

The Diffusion of Incel Culture into Digital Spaces and Its Negative Sociocultural

Implications

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Introduction

It has become apparent that the boundaries between the physical and digital world are no longer rigid, but rather porous, which alters interactions with ourselves and the world around us. Online platforms have become a third space outside of the home and professional environments for individuals to cultivate at. Though digital applications can provide community networks to connect individuals on a global scale, this accessibility has also made it easier for the spread of harmful narratives and the regression of sociocultural values. A new phenomenon has emerged online where many young men have begun to identify as being involuntarily celibate (Sparks et al., 2024). Also known as incels, these individuals report being unsuccessful in obtaining heteronormative sexual and romantic relationships. These men believe that women hold the power to control relationships that purposefully exclude unattractive men with the aid of a societal hierarchy that hyperfocuses on appearance, wealth, and status. This conglomeration of online, anti-women hate groups is known to many as the manosphere (Regehr et al., 2024). Many individuals believe that the misogynistic and anti-feminist rhetoric found in incel ideology remains in the confines of niche, online forums. However, with the increasing popularity of algorithmic social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, the manosphere is beginning to infiltrate mainstream digital spaces. This content utilizes pseudoscientific claims, objectifying language, and general sexism to spread covert misogyny packaged as humor, wellness information, and dating advice. Researchers are growing increasingly concerned about the influence these social media platforms have on impressionable users that indulge in content perpetuating harmful narratives and stereotypes about women. There is concern about the rise of misogyny, patriarchal control, and violence against women as a result of this content. According to a study conducted by Ipsos (2026) and the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's

College London, among a sample of 23,000 individuals, Gen Z's male population is leaning more conservatively when it comes to traditional gender values and patriarchy. In this study, 31% of Gen Z men believed that a wife should always obey her husband and 33% of these men said that the husband should have a final word on important decisions. Comparatively, only 13% and 17% of Baby Boomer men in this study held traditional views of decision-making within households (Ipsos, 2026). Another concerning statistic is that over 50% of Gen Z men believed that men are expected to do too much to ensure equality for women, compared to only 45% of Baby Boomer men. Though these findings are layered and multi-facitated, it may be inferred that patriarchal standards reinforced by Incel rhetoric may be worsening the issue for vulnerable populations.

To better understand the spread of incel ideology in digital spaces, it is important to understand who is at risk of both indulging in and spreading this harmful content as well as those who are most negatively impacted. There needs to be more awareness about specific platforms where this content is found, what this content looks like, and what makes this content so engaging. It is also important to dissect the societal implications of this digital crisis for both men and women. Incel ideology may erode the opportunity for individuals to engage in healthy interpersonal relationships based on equity over dominance (Vallerga & Zurbruggen, 2022). In extreme cases, violence against women can be utilized as a tool for submission, control, and punishment (Tranchese & Suguira, 2021). Furthermore, the rise of misogyny and the reinforcement of patriarchy may inform policy in political systems (Preston et al., 2025) . Women may begin to see less representation, advocacy of rights, and protections against harm in a variety of different spaces. specific platforms where this content is found, what this content looks like, and what makes this content so engaging. It is also important to dissect the societal

implications of this digital crisis for both men and women. Incel ideology may erode the opportunity for individuals to engage in healthy interpersonal relationships based on equity over dominance

The Archetype of an Incel

Researchers have compared Incel ideology to hegemonic masculinity, or enacting gender in ways that legitimize the patriarchy and the dominance of men over women (Connell, 2005). Collectively, incels hold the viewpoint that women are inherently inferior to men (Solea & Sugiura, 2023). Women are seen as simple-minded, weak, and manipulative when it comes to their interactions with men (Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022). Incels believe that society is organized along an appearance-based, multi-tiered hierarchy that controls sexual, romantic, and social relationships for most (Sparks et al., 2022). Sitting at the top of the hierarchy are the most attractive men and women, referred to as the “Chads” and Stacy's" in incel communities. The “Alpha” status is awarded to dominant men that are highly sought after and respected by both men and women. The middle of the hierarchy belongs to the most populated sector of people, known as the “normies.” These individuals have relatively average attractiveness and success in dating and social dynamics. However, at the bottom of the tier is where Incels are found. Incels are society’s least attractive men that feel envy and hatred for the Chads that hoard all the women. Because of this alleged structural barrier, women are believed to be hypergamous, superficial, and biologically programmed to seek out the most attractive and desirable men (Solea & Sugiura, 2025). Modern feminism encouraging sexual agency and promoting women’s rights has become the scapegoat as to why women are more selective with male partners (Solea

& Sugiura, 2023). This “us versus them” mentality prevents incels from understanding the nuances of patriarchy and how it constricts both men and women into rigid gender norms.

A lot of manosphere content claims that women are not to be trusted and find their expressions of romantic and sexual desire to be immoral (Krendel, 2020). There are many double standards when it comes to sexuality and romance, leading many men to slut-shame and demonize women for their sexual and romantic experiences. Incels believe that a woman’s value is rooted in sexuality serving male desire and reproduction. Hegemonic masculinity reinforces ideas such as women’s bodies being commodities for physical pleasure (Cosma & Gurevich, 2020). Men begin to feel entitled to a woman and her body, believing men are oppressed by the confines of lookism. Lookism, a term coined in the 1970s, refers to discrimination and prejudice based on physical appearance that does not abide by societal beauty standards (Halpin et al., 2025). Many incels cite lookism as a reason as to why they are unable to obtain romantic and sexual relationships with women. They blame their lack of traditional masculine characteristics as to what makes them unattractive to women. Some men have gone so far as to turn to “looksmaxxing” as a means of maximizing physical attractiveness (Solea & Sugiura, 2025). The male figure is presented as something to be engineered to abide by arbitrary standards of beauty that reflect what masculinity should be.

The resentment incels feel from being undesirable to women and the extreme lengths of confirming their masculinity may encourage men to seek out romantic and sexual experiences forcibly and inappropriately (Speckhard et al., 2020). A woman becomes a sexual vessel to be objectified by men and a tool for bolstering masculinity. Dangerously, some Incel communities have even cited rape and other forms of sexual coercion as a way to obtain sex from a women, disregarding her consent. Misogyny reinforced in these communities diminish the autonomy and

personhood of women. Incel ideology not only promotes fear, silencing women's voices, and threatened sexual violence, but also the exclusion, discrediting, and disdain of women on a mass scale (Tranchese & Suguira, 2021).

Many question what puts an individual at risk of indulging in and promoting incel ideology. The short answer is that there are multiple, complex factors that increase an individual's odds of endorsing the manosphere. When observing individual differences, Incels report significantly higher levels of loneliness than men who did not identify as an incel (Sparks et al., 2024). They also perceived having lower social support, which is correlated with poorer mental health outcomes long term. When measuring mental health symptoms, incels displayed elevated symptoms of anxiety, depression, and relationship distress. Negative body image, adult virginity, later sexual debut, social skills deficits, bullying, and lack of romantic experiences were also associated with incel experiences (Stijelja & Mishara, 2023). Furthermore, characteristics such as resentment, entitlement, and external blame for problems were associated with worse mental health and lower relational well-being. These characteristics seem to stem from feelings of dehumanization or being seen as subhuman by women and society on a broader scale (Daly & Reed, 2022). As a result, many incels resort to nihilism, misogyny, and poor coping mechanisms such as avoidance and isolation (Sparks et al., 2024). With the lack of interpersonal connection outside of online communities, incels become caught in their own self-pity and self-misery. It feels easier to blame marginalized groups such as women for their problems rather than address their circumstances and mental well-being.

The Spread of Incel Ideology Through Online Platforms

There has been a massive surge in incel ideology infiltrating technological spaces in more recent years, particularly amongst younger users. Social media and online forums provide easily accessible platforms to spread this harmful rhetoric on a global scale (Regehr et al., 2024). Incels are able to forage a community of like-minded individuals that find solace in the overlaps of their negative experiences as men trying to navigate social dynamics. Individuals that identify as incels and engage with this content are relatively protected by the anonymity online spaces can provide (Daly & Reed, 2022). Typically when creating an account on a social media or online forum application, users are given the option to make their account private. This privacy allows users to hide personal information that would make their identity known to the public, allowing them to engage in this content with less concerns of broader social consequences.

Content that reflects incel ideology varies depending on the platform that is promoting it. Online forums are seen as a hub for Incels and the birthplace for this movement in general (Solea & Sugiura, 2025). These message boards are seen as niche spaces for incels to participate in open discussions about male loneliness, social hierarchies that benefit women, and punishing women for these disparities. It is not uncommon for incels to create justificatory frameworks for gender-based and sexual violence against women seen in specific subreddits, comment threads, and circulated posts (Gosse et al., 2024). Although online forums are important for understanding the incel community and its members, it is harmful to believe that Incel content is contained within these obscure corners of the internet. In fact, research is finding that a wide variety of men are engaging with structural misogynistic content in more mainstream communities such as social media applications (Regehr et al., 2024). This then points to questions about shifting the understanding of how incel ideology is absorbed, accepted, and distributed in mainstream spaces.

There are a plethora of online applications that contribute to the spread of incel ideology on a global scale. Online forums are typically considered the original catalyst for the cultivation and spread of the incel movement. Key platforms for online incel forums include Reddit and 4-Chan (Tranchese & Suguira, 2021). 4-Chan is an anonymous imageboard website that allows users to post on boards dedicated to specific categories. Reddit is an online social media forum website that allows users to ask questions and have discussions within niche communities referred to as subreddits. The appeal of these forums is that it gives users the ability to indulge in freedom of speech, connect like-minded individuals, and remain completely anonymous if desired. In more recent years, 4-Chan and Reddit utilize volunteer moderators to monitor forums to remove harmful content that goes against the guidelines outlined by these platforms. One of the main drivers for this reform came from the r/Incels subreddit, which had amassed well over 40,000 members (Hauser, 2017). Within this subreddit, members discussed various topics such as derogatory language used towards women and how-tos for getting away with rape. On October 17 of 2017, Reddit enlisted a new policy to ban content that “glorifies, incites, or calls for violence or harm against an individual or a group.” This is one of the first instances of incel communities becoming visible to the public eye. It became clear that moderation and heavier restrictions were needed to regulate users' ability to engage in hate speech. Despite these efforts to maintain incel communities in online forums, a new wave of this rhetoric has been popping up in mainstream spaces.

As algorithmic social media platforms become more integrated into daily life, there seems to be an influx of harmful incel rhetoric and misogynistic content being spread to the masses (Regehr et al., 2024). TikTok and Instagram are two prime examples of algorithmic social media platforms that play a pivotal role in spreading incel rhetoric to the mainstream.

Much of the messaging on this platform is covert, masking misogyny as self-improvement, scientifically-backed, and humorous (Solea and Sugiura, 2025). Vulnerable populations, such as young men, are able to passively consume this content without requiring active searches of this content. Features such as “for you” pages and autoplay help to make this content flow seamlessly in the algorithm, allowing for easier immersion into this ideology. The community and engagement facilitated in comment sections may also create a sense of social belonging for individuals that begin to internalize Incel narratives about social hierarchy, romantic rejection, and self-esteem.

When looking specifically at the short-form content reflecting incel ideology on social media platforms, many creators utilize covert messaging (Solea & Sugiura, 2023). The convergence of general sexism, misogyny, and Incel rhetoric through more palatable forms of short-form content like images and videos makes it easier for the incel movement to penetrate mainstream spaces. Covert messaging reflects harmful narratives and stereotypes about women in the form of memes, emotional appeals, pseudoscientific claims, and shared male feelings (Solea & Sugiura, 2025). Content creators will use repurposed viral videos, memes, and movie/TV clips alongside their own text overlays to push a narrative. These creators may also include common terminology and slang that is popular amongst online users, more specifically younger audiences. Features like hashtags, keyword searches, and viral music on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram make it easier to push this content to vulnerable populations through the algorithm (Regehr et al., 2024).

Social media platforms typically utilize an algorithm that filters out short-form content to its users (Metzler & Garcia, 2024). Short-form content refers to digital content that is designed to be quickly consumed by users, typically only involving a few words in a post or a few minutes in

a video (Solea & Suguira, 2023). For example, on TikTok, creators are given the option to create videos that range from 1 second to a maximum length of 10 minutes. The content found within these algorithms are designed to optimize for engagement (Metzler & Garcia, 2024). However, this is not a direct correlation with the quality of the content, long-term societal goals, or moral values. Typically, short-form content that appeals to immediate social and cognitive preferences and biases receives more algorithmic engagement than the latter. The emotional reactions this content can produce creates echo chambers of discussion and debates between users, creating more engagement and perpetuating this content through the algorithm. Furthermore, social media users are more likely to share content that is lower-quality and liked by other peers than higher-quality content with less engagement.

The Negative Impacts of Incel Ideology

Incel rhetoric is harmful to society because it reinforces and normalizes rigid, gender stereotypes. Within a patriarchal society, men are expected to be dominant, stoic, and avoid femininity (Maryn et al., 2024). Masculinity is affirmed through means of aggression, rejection, and shame. Adhering to Western standards, a “real” man also affirms his masculinity through sexual conquest. Sex becomes less about connection or more about social status among men. Though women are shamed for their sexuality, men are shamed if they are not having sex. Young men who are shamed for not adhering to societal expectations to have sexual relations may direct their anger from the patriarchy to the women who are not having sex with them. This same anger can be directed towards the inability to form romantic relationships and connections with women as well (Daly & Reed, 2022). Unfortunately, the anger and resentment incels feel

towards women may translate from online to in-person interactions. This justificatory framework normalizes a variety of abusive behaviors.

Many incels perpetuate the dehumanization and objectification of women on a larger scale (Transchese & Suguira, 2021). Women are referred to by degrading and misogynistic terminology such as “sluts,” “whores,” and “holes” to name a few. Some incel men also refer to sexual relations with women using terms such as “plow,” “crack,” and “hit.” The implication of the language being used is that not only are women to be treated aggressively, but that men have inherent dominance and control over women with their genitalia (Transchese & Suguira, 2021). Mainstream non-sex positive pornography reflects much of the rhetoric about women enjoying being dominated during sexual interactions. It is not uncommon for porn to fail at portraying consensual sexual acts between partners. More specifically, female performers are typically instructed to show pleasure during aggressive sexual acts. What worsens the issue is that Incel ideology discusses women speculatively (Daly & Reed, 2022). Incels assume what women want or don’t want, citing pseudoscientific explanations to find answers rather than engaging in meaningful conversations with women. Women being left out of conversations about consent not only impacts sexual dynamics but romantic relationships as well (Vallerga & Zurbriggen, 2022). If incels inherently see women as less than, engaging in healthy and equitable relationships becomes nearly impossible. Women may find it harder to feel valued by partners in relationships with incel ideology undermining relational reciprocity. Men feel the pressure to abide by traditionally masculine traits such as dominance, emotional unavailability, and stoicism (Maryn et al., 2024). Both genders will have difficulties creating true intimacy and connection with each other, perpetuating the cycle of resentment incels become trapped in.

Furthermore, the subjugation of women is encouraged by some incels who believe that feminism and women's rights movements have put women at an unfair advantage in society (Sparks et al., 2022). In order to reduce this equity, incel ideology proposes the legitimization of gender-based violence (Haplin et al., 2025). Gender-based violence describes words, actions, or attempts to inflict physical, sexual, and psychological harm onto someone due to their gender identity. Many incels propose that the solution to ending gender equity is to utilize coercion, rape, or the return of enforced monogamy under a strict patriarchal rule (Sparks et al., 2022). In extreme cases, incels suggest the use of sexualized violence to restore masculinity and punish women (Gosse et al., 2025). Men seeing themselves as the victims of a social hierarchy justifies rape as a tool of revenge. Some incels even claim that women have rape fantasies and want to be mistreated during sexual acts. A lot of this anger and resentment is directed towards Chads, who incels perceive as being dominating and aggressive towards women they desire. Sexual violence being used as revenge and control encourages men to harass, coerce, and non-consensually access women's bodies for their own benefit.

In worst cases scenarios, Incel ideology has led to extreme violence such as murder. One of the most well known cases of mass murder conducted by an incel is seen with Elliot Rodger (Langman, 2014). On May 23, 2014, Rodger killed six and injured 14 people in a stabbing and shooting spree in Isla Vista, California. At just 22 years old, Rodger was filled with a lot of hatred towards women. In a video that he had posted to YouTube, Rodger admitted he had "never even kissed a girl," and could not comprehend why women did not want to have sexual relations with him. The mass murder he enacted was seemingly planned, referring to this rampage as the "Day of Retribution." He claimed this was the revenge he had to enact on a society that denied him love and sex. Rodger also stated that he planned to target the Alpha Phi

sorority at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He deemed these women as the “hottest” on campus and the “kind of girls [he’s] always wanted but was never able to have.”

Those that are neglected and forgotten may manifest their resentment into violence and aggression (Preston et al., 2025). For some incels, they feel that violence is the only way to be heard by society that sees them as subhuman. Incel rhetoric has proven to have real world implications that are damaging to all individuals if they are caught in the crossfire of violence.

Preventative Strategies

Although incel ideology is becoming more normalized within mainstream culture, there are a plethora of interpersonal and broader protective factors to help mitigate this issue. Since one of the strongest risk factors of becoming an incel is social isolation, the promotion of healthy social connections may be a good start to repairing the damage this rhetoric can instill (Sparks et al., 2024). Many incels use digital spaces such as social media and online forums to vent about frustrations like sexual and romantic troubles (Solea & Sugiura, 2023). Incels may find solace in the ability to connect with individuals who share similar experiences to them, especially if they feel ostracized in other spaces. However, incel communities can act as a bubble and cause men to become caught in an echo chamber of harmful narratives and confirmation bias. It may be helpful for men to form healthy connections with women to help diminish preconceived gender-based biases. According to James Lawrence, a young American man in his 20s who fell down the incel pipeline, the way that he deconstructed damaging views of women was “having interactions with real women who acted differently than how incels told [him] they would (The Guardian, 2025).” Engaging with women could allow incels to have a different perspective

outside of their own worldview and experiences as men. Maybe incels could see women less as romantic and sexual objects, but real humans with value and the right to their own autonomy.

Another protective strategy that could help individuals from being sucked into incel communities is having healthier examples of masculinity represented in society. For many young men in an increasingly digitalized world, their representations of masculinity mainly derive from movies, tv shows, and social media. Hegemonic masculinity, promoted by incels, legitimizes the patriarchal belief that women should submit to men (Vallerga & Zurbruggen, 2022). Media portrayals of men typically consist of action heroes, breadwinners, or authority figures (Connell, 1995). Alternative forms of masculinity showing traits of being nurturing or sensitive are usually demonized, with the media preferring to push traits like aggression, heterosexuality, emotional restraint, and dominance over women. The increasing popularity of the manosphere has also given rise to “alpha male” podcasts, where podcast hosts attempt to inform young men about dating advice, “looksmaxxing,” and upholding traditional masculinity (Bujalka et al., 2022). To these podcasters, masculinity is rooted in self-improvement in order to become a “high value” male. They also reinforce toxic stereotypes of women that align with incel rhetoric such as women being manipulative, promiscuous, and superficial in partner selectiveness. For both men and women, it could be extremely helpful to have access to informative and educational resources to deconstruct toxic gender biases. In educational institutions, it should be mandatory for sexual education courses to cover information about consent, female autonomy, and female pleasure (Aiolfi et al., 2024). Also, the promotion of social skills development and empathy should be implemented in educational institutions so adolescents have the tools to form meaningful connections with each other regardless of gender. Having greater access to online and in-person resources such as support groups, socials to meet

new people, and third spaces outside of the home and work can help with connection building. More specifically, peer to peer mentoring programs that empower older individuals to work with younger boys to help involve boys in discussions around misogyny (Regehr et al., 2024). It could be useful to expose adolescents to these resources and skills before the effects of gender socialization become more cemented (Ullrich et al., 2022).

More broadly, another preventative strategy that could help online users is more online restrictions on social media algorithms and digital literacy. It is vital that social media corporations are held responsible for addressing the harm caused by their algorithm structure and begin to better prioritise the well-being of users (Regehr et al., 2024). Unfortunately, when corporations prioritize profit and engagement over safety, it can be difficult for proper regulations to be enforced. Even when social media applications such as TikTok claim to restrict misogynistic content on their platforms, algorithmic systems of recommendation still push this content to users. Furthermore, incels tend to use pseudoscientific language to bypass filters and end up on the user's feed (Solea & Suguira, 2023). Ideally, it could be vital to work with social media platforms to remove or flag harmful content more efficiently, especially content that incites hate towards women (Martin, 2025). Companies should be more aware of the different types of content circulating on their platforms, especially more popular videos that incite harm and negative stereotype reinforcement within comment sections and community discussion. On an individual level, it could be crucial for individuals to build digital literacy skills. It can help teach critical thinking to help users identify harmful and extremist content (Regehr et al., 2024). Some researchers suggest implementing “healthy digital diet” education, a program that discusses different types of screen time and digital content young users are engaging with, akin to different food groups. Individuals are taught to consider how much they are consuming of

specific content, how it may be “ultra-processed” due to algorithms, and the potential psychological and physical implications. This education can also be provided for parents and community members who may not be aware of the risks of incel ideology online (Martin, 2025). Highlighting the risks of incel ideology without reinforcing stigmatization of these groups can be crucial for observing the harmful risks and behaviors associated. Education can begin within the home and in the direct environment if the tools and resources are available.

A Future Direction of Research

Outside of interpersonal relationships and societal outlooks on women, one future direction of research coming into question is whether there is a connection between online incel discourse and legal policy. Though there is not a direct correlation between politics and incels, many question if incels align with far-right political movements that suppress women’s autonomy and rights (Preston et al., 2025). During the United States 2024 presidential election, 56% of young male voters voted red (CIRCLE, 2024). Historically, republican policies concerning women’s rights tend to align with traditional values (Preston et al., 2025). Many conservatives are pro-life, meaning they are against the use of abortion. There is a positive correlation between far-right conservative individuals and religion being a centralized part of identity. Cultural and religious values can inform a woman's role as a wife and mother, encouraging women to uphold family values. Within traditional values, the lines can blur between traditional gender norms and female submission to dominant male patriarchs. Incels, like many far-right conservative individuals, are against feminist movements because they go against the norms of traditional gender roles (Coufal & Wedel, 2025).

One real world example of changing political landscapes in the United States specifically can be seen with potential legislative changes to no-fault divorce policies in Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana (Institute for Divorce Financial Analysts, 2025). No-fault divorce allows couples to dissolve a marriage without proof of wrongdoing for either spouse. This law made divorce from abusive partners much easier because they did not need proof of abuse to leave these harmful situations. Though incel culture cannot be directly blamed for these shifts in political climate, the potential consequences of undoing these protections seems to align with ideology seen within incel communities. Incels feel entitlement to women and their bodies, with or without consent (Speckhard et al., 2020). If legal policy makes it difficult for women to leave abusive relationships, men could have more control over these vulnerable women with few legal consequences. Women may also feel pressured to stay in troubling relationships due to externalized and internalized expectations.

Conclusion

Despite all of the criticisms about online platforms, these digital spaces are only going to continue to become integral in everyday life for the average individual. Community cohesion is defined by digital connectedness now more than ever, with many individuals utilizing the digital world as a place to inform their relationships and identify formation. Incel communities, originating on online forums, highlight the most extremist corners of the internet thought to be hidden in the shadows. However, in more recent years, there has been a surge of content on social media applications such as TikTok and Instagram that seem to correlate with the ideology directly sourced from Incel forums. There is increasing concern about the rise of misogyny, patriarchal control, and violence against women as a result of this content. It is crucial to address

who is at risk of both indulging in and creating harmful and misogynistic content as well as identifying the individuals most impacted by this rhetoric. Uncovering specific platforms where this content derives, what it looks like, and why it's engaging may point out the societal implications of this digital phenomenon. The opportunity to engage in healthy and equitable relationships may be diminished due to the popularization of harmful rhetoric about women. In more extreme cases, women may even be harmed as a means of submission, control, and punishment by their male counterparts. Furthermore, the reinforcement of patriarchal standards and misogyny may continue to damage society on a systemic level. It begs the question about future directions of uncovering potential links between Incel ideology and growing levels of gender inequality reflected by political policy. All of this context is necessary to help tailor preventative tools that promote education and support for those engaging with this content and negatively impacted as a consequence. Though dismantling incel frameworks is not an easy endeavor, there are a plethora of ways to begin the process of deradicalization within communities. This task is not something that should be done alone, considering that isolation and disconnection may be one of the main culprits of this phenomenon in the first place.

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