

An exploration of Domains of Compatibility in Marriage

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Sternberg (1988) defines love as comprising of three components namely passion, intimacy, and commitment. Love is also associated with a plethora of emotions, beliefs, and behaviors which reciprocate warmth, respect, and affection for one another. To be loved and to love another is a complex act that has many intricate details attached to it. Similarly, marriage is a bond that affiliates together, not just two individuals hoping to be in love forever, but also two families that have been built upon entirely different foundations, traditions, value systems, and lifestyles. Therefore, it is not unusual that this collision would lead to a multitude of adjustment, emotional, financial, and psychosocial problems. One of the major reasons for this disharmony could be the incompatibilities that individuals experience with their partners with regard to their cognitions, attitudes, and behavior. The present study was done with the intention to explore the various domains of compatibility that individuals in marital relationship experience. For this purpose, an exploratory study was done and data was collected through semi-structured interviews from 10 married individuals who have been married for 2 years and above. The data collected was analyzed using content analysis and the various domains of compatibilities were drawn. The details on the categories that emerged along with the implications, limitations, and future scope of the area would be discussed in the full paper.

Keywords: Compatibility, Marriage, Romantic Relationship, Love

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Marriage is a universal social institution that results in the coming together of two individuals who are bound by love and hoping to stay together forever in love. When we think of marriage we assume it to be a bed of roses, candle light dinners and eternal happiness for the next 40 years. However, most often that is so not the case. After the initial golden years and the honeymoon phase, the reality of life sets in. Married couples are burdened with responsibilities, work life balance issues, taking care of kids and having to deal with in-laws and the extended family. All these factors gradually lead to a decline in marital happiness.

In India, the scenario becomes a bit more complicated as we are part of a collectivistic culture wherein marriage is never the lone bliss that the husband and wife enjoy. Marriage is not just the union between two independent individuals but it is also the coming together of the immediate and extended families of the individuals to be married. This collision often results in unexpected storms and outbursts mainly because of the evident and conspicuous differences between the two families with respect to their traditions, lifestyles, family norms, rituals, beliefs etc. Considering the fact that there will be occasional storms and tornadoes in a situation of differences, it is not surprising that marriage is no cakewalk.

Keeping the above mentioned reasons in mind, we can assume that if the two families match in terms of their expectations regarding marriage, their lifestyle and culture etc. there would be comparatively lesser problems in marriage. However, the results of earlier research suggest mixed results. Research on whether similarity in personality leads to better satisfaction in marriage has been a topic of wide interest for many years. (Heaton, 1984 and Karney & Bradbury, 1995). There have been mixed evidences in such researches wherein some researchers have found that similarity in personality has led to increased marital satisfaction (Caspi & Herbener, 1990 and Russell & Wells, 1991), whereas other studies show that similarity has no relationship with marital satisfaction (Glicksohn & Golan, 2001; Watson et al., 2004).

Need for the study and Implications

The study was done with the intention of identifying how couples perceive compatibility between them as contributing to marriage. Assessing the compatibility among couples can be helpful in understanding the level of marital success later on. However, in this case the study was done among couples who were already married. In light of recent trends of increasing divorces, it

is essential that couples have an idea regarding what is it that builds intimacy between couples and what are the factors that can lead to a rift between them. Once they gain an understanding regarding the areas in which they are incompatible with each other, they can work towards trying to reduce the gap amongst them in those areas.

Reducing incompatibilities between the couples will aid in the increase of marital happiness thereby increasing levels of marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction has been found to be directly correlated with psychological well-being (Gable et al., 2004 and Suhail & Chaudhry, 2004).

The results of the study will also be helpful for marital therapists and counselors in working with couples so as to design modules that are domain specific so as to resolve incompatibilities between the couples. The questions asked to the married individuals will also help them gain some insights and perspectives regarding their marriage that they might have not thought of earlier. The insights will help them be aware of their weak spots and prevent triggering of related issues in the future. This exercise when done amongst both the husband and wife jointly will help them open up issues and perspectives that they feel are relevant to the issue and will also pave way for them to openly discuss their viewpoints with regard to the problem situations. The information that they gain through the exercise will also help them to build on their strengths leading to the advantage of their marriage.

Objectives

The analysis of the literature review revealed that though there have been many studies repeatedly done on similarities between couples based on their personalities, attitudes and values, a qualitative study that could identify what exactly compatibility means to married couples and what are their priorities with respect to compatibility has not been done. Therefore, the researchers decided to do a qualitative study to understand in depth the various dimensions associated with compatibility in marriage.

The present study was done with the following brief objectives in mind namely,

1. To understand the various adjectives associated with love and the various behaviors (both overt and covert) that married individuals employ to express their love.

2. To explore what does marital compatibility mean to married individuals and to explore the various domains in which they expect compatibility with their spouse.
3. To understand the various conflict resolution strategies employed by couples in solving issues in their relationship.
4. To understand whether love or compatibility was favored by couples in a marital relationship.

Method

The researcher decided to adopt a qualitative approach towards this topic because of the following reasons. Firstly, questionnaires that were psychometrically sound and relevant to the topic and culture of the Indian population were not available. Therefore, the researchers decided to frame their own set of questions that would accurately measure and unearth the various dimensions of compatibility.

Secondly, a quantitative approach towards the topic would not bring forth results that would be as elaborate as results that could be generated using a qualitative approach. Utilizing the qualitative approach would also be helpful to the sample of the study wherein they are free to express in detail their opinions on the topic. Further a qualitative approach can also add on to the literature dearth that is experienced with respect to the topic.

Utilizing a qualitative approach could also pave way for the construction of a psychometric tool in future that would help to assess compatibility between to-be and married couples.

Sample and Sample characteristics

The study was done with the intention of adding on to the dearth in literature with regard to marital compatibility and was not intended to generalize the findings. Therefore, the study utilized the convenience sampling technique to suit to the ease of the researchers wherein data was collected from 10 married individuals who were known to and easily approachable by the researchers due to proximity of location.

10 married individuals who were in their first marriages and in the age ranges of 24 – 50 years were selected for this study out of which 2 were males and 8 were females. The individuals were married for a period of 2 – 25 years. Out of the 10 participants, 9 participants were in arranged

marriages wherein only one participant was in a love marriage. All the participants were residents of Chennai, Tamil Nadu and were employed, of which majority were employed in the academic sector. All the participants were fluent in English and were from middle socio-economic families. All the individuals were in marriages that were arranged by their parents, matrimonial sites, relatives and other known sources.

Ethics and Informed Consent

As the study was pertaining to issues that are private and personal, the participants were informed beforehand about their freedom to withdraw from the study at any point. None of the participants were forced to be part of the research and their consent was obtained before proceeding with the interview. They were assured of the confidentiality and utility of their responses. The responses provide by the participants were recorded using a mobile recorder with the permission of the participants and the researchers also took notes regarding additional details. To make the participants comfortable, data was collected from the participants in a lone room and it was ensured that they would not be disturbed through the course of data collection.

Measurement

Data was collected from all the participants directly through face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Though the questions were prepared beforehand, additional questions were also asked to gain clarity regarding certain questions.

Data was collected from the participants regarding the various expressions of love and marital compatibility along with demographic details. The items were written down by the researchers and given to academic experts for review. Modifications suggested by the expert were carried out and the final list comprising of eight questions and demographic details were prepared. The time taken for collecting data from the participants ranged from half an hour to 45 minutes. The demographic details included their age, years of marriage and the kind of marriage (whether arranged or love marriage). The items pertaining to love and marital compatibility that were asked to the participants were as follows:

1. How would you define love?
2. How do you expect to be loved by your spouse?

3. How do you express love to your spouse?
4. What does Marital Compatibility mean to you?
5. Arrange the following in terms of decreasing preference (most preferred to least preferred) of compatibility with your spouse
 - a) Punctuality and Discipline (completing tasks on time with less procrastination and being on time)
 - b) Similarity in personality (similarity in preferences and behavior)
 - c) Cleanliness (putting things in order and maintaining hygiene)
 - d) Financial status (similarity in salary and spending habits)
 - e) Physical Appearance (similarity in terms of outward appearance)
 - f) Physical intimacy (preferences in terms of physical display of affection)
 - g) Job Similarity (similarity in terms of work domain and job status)
 - h) Spiritual engagement (similarity in terms of time spent and valued for spiritual activities)
 - i) Perspective towards marriage (similarity in opinions and attitude towards marriage)
 - J) Care towards others (preference for staying with in-laws, responsibility of children)
6. According to your perception, what are the different areas in which you are incompatible with your spouse?
7. How do you resolve incompatibilities in your marriage?
8. According to your perception, should couples marry because they are in love or should they marry because they are compatible with each other?

Data Analysis

After data was collected from all the participants, the researcher heard the recordings repeatedly and prepared separate lists for the answers provided for different questions. The data was analyzed through the process of content analysis. The researcher read through the responses of a particular item and started deciphering categories for the item. Similar responses were grouped in a particular category and when the responses were satisfactorily grouped, the researcher made adjustments to the title of a particular category. Further the researcher read through the categories again and tried to find if any of the categories could be further combined and did so if

relevant. Once the themes were identified the researcher then arranged the themes under a particular item in terms of the decreasing frequency using tally marks.

Findings and Discussion

The first question that was asked to the participants was, “According to their perception, how would they define love?” The responses given by the participants were grouped into the following categories with the respective themes.

Table 1 – Dimensions of Love

| INPUT COMPONENTS | PROCESS COMPONENTS | OUTPUT COMPONENTS |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Care (2) | Mutual understanding (4) | A lasting bond |
| Affection (2) | Not having expectations (2) | Acceptance |
| | Physical Intimacy | Satisfaction with one’s choice |
| | Give and Take | |
| | Compromise | |
| | Sacrifice | |
| | Helping each other | |

***Numbers mentioned in brackets are the number of people who gave the particular response**

According to the researcher’s discretion, Input components of love comprised of factors that the individuals brought into the marriage which were innate and something that they didn’t have to exert effort for which included their personality characteristics and emotions. Based on the responses of the participants, it can be understood that individuals understand love in its different forms such as care and demonstrating affection.

Process components of love comprised of factors for which the individuals had to exert effort, the actions and behaviors that they consciously expressed to show love. Based on the responses of the participants, it can be understood that the various processes that are involved in love are understanding each other during difficult times, helping each other thrive the testing periods and a mutual give and take policy which is inevitable in love. Some participants also stated that love

is not always winning, but at times it is letting the other person win by sacrificing your desires and compromising on your comfort.

Output components of love comprised of the end results or the final products of love that emerged as a result of spending effort and partly because of their input components. Based on the responses of the participants, it can be understood that when an individual brings in their innate personality into a marital relationship and are willing to exert effort in the relationship, it ultimately paves way for a beautiful bond which is long lasting and more accepting in which the individual is assured of the fact that their choice of partner has not gone wrong.

Two female participants who were in arranged marriages (SK – 43 years and LG- 35 years) said that, *“Love is not an emotion that can be defined in words”*.

The second question that was asked to the participants was, “How do you expect to be loved by your spouse?” for which the responses are categorized and mentioned in the table below.

Table 2 – Expectations in Love

| EMOTIONAL EXPECTATIONS | BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Doing things before saying (3) | Physically express love (2) |
| More Understanding (2) | Be more childish (2) |
| Accept as they are | Be different according to situation |
| Be more caring | Be patient |
| | Spend more time |
| | Listen more |
| | Be present when sick |
| | Do not restrict |

***Numbers mentioned in brackets are the number of people who gave the particular response**

Based on the responses of the participants, the researcher has grouped the expectations communicated by the participants into two categories namely, emotional expectations and behavioral expectations.

Based on the themes in the emotional expectations category, it can be understood that individuals expect their partners to understand them better and commit to actions before them openly expressing their desires. One of the female participants (VN, 51 years, Love marriage) who had been married for 26 years expressed that she wanted to be left alone and not be bothered. Her exact words were, *“Leave me as I am, do not force me to be what you want me to be”*.

The behavioral expectations reported by the participants were spending more family time, to be less inhibited in marriage, express more physical love and being present when they were ill. One of the female participants (LG, 35 years, Arranged marriage) who was married for 7 years reported that she expected her husband to take multiple roles in her life according to the demands of the situation. She said, *“I want him to be more than my husband, I want him to take care of me like a father, be my friend and at times also be my guide”*.

The third question that was asked to the participants was, “How do you express love to your spouse?” for which the responses are categorized and mentioned in the table below.

Table 3 – Expressions of Love

| WORDS | ACTIONS | GIFTS | TIME | FIDELITY |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|
| Talking about daily events (3) | Doing things before asking | Surprises | Doing similar interests together | Being true |
| Motivating (2) | Financial support (2) | | Being together | Not restricting |
| Guidance | Caring when sick | | Going out | Open about mistakes |
| | Cooking favorite food (2) | | | Forgiving mistakes |
| | Physical intimacy | | | |
| | Being nice to in-laws | | | |

***Numbers mentioned in brackets are the number of people who gave the particular response**

Based on the responses given by the participants, the researcher grouped the various expressions of love into five categories namely, Words, Actions, Gifts, Time and Fidelity.

The participants reported that they expressed their love to their spouses by sharing with them in detail the various happenings of the day. They also said that whenever their partners were down they tried to boost them up by reminding them of past glories and happy memories. Others also reported that when they found that the issue at hand was within their expertise level, they offered guidance based on their experience.

With respect to the actions category, participants reported that they expressed their love for their spouse by offering them financial assistance when expenses were not met, tried to lighten their mood by cooking their favorite food and one of the participants also reported that she expressed love for her spouse by being pleasant and presentable to her in-laws. One of the participants reported that she was a very creative person and therefore, enjoyed gifting and planning surprises for her husband.

In the time category, participants said that they expressed love to their spouses by ensuring that they balanced between their personal and professional lives. They ensured that they spent time together doing things that were interesting for both of them and one of the participants said that she expressed her love by just making her presence felt known.

In the fidelity category, participants reported that they expressed their love for their spouses by being true and committed to them alone and making sure that they forgave them for past mistakes. One of the participants reported that she loved her husband because she saw to it that the past was never brought up in conversations. Another female participant (MP, 24 years, Arranged marriage) reported that she expressed her love for her spouse by letting him be free and not being restrictive. One of the female participants (UB, 44 years, Arranged marriage) reported that she felt like she did not express love to her spouse.

The fourth question that was raised to the participants was, “What does Marital Compatibility mean to you?” for which the responses were categorized as follows:

Table 4 – Dimensions of Marital Compatibility

| EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS | BEHAVIORAL DIMENSIONS |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Accepting as they are (3) | Not forcing change (3) |
| Same wavelength (2) | Sacrifice |
| Mutual understanding (2) | Being open and transparent |
| Emotional balance | |

***Numbers mentioned in brackets are the number of people who gave the particular response**

Based on the responses provided by the individuals, the researcher grouped the dimensions of compatibility into Emotional and Behavioral dimensions.

The responses in the emotional dimension category included accepting them as they are and both the couples being able to balance life by complementing each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Other participants also reported that mutual understanding between the couples and a similar thought pattern can pave way for marital compatibility. The responses in the behavioral dimension included letting the partner be themselves and accepting the differences, willingness to sacrifice and being transparent about differences would lead to marital compatibility.

Most of the participants expressed confusion in terms of the meaning of the word “compatibility”. Some of them said that they could not define what compatibility is but could explain what leads to compatibility.

The fifth question which was asked to the participants was to arrange the areas listed by the researcher in terms of their preference for compatibility (from highest priority to least preference). The table given below depicts the various areas of compatibility based on the ranks given by individuals based on their decreasing terms of priority.

Table – 5 Ranking of Areas of Compatibility

| AREA OF COMPATIBILITY | RANK |
|------------------------------|-------------|
| Perspective towards Marriage | I |
| Physical Intimacy | II |
| Similarity in Personality | III |
| Punctuality and Discipline | IV |
| Spiritual Engagement | V |
| Care towards others | VI |
| Job Similarity | VII |
| Cleanliness | VIII |
| Financial Status | IX |
| Physical Appearance | X |

Based on the ranks awarded by the participants, it can be understood that for most of the individuals, the areas in which they desired compatibility with their spouses was Perspective towards marriage. Perspective towards marriage included aspects such as similarity in opinions regarding the age to get married, the number of children, division of responsibility after marriage, decision making regarding children, finance and other aspects. Most of them reported that if there was compatibility in this area, compatibility in other areas mattered less as this would set right the mismatches of all the other areas. The other two areas which were considered important with respect to compatibility were physical intimacy and similarity in personality. Expression of physical display of affection is an important aspect of marriage which is one of the deepest bonds of all relationships. Often couples fail to engage in physically intimate acts due to lack of time and due to responsibilities at the workplace and additional roles after having children.

The areas of compatibility that were ranked least or which did not matter to the participants included Cleanliness, Financial Status and Physical Appearance. Thus, it can be understood that most of the participants regarded the extra aspects of marriage such as orderliness in the home,

the economic status of the spouse and their outward appearance as secondary and they did not think it played an important role in contributing towards marital compatibility.

The next question which was asked to the couples was, “According to your perception, what are the different areas in which you are incompatible with your spouse?” The responses provided by the participants were categorized as follows:

Table – 6 Incompatibilities in Marriage

| BEHAVIORAL DEFICITS | EMOTIONAL/ COGNITIVE DEFICITS |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Care for extended family (3) | Approach towards life (4) |
| Open communication (2) | Expression of Love (2) |
| Money management (2) | Different Wavelength |
| Issues concerning children (2) | |
| Job dissimilarity | |
| Decision making | |

***Numbers mentioned in brackets are the number of people who gave the particular response**

Based on the responses provided by the participants, the researcher grouped the responses into Behavioral deficits and Emotional/Cognitive deficits. The individuals reported that they were incompatible with their spouses in terms of issues concerning children wherein they experienced a lot of interference from their respective in-laws. Participants also reported that they experienced incompatibilities in issues concerning finance and in terms of their communication patterns. Female participants reported that they craved open communication but their husbands were rarely in the mood for open communication.

In terms of emotional or cognitive deficits, couples reported that they often experienced incompatibilities in terms of expression of affection and wavelength differences. One of the male participants (CG, 35 years, Love marriage) reported that he experienced an incompatibility with his wife in terms of approach towards life. He was quite matured and easy-going in dealing with issues of life but his wife had a very serious approach towards life which often created rifts

between them. Most of the female participants also reported that they experienced an incompatibility with their spouses in terms of expression of love. They reported that they craved for more verbal expression of love whereas their spouses often were not in the mood for conversations due to their busy schedules at work.

For the next question, “How do you resolve incompatibilities in your marriage?”, the responses were categorized as follows:

Table – 7 Approaches to resolve Incompatibilities

| WIN-WIN APPROACH | WIN-LOSE APPROACH | LOSE-LOSE APPROACH |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Trying to make them understand (2) | Being Silent (5) | Ignore (3) |
| Open Communication | Compromise(2) | Withdraw (3) |
| 3 rd Party help | Rumination | |

***Numbers mentioned in brackets are the number of people who gave the particular response**

Based on the responses provided by the participants the responses were categorized as Win-Win approaches, Win-Lose approaches and Lose-Lose approaches. In the win-win approaches, participants reported that they would try to resolve the problem by opening about the topic of conflict when their partner is in a good mood and would explain to them how they feel about the problem. One of the female participants (SM, 46 years, Arranged marriage) reported that whenever she felt that the problem was beyond her solving capacity, she would seek the help of her colleagues and extended family.

In the win-lose category, participants reported that they would fight their best and when they understand that the problem will not be solved if they lingered the fight, they would agree to compromise. Most of the female participants reported that they would try to discuss the problem with their spouse, but beyond a point they would remain silent when they find that the problem is getting aggravated. One of the male participants (SR, 40 years, Arranged marriage) reported that one of the ways through which he tries to divert himself from a conflict is by engaging in

excessive rumination. He reported that, *“I sometimes spend my time comparing my single life and married life and think about how life was much happier when I was a bachelor”*.

In the lose-lose category, participants reported that when they understand that a particular problem has been repeatedly occurring and aggravating, but never being solved no matter whatever they try, they just ignore the issue and withdraw themselves. One of the female participants (VN, 51 years, Love marriage) reported that, *“After all these years of fights, I just don’t care anymore. All are matured enough to make their own decisions. Let them decide for themselves”*.

For the next question, “According to your perception, should couples marry because they are in love or should they marry because they are compatible with each other?”, respondents gave mixed responses. Out of the 10 participants, four of them stated that couples should marry because they love each other and not for compatibility. The explanations they gave to support their answer included:

Two female participants who were in Arranged marriages (SK, 43years and SM, 41 years) reported that, *“Love matters above everything, if love is there, efforts for compatibility will automatically happen”*.

Another female participant (RR, 27 years, Arranged marriage) reported that, *“One should marry only for love because you can be compatible with a lot of people, but you can only fall in love with one person”*.

A female participant (VN, 51 years, Love marriage) said, *“One should get married only if you love someone truly because love has more depth than compatibility. Compatibility is something for which you can take effort, but love has to come effortlessly”*.

5 participants responded by saying that couples should get married only if they are compatible with each other. Explanations given to support their responses were as follows:

A female participant (LG, 36 years, Arranged marriage) reported, *“People should get married for compatibility alone as it reduces the risk for separation and conflicts”*.

Another female participant (UB, 44 years, Arranged marriage) reported, *“It is better to marry for compatibility so that you do not have to torment yourself in future and deal with differences”*.

One of the male participants (SR, 40 years, Arranged marriage) reported that, *“If it is an arranged marriage, it is better to marry because you are compatible with each other, but if it is a Love marriage, you can marry because you love one another”*.

Conclusion

The study aimed to identify the various expressions of love employed in a marital relationship. The study also identified the different meanings and adjectives that people employ to describe compatibility and the various areas of compatibility that people give priority to.

From the responses provided by the participants it can be understood that married individuals understand love in different forms and they crave for love in different forms. But sadly, these expectations are rarely openly communicated and so are they rarely fulfilled and satisfied.

In terms of compatibility, it can be understood that married individuals prefer compatibility with their spouses in terms of their attitudes and perspectives towards marriage rather than secondary aspects that are part and parcel of marriage such as financial compatibility or compatibility in terms of physical appearance.

In terms of their conflict resolution strategies, a pattern of indifference and ignorance towards resolving problems was seen amongst couples who had been married for a long time. Thus, it can be understood that though initially couples take time and make effort to resolve conflicts, when their efforts are repeatedly not acknowledged or ignored, they silently withdraw themselves into their own shells and begin to ignore their spouses. Though this is an unhealthy pattern, most of the individuals said that the interest and vigor to solve problems and resolve conflicts has reduced after a period of time. They just want to continue with the routine of life and are happy when they are not bothered but left to themselves.

On the question of whether love or compatibility matters in marriage, the study has revealed mixed responses wherein few individuals favored love over compatibility because they believed that love forgives and ignores many differences and that having love for one another would help to resolve incompatibilities. However, on the other hand, few individuals also reported that love

didn't matter, as compatibility was effective for a long term relationship in order to avoid conflicts and differences in future.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

As the sample for the study was quite small and biased in terms of gender, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to a larger sample. The items used for the study could not probe beyond a limit what exactly does compatibility mean to married couples. Most of the couples gave their responses based on the current conflicts happening in their life and therefore, the responses could be biased. Data was collected only from two male participants which therefore prevents the researchers from arriving at a conclusion regarding gender differences and preferences. The differences on views among arranged marriage and love marriage couples also could not be done due to a sample disparity. Most of the participants were in long term marriages and had children who were adolescents, therefore, this also prevented the researchers from arriving at a conclusion regarding their views which could be biased due to the presence of children in their life.

The findings of the study can be utilized by therapists and counselors working with married couples to provide them access to interventions to resolve incompatibilities. A focus group discussion can be conducted amongst married couples, lawyers in family courts and family therapists to understand the various dimensions of compatibility that are sought for in a marriage. A quantitative tool can be developed that can assess the compatibility between would-be couples to help them identify incompatible areas and thereby provide specific intervention. Married couples can also be given training regarding conflict resolution in marriage as most of them seem to be involved in unhealthy patterns of resolution.

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