

# Navigating the Influence of Social Media in Shaping an Athlete's Sports Career Journey

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## Abstract

This study examines the influence of technology and social media in shaping the sports journeys and identity construction of young athletes in Nepal, focusing on the experiences of a female volleyball player from Barpak-Sulikot Rural Municipality, Gorkha, Nepal. A qualitative case study was employed, with data collected through in-depth interviews. The participant, a young female volleyball player, referee and student from a highly marginalized indigenous community of rural Nepal, was selected for her dual role as an athlete and referee, reflecting her remarkable achievements despite financial and socio-cultural challenges. Data were analyzed through coding and thematic exploration to derive insights into the intersection of sports, digitalization, and personal development. The study reveals two overarching themes: (1) the influence of limited technological resources and socio-cultural norms on athletic growth and digital engagement, and (2) the strategic use of social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube for personal branding, skill development, and professional connectivity. The findings expose how early exposure to digital tools, such as recorded gameplay and sports tutorials, fosters skill enhancement, confidence, and recognition. This study provides insight into how athletes in developing countries navigate the dual pressures of traditional socio-cultural expectations and modern digital demands.

**Keywords:** Social media, digital technology, sports development, career of an Athlete

## Introduction

The digital era has transformed the way athletes interact with their audiences and

stakeholders, with technology and social media becoming crucial tools for identity construction and self-presentation (Park et al., 2020). This shift is particularly significant in developing countries like Nepal, where rapid technological advancements and growing social media penetration are reshaping traditional communication landscapes (Dahal, 2023; Adhikari, 2022). Nepali athletes, operating within a socio-cultural context marked by resource limitations, evolving sports infrastructure, and unique societal expectations, are increasingly utilizing digital platforms to enhance personal branding, engage with fans, and advance their careers (Adhikari, 2022; Jiang & Phakdeephrot, 2024). These dynamics reflect broader global trends but also highlight the distinct challenges and opportunities faced by athletes in Nepal's specific context.

While the impact of digital tools on athletes' identities has been extensively studied, existing literature predominantly focuses on elite athletes from developed nations. Studies have explored how digital platforms foster personal branding, increase sponsorship opportunities, and enhance audience interaction (Geurin, 2017; Park et al., 2020). For instance, Geurin's (2016) study on elite female athletes highlights both the benefits of visibility and engagement, as well as challenges such as harassment and the pressure to maintain an active online presence. Similarly, Park et al. (2020) emphasize the potential of social media as a branding tool but note barriers such as digital literacy gaps and negative public feedback. However, these studies largely overlook the nuanced experiences of athletes in developing countries like Nepal, where socio-economic and cultural factors uniquely influence digital engagement.

Nepal provides a compelling and underexplored context for examining how athletes construct and manage their identities in the digital age (Nepal Olympic Committee, 2019). The country's cultural diversity and emerging digital ecosystem offer unique opportunities for athletes to influence social media for self-promotion, global connectivity, and audience building (BEYOND Hospitality AG, 2023, July 4). However, these opportunities are counterbalanced by challenges such as limited access to technology, underdeveloped sports infrastructure, and socio-cultural norms that shape both online and offline identities (Bayraktar, 2023). Investigating these dynamics is essential for understanding how athletes in underrepresented regions navigate the dual pressures of traditional expectations and modern digital demands.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by qualitatively exploring how Nepali athletes construct and manage their identities in the digital age. By situating the study within Nepal's socio-cultural and economic landscape, this study not only contributes to global discussions on sports and digital media but also magnifies the voices of athletes from less-represented regions (Nepal Olympic Committee, 2019). The findings aim to provide insights into how athletes in similar contexts can effectively utilize digital platforms for personal and professional development. This localized approach underscores the potential of technology and social media to shape athletic identities, even in environments constrained by limited resources. The key research question of

this study is: how does exposure to technology and social media influence the sports journey of young athletes?

### **Theoretical Perspective**

The theoretical foundation of this study is built on the intersection of digital media and sports management, focusing on how athletes use technology to shape their identities and engage with audiences. A key theory guiding this study is the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), first developed by Katz et al., (1973). UGT suggests that people actively choose media that fulfill their specific needs and desires. This theory helps explain why individuals, including sports fans, select certain digital platforms over others to consume sports content. In the context of sports management, UGT offers a useful lens for understanding how and why athletes and fans interact through digital channels.

Furthermore, UGT emphasizes the active role of users in selecting and using media rather than being passive consumers. For example, fans may follow athletes on social media to feel connected, stay updated, or be entertained (Katz et al., 1973). Similarly, athletes may use these same platforms to build personal brands, connect with supporters, and manage public perceptions. By applying UGT, this study explores how Nepali athletes meet their communication and identity-building needs through the strategic use of digital tools.

This theoretical framework allows for a deeper understanding of the perspectives and motivations behind digital engagement in sports, especially in developing countries like Nepal, where access to traditional media and sponsorship opportunities may be limited (Nepal Olympic Committee, 2019). It also highlights how local socio-cultural contexts influence the ways athletes use digital platforms. As shown in previous studies, UGT provides a solid basis for analyzing media behavior in sports (Jiang & Phakdeephrot, 2024), but its application to non-Western and less-researched settings such as Nepal remains limited. Thus, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge by extending UGT to understand how athletes from underrepresented regions navigate the digital world to shape their professional and personal identities.

### **Social Media and Athletes' Careers**

In the study, "Elite Female Athletes' Perceptions of New Media Use Relating to Their Careers," Geurin (2016) explores how elite female athletes perceive and manage their use of new media. By focusing on athletes' perspectives through qualitative interviews with six athletes preparing for the 2016 Rio Olympics, the study reveals that new media serve multiple functions in their careers. Athletes use social media to share their lives, build connections with fans, secure sponsorships, and promote themselves. Geurin finds that the athletes' online presence enhances their visibility and creates personal engagement with followers, while also helping them financially through sponsorship opportunities. However, challenges such as harassment, unwanted public commentary,

and the pressure to maintain an online presence are also highlighted.

Additionally, the study identifies strategic approaches these athletes employ, including authentic posting, regular interaction with followers, and consistent posting schedules. Metrics like engagement numbers and personal benchmarks are used to measure the success of their online efforts. Geurin's research underscores the complex dual role of new media, offering both significant opportunities and notable challenges, particularly for female athletes facing gender-specific pressures. The findings suggest that better support systems are needed to help athletes navigate the demands of digital self-promotion, fan interaction, and sponsorship obligations while maintaining personal well-being.

The qualitative study by Park et al. (2020) on student-athletes' perceptions of social media as a personal branding tool highlights both the benefits and barriers of its use. The study reveals that student-athletes view social media as a powerful platform for building an online presence, especially in connecting with potential employers and showcasing skills and achievements. Interviewees like Ruby and Mason emphasized that their social media profiles could influence future job opportunities, with social media serving as a convenient means to distribute information quickly. Sara noted how social media allows her to keep her audience updated on her athletic achievements, while Anna highlighted the ease of reaching a large audience. This underscores how athletes perceive social media as beneficial for personal branding by enabling them to control and promote their image in a professional light.

However, the study also addresses significant barriers to effective personal branding via social media. The participants expressed concerns about unwanted posts from others, content disliked by audiences, and a general lack of awareness about personal branding. For example, Madelyn and Ethan voiced concerns about the inability to control what others post, which could negatively impact their online image. Anna and Sara shared worries about how negative feedback or controversial posts could harm their brand. Additionally, several participants noted that many student-athletes lack a clear understanding of personal branding, which could hinder their efforts to build a strong online presence. These concerns highlight the potential risks of social media, where a misstep can have lasting consequences on one's image and future opportunities. The integration of technology into sports has revolutionized performance, training, and the overall structure of athletic competitions. In Omoregie's (2016) analysis, he explores how technological advancements have permeated various aspects of sports, reshaping not only how athletes train but also how we understand their capabilities. Sports technologies, ranging from self-enhancing devices like prosthetics and gene doping to rehabilitative tools and data-driven innovations, allow athletes to push the boundaries of their physical and mental limits. Technologies such as self-technologies, which include banned substances and biomechanical interventions, raise ethical concerns but also present new ways for athletes to enhance their performance. Similarly, landscape technologies,

including high-tech stadiums and artificial environments, have transformed the spectator experience while simultaneously affecting athletes' tactics and performance strategies. Omoregie categorizes sports technologies into six types, including implement technologies (tools like advanced golf clubs or swimming suits), movement technologies (used to analyze and improve biomechanics), and database technologies, which provide athletes and coaches with real-time feedback and comprehensive analysis of performance metrics. Rehabilitative technologies have proven essential for athletes recovering from injuries, ensuring they can return to peak condition faster. The development of these technologies, such as energy-efficient prosthetics and computerized training tools, has brought unprecedented changes to sports, enhancing performance while sparking debates over fairness and the human limits in athletic achievement. These innovations illustrate the profound impact of technology on both the mechanics of sports and the evolving concept of the athletic body.

The above-reviewed studies provide valuable insights into how social media and technology influence athletes' identities and careers. However, a significant research gap exists in examining these dynamics within the specific socio-cultural context of Nepal. Most of the existing literature, including Geurin's (2016) and Park et al.'s (2020) studies, focuses on athletes in Western or globalized environments, often overlooking how these digital tools function in developing countries with distinct cultural, economic, and technological landscapes.

The unique challenges Nepali athletes face—such as limited access to resources, lower digital literacy, and specific cultural expectations—are not adequately addressed in current research. Furthermore, while previous studies explore the professional and branding aspects of social media, there is limited exploration of how these platforms shape athletes' identities in contexts where traditional norms may conflict with modern digital practices. Investigating these gaps in the Nepali context will provide a more nuanced understanding of the role of technology in athlete identity formation in underrepresented regions.

## **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative case study approach to explore how young athletes in Nepal navigate the intersection of sports, technology, and identity construction in the digital age. The study site was purposively selected in the Sulikot Rural Municipality, Gorkha, for its significance in promoting local sports talents and providing rich contextual data for the study. To collect in-depth qualitative data, we identified a volleyball player from Majhthar village under Sulikot Rural Municipality. The participant, pseudonym (Ms. Sugita Baram), was chosen for her remarkable achievements in sports despite facing financial and socio-cultural challenges. Sugita is the youngest in her family and began playing volleyball during the ninth grade. Currently pursuing her third year of undergraduate studies at Gorkha Campus, she has competed in local, district, and provincial-level competitions and has also completed training as a district-level referee.

Her dual role as an athlete and referee provided unique insights into the intersection of sports, digitalization, and personal development. Given her active engagement with social media platforms like TikTok and her strong presence in local sports, Sugita's experiences offered valuable perspectives on the influence of digital tools on athletic growth and identity construction.

The selection of participants was guided by purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the study's central question: how does exposure to technology and social media influence the sports journey of young athletes? Initially, efforts were made to include a former player with experience in traditional Kapardi games who had also taken on coaching and officiating roles. However, due to unforeseen circumstances involving international travel, this participant was replaced by another key informant whose profile aligned closely with the study's objectives. Ultimately, three individuals—two former volleyball players and one badminton player—were contacted in person and via phone on January 1, 2025 and invited to share their perspectives. Of these, Ms. Sugita Baram emerged as the most relevant and articulate participant, given her active engagement with digital platforms and her ongoing academic pursuits alongside her athletic career.

Data collection unfolded through semi-structured interviews conducted over multiple sessions to build rapport and encourage open dialogue. The first meeting took place on Saturday, May 3, 2025, at a university campus where a researcher teaches. Upon arrival, the researcher noted initial discomfort and hesitance from the participant, which is common in qualitative research when discussing personal and professional narratives. Informal conversation about family background, educational experiences, and the local environment helped ease tension. Although the first session lasted only six minutes and yielded limited data, it laid the groundwork for deeper engagement.

Subsequently, meetings were arranged to foster trust and facilitate more meaningful discussion. On May 7, the second session occurred in a more relaxed setting, with the participant accompanied by a friend, contributing to a more comfortable atmosphere. During this interaction, the researcher explained the purpose of voice recording and its role in ensuring accuracy, though the participant initially declined. A third and final formal interview was held on May 12, after sharing a casual lunch, during which the participant felt more at ease. This session lasted approximately 52 minutes and covered all key areas outlined in the interview guide. Some follow-up questions were clarified via telephone conversations to enhance data clarity and completeness.

The recorded interview was transcribed verbatim, ensuring accuracy and a detailed representation of Sugita's narratives. The transcription process required two days and was reviewed thoroughly to ensure completeness. The analysis began with coding the data and identifying recurring themes and sub-themes through a systematic process. Two overarching themes emerged, such as how limited technological resources,

financial hardships, and traditional gender roles influenced Sangita's journey in sports and digital engagement, and Sangita's strategic use of social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube for personal branding, skill development, and connecting with peers and mentors. These themes were contextualized and linked to existing literature to provide a nuanced understanding of Sangita's experiences and the broader implications for athletes in resource-constrained settings. This is how the methodology of this study prioritized depth over breadth, emphasizing quality interactions and contextual understanding. By focusing on a single, detailed case within a broader framework of emerging digital practices in Nepali sports, this study offers a nuanced perspective that contributes to global discourse on the intersection of sports, technology, and identity in underrepresented regions.

### **Findings and Discussion**

This section examines the role of mobile phones and social media in shaping the sports journeys of young athletes, focusing on how digital tools enhance learning, motivation, and skill development. The findings reveal that exposure to mobile phones significantly influences athletes' engagement with sports, acting as a gateway to self-learning, visualization of success, and overcoming challenges. It also reveals that Digital tools like YouTube and TikTok have emerged as transformative platforms, providing both inspiration and practical resources for athletes' skill enhancement.

### **Initial Exposure to Social Media and Use of Digital Tools**

The participant athlete's introduction to social media, as she reported, was shaped by curiosity and peer influence, revealing a lack of early access to digital tools due to socio-economic and institutional constraints. She said, "Hearing others talk about it, I felt like watching TikTok and YouTube and reaching heaven. But I neither have the means to buy a mobile phone, nor is it allowed to take one to school, even if I could afford it." This initial exposure highlights how institutional restrictions, such as prohibiting mobile phones in schools, limit early digital literacy. The participant's experience aligns with studies by Geurin (2016) and Park et al. (2020), which emphasize the importance of digital platforms in career development but often overlook barriers in resource-limited settings. The use of classroom technology, such as showing volleyball-related videos during training, offered an alternative gateway for her digital engagement. She remarked, "Watching those videos felt as if I were playing the game myself," illustrating how technology can inspire and enhance athletic performance even in constrained environments.

The use of mobile phones to record her gameplay during the volleyball tournament was a pivotal moment. She shared, "For the first time, I saw a video of myself playing. Watching that video boosted my confidence." This aligns with the findings of Omoregie (2016), who underscores the transformative role of technology in performance analysis

and self-reflection. Viewing recorded gameplay enabled the participant to analyze her strengths and weaknesses, fostering both personal growth and athletic development. This experience highlighted the potential of digital tools not only for performance enhancement but also for establishing a social identity. Recording and sharing gameplay can serve as a stepping stone for athletes in developing regions to gain visibility and recognition. However, it also underscores the need for resources and training to effectively use these tools, a point often missing in studies focusing on athletes from resource-rich environments.

### **The Role of Mobile Phone in Shaping Early Sports Aspirations**

Early exposure to mobile phones plays a critical role in shaping young athletes' interests and aspirations. According to the participant athlete of this study, interactions with platforms like YouTube and TikTok ignited her curiosity about sports content, inspiring her journey. She shared, "I used to always be bothered by talking about TikTok and YouTube in the classroom. That thing always caught my attention—what is YouTube, what is TikTok?" Though she initially relied on borrowed devices, these moments left a lasting impression, as she vividly recalls watching Dohori songs and volleyball videos that fueled her imagination. This early fascination demonstrated the potential of digital tools to direct young minds toward sports-related goals. Moreover, exposure to team game videos allowed athletes like Sujita to visualize their success. She recounted, "When the volleyball game was over, the teacher took us to a room with a computer to show a video about volleyball. Watching the video, I felt like I was playing as a player myself." This visualization strengthened her determination and motivation to pursue excellence in sports, even amidst challenges like pandemic-induced delays in competitions.

### **Digital Tools as Catalysts for Skill Development and Self-Learning**

Mobile phones and digital platforms have become indispensable tools for skill development and self-directed learning among athletes. Initially, the participant athlete relied on borrowed devices to watch YouTube tutorials, which helped her learn essential volleyball techniques, such as serving and team play strategies. She explained, "The teachers taught us by watching videos.....how to serve, how to lift, how to play a team game." Later, owning a mobile phone empowered her to explore advanced techniques independently, boosting her confidence and technical expertise. Reflecting on this, she noted, "By uploading new videos on YouTube, I gained knowledge about many things. It helped me improve my playing skills." Furthermore, the integration of multi-digital platforms like Facebook and TikTok broadened learning opportunities and facilitated self-reflection and peer learning. As Sangeeta remarked, "I got the opportunity to self-reflect for the first time by watching not only my games but the games of many friends." This holistic use of digital tools not only refined her skills but also elevated her recognition and versatility, establishing her as both a player and a referee.



## Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the transformative role of social media and digital technologies in shaping the sports journey and identity construction of a young female volleyball player, offering insights into the interplay of socio-cultural constraints and digital opportunities within a developing country context. The findings align with and extend existing literature, particularly through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) (Katz et al., 1973), which posits that individuals actively select media to fulfill specific needs. The participant, Ms. Sugita Baram, strategically used platforms like TikTok and YouTube to meet her needs for skill development, personal branding, and professional networking, demonstrating the active agency emphasized by UGT. However, her experiences also reveal unique challenges rooted in Nepal's socio-economic and cultural landscape, which have been underexplored in prior research focused on athletes from developed nations (Geurin, 2016; Park et al., 2020).

The first key theme—limited technological resources and socio-cultural norms—highlights how structural barriers shape digital engagement and athletic development. Sugita's initial lack of access to a personal mobile phone and institutional restrictions, such as school policies banning phones, reflect broader digital divides in developing countries (Nepal Olympic Committee, 2019). These findings echo Park et al. (2020), who noted digital literacy gaps as obstacles to social media use, but add a contextual layer by illustrating how socio-cultural norms, including gender expectations and financial constraints, further limit access. For instance, Sugita's reliance on borrowed devices and classroom technology underscores the critical role of institutional support in bridging digital gaps for athletes in resource-constrained settings. This contrasts with studies like Geurin (2016), where elite athletes in developed nations face fewer access-related barriers but deal with pressures like online harassment. The Nepali context thus demands tailored interventions, such as community-based digital literacy programs or subsidized access to technology, to empower young athletes.

The second theme—the strategic use of social media for personal branding, skill development, and connectivity—demonstrates how digital platforms act as catalysts for athletic and personal growth. Sugita's use of YouTube tutorials to learn volleyball techniques and TikTok to share gameplay aligns with UGT's emphasis on media fulfilling informational and social needs (Katz et al., 1973). Her experience of recording and reviewing gameplay to boost confidence and analyze performance reinforces Omoregie's (2016) findings on the role of technology in performance enhancement. However, unlike athletes in resource-rich environments, Sugita's digital engagement was shaped by necessity and opportunity rather than institutional support. Her ability to gain recognition as both a player and referee through social media highlights the democratizing potential of digital platforms in developing countries, where traditional sponsorship opportunities are limited (Adhikari, 2022). Yet, this also raises concerns about the sustainability of such self-directed efforts without formal guidance on digital

branding or protection from online risks, as noted by Geurin (2016).

This study advances the existing literature by placing digital engagement within Nepal's unique socio-cultural and economic context, filling a crucial research gap that has mainly focused on Western or elite athletes (Jiang & Phakdeephrot, 2024). Sugita's experiences, as she balances her roles as athlete and referee while confronting traditional gender norms and entrenched stereotypes of male dominance, illustrate the intersectionality of identity formation in digital spaces. Her statement, "As a girl, I felt the sting of exclusion every time we approached the playing field. The boys dominated the space, sneering that girls like me didn't know how to play ball. It wasn't just their words that hurt; it was the way they would take over the entire area, leaving us no room to even try. We struggled with the basics, unsure how to handle the ball properly because no one gave us a chance to learn. While the boys sprawled across the main field, monopolizing the net and perfecting their game, we girls were pushed into a small corner, practicing our passes in the shadows," highlights the gendered barriers she faced in seeking fair opportunities. Sugita's strategic use of social media to challenge socio-cultural expectations aligns with global trends of athletes using digital platforms for self-presentation (Park et al., 2020). However, her story is uniquely shaped by challenges of overcoming financial limitations and lack of infrastructural support, which are characteristic of Nepal's context. This localized perspective broadens the application of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) by demonstrating how cultural and economic factors influence media choices and usage, extending its relevance to non-Western settings.

## Conclusion

This study looks at how digital technologies and social media shape the sports journey and identity building of young Nepali athletes, focusing on a female volleyball player from Barpak-Sulikot, Gorkha. The findings show that platforms like TikTok and YouTube are powerful tools for skill development, self-reflection, and gaining visibility, helping athletes overcome resource limitations and a lack of sports infrastructure. Despite initial challenges such as limited access to mobile phones and institutional barriers, the participant showed resilience by using digital tools to improve her volleyball skills and develop a social identity. These insights highlight the transformative power of digital platforms in empowering young athletes in Nepal, aligning with global trends while addressing regional socio-cultural and economic challenges (Adhikari, 2022; Park et al., 2020). However, issues like limited technology access, low digital literacy, and societal expectations emphasize the need for targeted efforts. To support Nepali athletes, schools and sports organizations should invest in affordable technology, create community tech hubs, and offer digital literacy training tailored to athletes' needs. These efforts can close access gaps and help athletes use digital tools effectively for personal and professional growth. The study also stresses the importance of creating safe online spaces to reduce

risks like harassment so athletes can participate confidently. The key takeaway is that digital platforms give Nepali athletes new chances to connect, learn, and grow, even in resource-limited settings. By overcoming barriers and building supportive systems, stakeholders can expand these opportunities and help young athletes succeed. Future research should look at different athlete experiences across Nepal and examine the long-term effects of digital engagement to develop sustainable policies, ultimately strengthening Nepal's sports scene and highlighting the resilience of its athletes.

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Annex 1: Data Transcription

10. **सोशल मीडिया और आदर्श:**

आजकल के आदर्शों में सोशल मीडिया का बहुत बड़ा योगदान है। इससे हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं। सोशल मीडिया हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं। सोशल मीडिया हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं।

11. **सोशल मीडिया और आदर्श:**

आजकल के आदर्शों में सोशल मीडिया का बहुत बड़ा योगदान है। इससे हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं। सोशल मीडिया हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं। सोशल मीडिया हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं।

12. **सोशल मीडिया और आदर्श:**

आजकल के आदर्शों में सोशल मीडिया का बहुत बड़ा योगदान है। इससे हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं। सोशल मीडिया हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं। सोशल मीडिया हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं।

13. **सोशल मीडिया और आदर्श:**

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15. **सोशल मीडिया और आदर्श:**

आजकल के आदर्शों में सोशल मीडिया का बहुत बड़ा योगदान है। इससे हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं। सोशल मीडिया हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं। सोशल मीडिया हमें अपने आदर्शों को आसानी से ढूँढ सकते हैं।



<p>Use of multiple digital tools          New knowledge from alternative digital tools          Make a champion athlete          Inspired by social media          Self- learning for the first time by video          Use of the digital tool          Positive support          Social media platform          Positive suggestion          Dual character</p>	<p>social media tools (personal development)</p>	
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