

## **Impact of Social Media in Curbing Pre-Election Violence in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election in Edo State: A Perception Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** The effectiveness of social media in curbing pre-election violence is a critical issue in the context of the 2023 Nigerian presidential election in Edo State. Social media platforms have become significant channels for information dissemination, particularly concerning election-related events, yet their role in addressing pre-election violence remains under-explored.

**Objective:** The researchers examined the effectiveness of social media in curbing pre-election violence during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, focusing on the perceptions of Benin residents. Specifically, it sought to determine the level of social media exposure to pre-election violence, assess perceptions of media objectivity in reporting such violence, and evaluate perceptions of the effectiveness of media reportage in mitigating violence.

**Method:** Adopting a survey research design, data were collected from a sample of 400 participants selected through random sampling techniques in Benin City. A structured questionnaire was utilized to gather information on residents' social media exposure, perceptions of objectivity, and effectiveness of media reporting on pre-election violence.

**Results:** The findings indicated a significant level of exposure among Benin residents to social media reportage regarding pre-election violence. However, perceptions varied, with a notable proportion of residents viewing social media messages as ineffective and lacking objectivity. This suggests a critical disconnect between media exposure and residents' trust in the information being disseminated.

**Conclusion:** The researchers conclude that while Benin residents are exposed to social media coverage of pre-election violence, many perceive this coverage as ineffective and biased. This scepticism may undermine the potential of social media to play a constructive role in addressing pre-election violence, highlighting the need for improved reporting practices.

**Unique Contribution:** This research contributes to the understanding of the complex relationship between social media reporting and public perception in the context of electoral violence. It underscores the necessity for media organizations to enhance the objectivity and effectiveness of their reportage, providing valuable insights for policymakers developing guidelines for responsible media practices during elections.

**Key Recommendation:** Media organizations should prioritize improving the objectivity and effectiveness of their reporting on pre-election violence, while policymakers should establish best practices and guidelines to ensure credible and responsible media engagement in electoral processes.

**Keywords:** Benin City, Media effectiveness, pre-election violence, 2023 presidential election, Nigeria.

## INTRODUCTION

Election violence in Nigeria especially in presidential elections has been a persistent issue, involving both state and non-state actors, and is often linked to political and ethnic tensions. The role of media reporting, including social media, in promoting peaceful elections and addressing this violence is crucial. The media, including social media platforms, bear the responsibility of providing accurate and unbiased coverage of events, facilitating peaceful conflict resolution, and acting as a watchdog to expose electoral malpractice and hold politicians accountable (Fayoyin & Olayide, 2019). Effective reporting on election violence is vital as it has the potential to shape public opinion, influence the outcome of elections, and ensure peaceful dispute resolution (Amiebaho, Nwaoboli & Asemah, 2023).

In Nigeria, several factors contribute to the occurrence of election violence. Political and ethnic tensions, stemming from the country's multi-ethnic nature, can escalate during elections and lead to violence. Electoral malpractice, such as ballot box snatching, vote buying, and result falsification, also contributes to a sense of injustice and frustration among the electorate, which can escalate into violence (Ojo and Adepoju, 2018). Social media, as a powerful communication tool, has both positive and negative impacts on election violence. It can exacerbate or mitigate violence, depending on how it is utilized. Studies have shown that social media can perpetuate political and ethnic tensions, thus fueling violence (Onuoha, 2015). False information, hate speech, and incendiary content circulated on social media platforms can amplify existing tensions and lead to violent incidents.

However, social media can also play a positive role in promoting peaceful elections. It provides a platform for citizens to express their grievances, disseminate information, and mobilize for peaceful action. Through raising awareness about the importance of peaceful elections and disseminating accurate information, social media can contribute to reducing election-related violence (Ogunbodede and Oyebisi, 2018). Based on this premise, this study examines Benin residents' perception of social media effectiveness in curbing pre-election violence in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. Despite efforts by stakeholders to address the problem of pre-election violence in Nigeria, election violence persists, and the role of social media reporting in promoting peaceful elections is not well understood. While previous studies such as Onuoha (2015) and Onwe, Nwafor, & Orji-Egwu, (2017) have carried out studies relating to mass media role in perpetuating political and ethnic tensions that lead to election violence, there still remains dearth of literature on the effectiveness of social media reporting in promoting peaceful presidential elections in Nigeria. This study aims to fill this research gap by assessing the perceptions of Benin City residents towards media coverage of pre-election violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Through identifying areas for improvement, the study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge on the role of social media reporting in promoting peaceful elections in Nigeria.

## **Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Determine the extent of Benin residents' exposure to social media messages on pre - election violence in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election
2. Investigate Benin residents perception of the objectivity of social media messages on pre - election violence in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election
3. Evaluate the perception of Benin residents on the effectiveness of social media messages in curbing pre - election violence in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election

## **CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

### **Election Violence**

Election violence, according to Ojo and Adepoju (2018), is any kind of violence that occurs during or after an election with the intention of upsetting the electoral process, frightening voters, or inflicting damage to people or property. This concept places particular emphasis on the violence's temporal nature, particularly when it occurs during or after an election. The election process may be greatly impacted by violence in many ways, including physical assaults, voter intimidation, ballot box snatching, and other kinds of electoral fraud. The goal is to create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that will make it difficult for competing candidates to run effective campaigns and prevent people from exercising their right to vote democratically.

Election violence, according to Nwankwo and Iheriohanma (2018), is defined as acts of violence committed during a presidential election with the aim of influencing the result or undermining the democratic process. The purposeful use of violence with the intent to sway the results of an election or undermine the democratic process is at the centre of this concept. The election process may be greatly impacted by violence in a variety of ways, including physical assaults, vote rigging, ballot box stuffing, and other electoral fraud. The goal is to undermine democracy and gain an unfair advantage in the voting process. Election violence is defined by Ojo (2015) as actions or behaviours that take place during an election with the purpose to sabotage the electoral process and intimidate rival candidates. The emphasis of this description is on exposing the violence's intended outcome, which is to purposefully sabotage the election process and terrorize opponents. Violence may take many different forms, such as physical attacks, verbal abuse, and property destruction. The goal is usually to create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that will make it difficult for competing candidates to run effective campaigns and prevent people from exercising their right to vote democratically (see: Aligwe, et al., 2016; and Ezike, et al., 2016).

According to Odionye and Aluko (2021), election violence is any kind of violence that occurs before, during, or after a presidential election. Its objective is to obstruct the voting process, rig the results, or cause personal injury and property damage. The concept emphasises the time nature of violence by pointing out that it may occur before, during, or after an election. The election process may be greatly impacted by violence in many ways, including physical assaults, voter intimidation, ballot box snatching, and other kinds of electoral fraud. The goal is to create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty that will make it difficult for competing candidates to run effective campaigns and will dissuade citizens from exercising their right to vote.

## **Social Media**

Social media is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of internet-based applications and services that allow users to create, share, and modify user-generated content. Social media platforms allow users to connect with friends and family, as well as to connect with others who share their interests (Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023; Onalaja, 2024; Nwaoboli & Ajibulu, 2023). Social media has become an integral part of our lives, and it is used for a variety of purposes, including communication, entertainment, news, and commerce. According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), social media are internet-based applications that allow the creation and sharing of user-generated content. Aral & Walker (2011) see social media as online platforms that facilitate the creation, sharing, and modification of user-generated content. Boyd & Ellison (2007) define social media as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system, and update their profile status and/or share content.

One of the most common types of social media is social networking sites and according to Fayoyin & Olayide (2019) and Nwaoboli, Ezeji & Osife-Kurex (2022), these platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, allow users to connect with friends and family and to connect with others who share their interests. Users can share updates, photos, and videos, and engage in conversations with others. Another type of social media is microblogging platforms (Onalaja, 2024). These platforms, such as Twitter and Tumblr, allow users to share short messages or "tweets" with their followers (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Image-sharing platforms, such as Instagram and Pinterest, are another type of social media. These platforms allow users to share photos and videos with their followers. Users can also browse through other people's posts and discover new content. Image-sharing platforms are a great way for people to showcase their creativity and connect with others who share similar interests.

Aral & Walker (2011) observe that video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok, are also popular social media platforms. These platforms allow users to share videos with their followers. Social news and bookmarking sites, such as Reddit and Digg, are also popular social media platforms. These platforms allow users to share news articles and other web content with their followers. Users can upvote or downvote content, which determines how popular it is on the platform. Social news and bookmarking sites are a great way for people to discover new content and stay up-to-date on current events.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Impacts of Pre-election violence on Presidential elections**

Pre-election violence in Nigeria has significant impacts on the outcome of presidential elections. Firstly, it leads to reduced voter turnout due to the fear and insecurity created by the violence. Low turnout makes it challenging to determine the true will of the people, raising questions about the legitimacy of the election (Nwankwo & Iheriohanma, 2018). Secondly, pre-election violence can be utilized as a tool to manipulate the electoral process, enabling electoral malpractice such as ballot box stuffing and vote buying, which undermines the credibility of the election (Adebayo, 2015). Another consequence is the intimidation of opposing candidates and their supporters. Physical attacks, threats, and property destruction create an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, impeding candidates' ability to campaign and mobilize their supporters (Adeniran & Olaniyan,

2013). Moreover, pre-election violence can create the perception of bias and unfairness, eroding public trust in the electoral process. This can lead to protests, legal challenges, and civil unrest, further undermining democracy (Ojo & Adepoju, 2018).

Furthermore, pre-election violence polarizes the electorate and deepens societal divisions. Existing social, economic, and political tensions are exacerbated, making it difficult for the winning candidate to govern effectively and foster national unity (Marenin & Stohl, 2001). The violence can also result in the delay or cancellation of the election, causing uncertainty, increased tensions, and potential constitutional crises (Odionye & Aluko, 2021). Economically and socially, pre-election violence imposes significant costs. It leads to property destruction, loss of lives, and disruption of economic activities, contributing to long-term consequences such as increased poverty, unemployment, and social unrest (Ogunbodede & Oyeibisi, 2018). Additionally, pre-election violence attracts international condemnation and damages a country's reputation. Negative media coverage and diplomatic pressure from foreign governments and international organizations undermine the legitimacy of the government and harm international relations (Ojo & Adepoju, 2018).

At large, pre-election violence in Nigeria has far-reaching consequences. It reduces voter turnout, manipulates the electoral process, intimidates candidates and their supporters, fosters perceptions of bias and unfairness, polarizes the electorate, delays or cancels elections, imposes economic and social costs, and attracts international condemnation. It is crucial for stakeholders to address this issue comprehensively to ensure peaceful, credible, and democratic elections in Nigeria.

### **Influence of social media messages on pre-election violence in presidential elections**

The influence of social media messages on pre-election violence in presidential elections is a crucial aspect to consider. Media reportage, including social media, can have both positive and negative effects on the occurrence and escalation of pre-election violence. Negative effects arise when media outlets engage in sensationalism, bias, and the dissemination of false information, which contribute to the escalation of violence. Sensationalized media reports have been found to exacerbate tensions and contribute to the escalation of violence (Ogunbodede & Oyeibisi, 2018). Similarly, the spread of false information through social media and other digital platforms can mobilize violent groups and intensify violence (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023). Furthermore, media bias can misrepresent events and demonize certain groups, fueling violence and hatred. Social media outlets can also incite pre-election violence through hate speech or the promotion of violent ideologies. According to Marenin and Stohl (2001), examples from the Philippines illustrate how social media outlets played a significant role in inciting violence during elections. Similarly, Ojo (2015) highlights the involvement of social media outlets in inciting violence during the elections in Nigeria by stating that the publication of incisive pictures can incite pre-election violence. However, social media messages can also have positive effects on promoting peace and stability during presidential elections.

Social media platforms can act as an early warning system by reporting on early signs of tension and conflict, thereby helping to prevent pre-election violence (Odionye & Aluko, 2021). Moreover, they can promote transparency and accountability by reporting on the electoral process and highlighting irregularities or malpractices, thus contributing to free and fair elections (Ogunbodede & Oyeibisi, 2018). Social media outlets also have the potential to foster dialogue and



reconciliation among opposing groups by providing platforms for peaceful dialogue and debate (Ojo & Adepoju, 2018). By offering opportunities for opposing groups to express their views and engage in constructive dialogue, social media outlets can help promote peace and stability. Additionally, social media outlets can mobilize public opinion against pre-election violence by highlighting the negative consequences of violence and promoting peaceful alternatives. Through the dissemination of messages centered on peace, tolerance, and mutual respect, social media outlets can play a critical role in mobilizing public opinion against violence (Onuoha, 2015).

In sum, social media messages and media reportage in general have a significant impact on pre-election violence during presidential elections. While negative influences include sensationalism, bias, false information, and the promotion of violence, positive influences manifest through early warning systems, transparency, accountability, dialogue facilitation, and mobilization of public opinion against violence.

## **EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

Ugo (2023) conducted a study investigating the impact of social media on pre-election violence during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election. The researcher employed the social identity theory and the social learning theory to explore how social media influences pre-election violence. The study incorporated a mixed-methods research design, including a survey of social media users, content analysis of social media posts, and semi-structured interviews with political actors and civil society groups. Through survey questionnaires, content analysis, and interviews, the study found that false information circulated through social media and other digital platforms contributed to the escalation of violence during the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. It emphasized that responsible use of social media can promote peace and stability during electoral processes. The study recommended that political actors and media practitioners adopt responsible social media usage to prevent pre-election violence and foster peaceful and democratic electoral processes.

Marenin and Stohl (2001) conducted a comparative analysis of media reportage on pre-election violence in various countries, including the Philippines, South Africa, and Northern Ireland. By employing the social learning theory, the study explored how media reportage influences violence during elections. The researchers utilized content analysis of media reports, interviews with journalists, and surveys of the public to collect data. Their findings revealed that media reportage can incite violence by promoting violent images and messages, particularly in societies with political and ethnic divisions. The study emphasized that responsible journalism and ethical media practices play a crucial role in promoting peace and stability during electoral processes.

In a study by Ogunbodede and Oyeibisi (2018), the focus was on investigating the relationship between media reportage and pre-election violence in Nigeria during the 2015 presidential elections. The researchers employed the agenda-setting theory and the social responsibility theory to understand the influence of media reportage on pre-election violence. They utilized a qualitative research design, conducting semi-structured interviews with journalists, politicians, and civil society groups, along with content analysis of media reports. The study demonstrated that sensationalized media reports and biased reporting contributed to the escalation of violence during the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria. It also highlighted the significance of responsible journalism and ethical media practices in preventing pre-election violence, recommending their adoption to promote peaceful and democratic electoral processes.

In comparison to the previous studies, the current study examined the specific impact of social media messages on pre-election violence in presidential elections. While the previous studies have touched on the role of media reportage and social media, the current study focuses specifically on the influence of social media messages. It seeks to explore how the dissemination of messages through social media platforms can contribute to the occurrence and escalation of pre-election violence. Additionally, the current study differs in terms of its research design, theoretical framework, and geographical focus.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Agenda-Setting Theory, introduced by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, posits that the media play a crucial role in influencing the public's perception of issue importance by selectively emphasizing certain topics (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Instead of directly manipulating people's beliefs, the theory suggests that the media inform individuals about what they should consider significant. Arijenwa & Nwaoboli, (2023) further expound on the Agenda-Setting Theory, highlighting three key principles underlying its framework.

Firstly, the media significantly shape the public's perception of the significance of problems. In giving prominence to specific issues, the media can influence what the public considers important and worthy of attention. In the context of pre-election violence, media coverage can shape how the general public views this issue, as they rely on media sources for information and cues about its salience. Secondly, the media's influence on public perception depends more on the topics they choose to highlight rather than their own agenda. While media outlets may have their own biases and preferences, their ability to shape public opinion is primarily determined by the issues they prioritize in their coverage. Through focusing on pre-election violence and providing extensive coverage, media sources can potentially influence the public's perception of its significance and urgency. Thirdly, several factors can constrain the media's capacity to shape public perception, including the audience's preexisting ideas and values and the availability of alternative information sources. The existing beliefs and values held by individuals can act as filters through which they interpret media messages. Additionally, if alternative information sources present conflicting views or downplay the importance of pre-election violence, it may limit the media's influence on public perception.

In the specific context of assessing media efficacy in covering pre-election violence during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria, the Agenda-Setting Theory provides a framework for analyzing the impact of media coverage on the general public's perception, particularly among Benin citizens. Media outlets that extensively highlight the negative consequences and implications of pre-election violence may lead the public to perceive it as a significant issue that requires attention and action. Conversely, if media sources downplay or underreport the seriousness of pre-election violence, it may shape the public's perception of it as a non-issue that does not warrant immediate attention.

## METHOD

A descriptive survey design was chosen for the study, which involved collecting data from a sample of participants using a structured questionnaire. The population of the study was the total number of residents of Benin City which according to the population projection by the National Population Census (2016) Enumeration Area Demarcation (EAD) Data, was 1,496,000. To determine the appropriate sample size, the Taro Yamane sampling size technique was used, assuming a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%. Based on this calculation, a sample size of 400 participants was determined. A random sampling technique was used to select participants from the population, ensuring that each person had an equal chance of being selected. The choice of a survey design was justified because it allowed the researchers to collect data from a large number of participants in a relatively short amount of time. It should be noted that 25 copies of the questionnaire were not retrieved while 375 copies were retrieved.

## RESULT

**Table 1: Extent of Benin residents' exposure to social media messages on pre - election violence in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage %
Strongly Agree	188	50.1
Agree	96	25.6
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	24	6.4
Strongly Disagree	67	17.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Field Survey, 2024.**

Data in Table 1 suggests that social media reportage on pre-election violence during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election reached a significant portion of Benin residents. The high percentage of respondents who strongly agree that they were exposed to media reportage on pre-election violence suggests that media coverage of the issue was widespread and reached a significant portion of the population.

**Table 2: Benin residents' perception of the objectivity of social media messages on pre - election violence in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage %
Very High	76	20.3
High	101	26.9
Neutral	11	2.9
Low	90	24
Very Low	97	25.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Field Survey, 2024.**

Table 2 indicates that there is significant proportion of residents who have doubts about the objectivity of social media messages on pre-election violence, which could affect their trust in social media and their ability to make informed decisions about the election.



**Table 3: Perception of Benin residents on the effectiveness of social media messages in curbing pre - election violence in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election**

Variable	Frequency	Percentage %
Very Effective	94	25.1
Effective	66	17.6
Neutral	17	4.5
Ineffective	96	25.6
Very Ineffective	102	27.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>375</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Field Survey, 2024.**

The data in Table 3 suggests that Benin residents have varying perceptions of the effectiveness of social media messages in curbing pre-election violence during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, with a greater proportion of respondents perceiving it to be ineffective.

## DISCUSSION

The present study examined Benin residents' perception of social media effectiveness in reporting pre-election violence during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. The study found that a significant proportion of Benin residents (75.7%) were exposed to social media reportage on pre-election violence during the election. This finding is consistent with the literature on the role of the media in informing citizens about election-related issues (Marenin & Stohl, 2001). The high level of media exposure suggests that social media messages on the issue were widespread and reached a significant portion of the population.

However, Table 2 revealed that a significant proportion of residents (50.3%) did not perceive social media messages on pre-election violence during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election to be objective. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have identified social media bias and lack of objectivity as factors that contribute to pre-election violence (Ogunbodede & Oyeibisi, 2018). The perception of media bias and lack of objectivity could affect residents' trust in the media and their ability to make informed decisions about the election.

Table 3 showed that a significant proportion of residents (52.8%) perceive social media messages to be ineffective in curbing pre-election violence, with only 25.1% considering it to be very effective. This finding is consistent with a study that examined the role of social media in pre-election violence during the 2019 Nigerian presidential election (Ugo, 2023). The study found that social media did not play a significant role in curbing pre-election violence, as many users lacked trust in the information shared on social media platforms. Similarly, the present study's finding suggests that residents lack confidence in the media's ability to play a positive role in curbing pre-election violence.

More so, the findings of the present study suggest that social media coverage of pre-election violence during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election reached a significant portion of Benin residents. However, residents have varying perceptions of the objectivity and effectiveness of media reportage, with a significant proportion perceiving it to be ineffective and not objective. These findings highlight the need for media organizations to improve their reporting practices and

for policymakers to develop strategies to improve the quality and effectiveness of media reportage on pre-election violence.

In addition to aligning with previous studies that highlight the pervasive role of social media in informing citizens about election-related issues (Marenin & Stohl, 2001), the present study extends the discourse by revealing a critical gap in the perceived objectivity and effectiveness of such media coverage. While previous research has identified media bias as a contributing factor to pre-election violence (Ogunbodede & Oyeibisi, 2018), our findings indicate that over half of the respondents view social media messages as ineffective in curbing violence, suggesting a deeper skepticism towards the media's role. This skepticism may stem from the rapid spread of misinformation and the lack of accountability in social media reporting, which can erode public trust.

Furthermore, the high level of media exposure juxtaposed with the residents' perception of ineffectiveness reveal the complex dynamics between media consumption and public perception, indicating that simply disseminating information is insufficient without ensuring its reliability and objectivity. Thus, our study not only corroborates existing literature but also highlights the urgent need for media organizations to adopt more rigorous reporting practices and for policymakers to implement measures that enhance the credibility of social media as a tool for fostering informed electoral participation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The researchers conclude that social media messages on pre-election violence during the election reached a significant portion of Benin residents. However, residents have varying perceptions of the objectivity and effectiveness of media reportage, with a significant proportion perceiving it to be ineffective and not objective. Based on the findings from each table, the following recommendations are made: Given the high level of media exposure among Benin residents, media organizations should continue to prioritize reporting on pre-election violence. However, it is important to ensure that media coverage is accurate, unbiased, and objective to avoid causing further tension and violence. Media organizations should strive to improve the objectivity of their reporting to restore residents' trust in the media. This could be achieved through training and sensitization of journalists on ethical reporting practices and the need to avoid political bias. Policymakers and media organizations should work together to improve the effectiveness of media reportage in curbing pre-election violence. This could be achieved through the development of guidelines and best practices for reporting pre-election violence and the provision of training for journalists on the effective reporting of pre-election violence.

### **Ethical Clearance**

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants involved in this study. They were informed that the research was conducted purely for academic purposes, and their participation was entirely voluntary.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

### **Authors' Contributions**

Ngozi B. Okeibunor, PhD, conceived the study, including the design. Emeke Precious Nwaoboli contributed to data collection and analysis. Both authors collaborated in writing the initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

### **Availability of Data and Materials**

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors upon reasonable request, without undue reservation.

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