on exploring the use of some SNS amongst older people, who belong to an already established local community with a strong physical aspect, as a previous step towards addressing the key question of how to support and facilitate their participation in community networks with SNS. The results have addressed a number of important aspects to be considered towards this end.

We have shown that a large number of older people do not necessarily dismiss the potential of online communities. They recognize that social network technologies are largely widespread, both in current society and amongst their family members, and therefore knowing and learning to use them is deemed socially included and useful in order not to lag behind.

Initial negative concerns, i.e. lack of usefulness, fear of being glued to SNS, which are often pointed out by previous studies as key aspects preventing the adoption of SNS (and ICT, in general), amongst older people, are mostly overcome after a period of prolonged use, while others, privacy and gossiping concerns, never disappear. We have shown how our participants adopted strategies to mitigate them, such as learning to control the technology and carefully monitor their friends’ list.

We have also shown that our participants do not express themselves in online communities with the language/tools offered by Social Networks Sites, i.e. comments, I like buttons, status update. Socialization and opinions and information sharing remain mainly face-to-face practices. This can also explain why their Facebook Walls are almost empty, despite the fact that they claim to use Facebook at least once per week. They are avid information consumers in online communities and SNS, especially information regarding their local community or cultural tradition. They prefer private messages (i.e. one-to-one communication, similar to the e-mail), instead of making their status visible to all their friends. They did not actively participate, i.e. commenting, uploading content, in open or public online networks.

Trust is crucial in the uptake of online communities among our participants; especially if people they do not know can participate in the community, and there is no control for trusting their members. We consider that older people’ use of place-based online communities can be fostered by adding offline interactions and control (e.g. trusted local association as administrator and membership control), and this is part of our future work.

Our next step is to conduct further ethnographical research to understand the use that our participants make of the Life 2.0 platform, as this should allow us understand our results in a concrete case study, and how technological solutions adopted in the platform support, mitigate their concerns, or create new ones.

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