The range of mental health crisis- Social Media and Gen Z

1. INTRODUCTION-Social Media

The digital revolution has fundamentally transformed how humans communicate, connect, and construct their social identities. Social media platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter/X, Snapchat, and YouTube—have evolved from novel communication tools into essential infrastructure shaping contemporary social existence. By 2025, global social media adoption exceeded five billion users, representing more than 68% of the world's population. This unprecedented connectivity has created complex psychological landscapes characterized by both remarkable opportunities and significant challenges. The relationship between social media usage and mental health represents one of the most pressing questions in contemporary psychology, public health, and digital culture studies. While these platforms facilitate connection, community building, and creative expression, mounting evidence reveals concerning correlations with depression, anxiety, body image disturbances, sleep disruption, and other mental health challenges—particularly among adolescents and young adults. Understanding this nuanced relationship requires examining both the protective factors and risk elements inherent in intensive social media engagement.

This chapter explores the multifaceted connections between social media and mental health, synthesizing research evidence, theoretical frameworks, and practical implications. We examine how platform design features, usage patterns, individual vulnerabilities, and social contexts interact to influence psychological well-being. By understanding these complex dynamics, we can develop evidence-based approaches to maximizing social media's benefits while mitigating its harms. Social media encompasses internet-based communication platforms enabling individuals, organizations, and communities to exchange information, concepts, personal communications, and various content forms including video and photographic materials in real-time interaction. These digital platforms facilitate information sharing and virtual community connections through multiple content formats—textual, video-based, photographic, and supplementary media. Social media consists of websites, applications, and digital platforms enabling users to disseminate information and concepts within virtual communities through textual content, photographs, videos, and additional media formats.

Social media in 2025 transcends its original function as a mere communication mechanism—it has evolved into a comprehensive global ecosystem influencing culture, political discourse,

marketing strategies, and everyday existence. Contemporary platforms have transformed into artificial intelligence-powered, multimedia-enriched environments where content personalization, authentic engagement, and brief-format content predominate.

By 2025, global social media adoption exceeded five billion users, representing more than 68% of the world's population. More than five billion individuals worldwide utilize these platforms for both personal interactions and professional purposes. This ecosystem includes messaging and chat applications, social networking platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok), and community discussion forums like Reddit and Discord. The dominant social media platforms include Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Numerous social media corporations maintain ownership of multiple platforms targeting diverse user segments. For instance, Meta owns Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and WhatsApp, creating an integrated portfolio of social networking services. Initial social media platforms including MySpace and LiveJournal were architected to facilitate connections among friends and family members.

MySpace enabled users to construct personalized profile pages and distribute self-descriptive information, achieving the milestone of one million active monthly users in 2004.

LiveJournal provided a platform where users could publish journal-style entries accessible to either public or restricted networks, surpassing 2.5 million active accounts by 2005.

1.1 The Growth Era (2000s-Early 2010s)

Social media adoption accelerated dramatically throughout the 2000s and early 2010s as Facebook and X (previously known as Twitter) gained widespread popularity. Similar to MySpace's model, Facebook users establish profiles to disseminate personal information, while other users contribute comments and responses. Initially concentrated among college-aged demographics, social media subsequently attracted both younger and older user populations.

1.2 Innovation Wave: The Feed Revolution (2006)

In 2006, X introduced its feed functionality, aggregating posts from followed accounts onto unified pages. Facebook subsequently launched its analogous News Feed feature. This news feed concept became a standardized element across numerous social media platforms. Users increasingly began posting hyperlinks to external websites, facilitating the sharing of news articles, current event coverage, and product information alongside personal updates.

Interactive features enabled users to engage with others' content through likes, shares, and comment functionalities.

1.3 Social Media and Business Orientation

During this developmental period, social media platforms incorporated business-oriented profile pages and targeted advertising capabilities visible to other users. These features enhanced business accessibility and generated increased revenue streams for platform operators.

1,4 The News Consumption Renaissance

Social media users progressively allocated more time to feed scrolling and consuming daily news updates and commentary on contemporary events. By 2025, slightly over half (53%) of U.S. adults reported obtaining news from social media either "sometimes" or "often." Only 27% of American adults stated they "never" access news through social media. Younger consumer demographics demonstrate higher likelihood of obtaining news through social media compared to older generations. As users continued expanding their social media engagement time, various specialized platform types emerged. These can be broadly classified into distinct categories, each serving specific user needs and purposes.

1.5 Professional Applications - Social Media in the Workplace

Numerous social media users operate in professional capacities across various sectors. The professional dimension of social media extends beyond marketing and promotion to encompass genuine career pathways built entirely on platform presence and audience engagement. This represents a fundamental shift in how digital platforms function within professional ecosystems, creating entirely new economic opportunities and career trajectories. Actors and writers leverage social media to establish connections with audiences and fans of their creative work, building personal brands and maintaining direct fan relationships. Politicians utilize these platforms for constituent communication and voter engagement, making social media essential for modern political campaigns and governance. Charitable organizations employ social media to advance causes and facilitate donation collection, expanding their reach and impact beyond traditional fundraising methods. Public agencies utilize social media for citizen

communication during emergency situations and crisis management, providing real-time updates and critical information.

1.6 Social Impact - Benefits and Criticisms

Social media receives recognition for facilitating user connectivity, enabling community development across geographical boundaries, and fostering meaningful connections among diverse populations. These platforms excel at disseminating critical information across populations rapidly, particularly valuable during emergencies, social movements, and important public discourse. Social media enables broader participation in civic discourse, political engagement, and social activism, giving voice to previously marginalized communities. The platforms have created entirely new professional categories, economic ecosystems, and business models that generate employment and entrepreneurial opportunities. Detractors argue that social media negatively impacts adolescent mental health, contributing to issues including anxiety, depression, body image concerns, and social comparison pressures. Critics point to social media's role in enabling misinformation propagation, spreading false narratives, and undermining trust in institutions and factual information. Questions persist about user data collection, privacy protection, surveillance capitalism, and the ethical use of personal information by platform operators.

2. Social Media and Mental Health

Social media plays a major role in modern life, influencing how people connect, communicate, and express themselves. It has both positive and negative effects on mental health. On the positive side, social media helps people stay connected, find support communities, and raise awareness about mental health issues. It allows for self-expression and can reduce loneliness when used meaningfully. However, excessive or unhealthy use can lead to anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and sleep problems. Problems like cyber bullying, social comparison and addiction are common among heavy users, especially teenagers. Constant exposure to idealized images or negative news can increase stress and feelings of inadequacy. Maintaining balance and mindful use is essential. Setting screen-time limits, following positive content, and using social media for genuine connection can reduce harm. Parents, educators, and platforms all play a role in promoting digital well-being and protecting users' mental health.

2.1 Social Comparison Theory

Social Comparison Theory, originally proposed by Leon Festinger (1954), posits that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities, attributes, and circumstances to others. Social media platforms create unprecedented environments for social comparison by exposing users to carefully curated representations of peers' lives, achievements, physical appearances, and experiences.

2.1.1 Upward Social Comparison occurs when individuals compare themselves to others perceived as superior, often resulting in diminished self-esteem, increased dissatisfaction with personal circumstances, and elevated depressive symptoms. Adolescents comparing their unfiltered reality against peers' idealized digital presentations may develop unrealistic expectations for their own lives, bodies, and achievements, fostering feelings of inadequacy and failure.

2.1.2 Downward Social Comparison—comparing oneself to others perceived as worse off— can temporarily boost self-esteem but may foster negative emotions including schadenfreude or guilt. The quantification of social validation through likes, comments, shares, and follower counts transforms social comparison into measurable hierarchies of perceived worth.

2.2 Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) identifies three fundamental psychological needs essential for well-being: autonomy (feeling in control of one's life), competence (feeling capable and effective), and relatedness (feeling connected to others). Social media's impact on mental health can be understood through how platforms satisfy or frustrate these needs. When social media enhances autonomy (self-expression), competence (skill development, positive feedback), and relatedness (meaningful connections), it supports psychological well-being. Conversely, when platforms undermine these needs—through algorithmic control limiting autonomy, negative feedback damaging competence perceptions, or superficial interactions replacing deep connections—mental health suffers.

2.3 The Displacement Hypothesis

The Displacement Hypothesis suggests that time spent on social media displaces activities more beneficial for mental health, including physical exercise, in-person social interaction,

outdoor time, hobbies, and sleep. This displacement mechanism may explain correlations between heavy social media usage and poor mental health outcomes, even if platforms themselves aren't inherently harmful. Research supports partial displacement effects, particularly regarding sleep. Late-night social media usage directly disrupts sleep through multiple pathways: blue light exposure suppressing melatonin production, cognitive and emotional stimulation preventing sleep onset, and reduced total sleep duration due to delayed bedtime. Chronic sleep deprivation substantially increases risks for depression, anxiety, impaired cognitive function, and physical health problems.

2.4 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory examines why individuals use media and what psychological needs media fulfills. People engage with social media seeking various gratifications: information, entertainment, social connection, identity expression, and emotional regulation. The specific gratifications sought influence mental health outcomes. Using social media for authentic connection and meaningful interaction generally supports well-being. Using platforms for validation-seeking, social comparison, or escape from real-life problems tends to correlate with negative mental health effects. Understanding individual motivations helps explain why social media impacts different users differently.

3. Gen Z Mental Health: A Generation in Crisis

Generation Z (born 1997-2012) faces an unprecedented mental health crisis coinciding with their status as the first generation raised entirely in the social media age. The statistics are alarming: since 2011, the number of high school-aged youth (12-17 years old) experiencing depressive symptoms—including sadness and hopelessness—considering suicide, and attempting suicide has increased significantly. By 2021, almost one-third of high school students reported experiencing poor mental health within the past month. This mental health deterioration correlates temporally with the explosive growth of social media usage. One-third of teenagers now use at least one social media site "almost constantly," and research demonstrates that youth spending over three hours daily on social media face heightened mental health problem risks. While correlation doesn't prove causation, the relationship between intensive social media engagement and psychological distress demands serious examination.

This analysis explores how social media specifically impacts Gen Z mental health, examining mechanisms of harm, gender disparities, emerging awareness patterns, and pathways toward healthier digital futures.

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4. **The Range of Mental Health Crisis**

The range of mental health crises covers a wide spectrum of emotional, behavioral, and psychological disturbances that significantly affect a person's ability to cope or function normally. A mental health crisis may arise suddenly due to stress, trauma, or underlying mental illness, and its severity can vary from mild distress to life-threatening situations.

o **Depression Rates** As of 2023, girls demonstrate approximately double the depression symptom rate as male counterparts, with nearly three in five feeling constantly sad or hopeless. This represents a dramatic increase from previous decades, with the inflection point beginning between 2010 and 2012—precisely when smartphone ownership and social media usage exploded among adolescents.

o **Anxiety and Stress** In 2021, almost one-third of high school students experienced poor mental health within the past month. Anxiety disorders, panic attacks, and chronic stress affect Gen Z at rates substantially higher than previous generations at comparable ages.

o **Suicide and Self-Harm** Since 2011, rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts have increased significantly among adolescents. Self-harm behaviors, once relatively rare, have become increasingly common, with social media both potentially contributing to these behaviors and sometimes providing communities that normalize them.

o **Disparities and Vulnerable Populations** Substantial disparities exist within these trends. Female, LGBTQ+, and racial/ethnic minority youth demonstrate higher likelihood of experiencing poor mental health outcomes. These disparities reflect complex interactions between social media usage patterns, offline discrimination, community support access, and specific platform impacts on marginalized populations.

4.1 The Timeline: When Did Things Change?

Dr. Benjamin Druss, professor and Rosalynn Carter Chair in Mental Health, observes: "There was an inflection point starting between 2010 and 2012 where we started seeing spiking levels of everything—from reports of feeling lonely and left out, to depressive symptoms, to rising rates of diagnosed and treated anxiety and depression."

This timeline corresponds directly with:

- Widespread smartphone adoption among teenagers
- Instagram's launch (2010) and explosive growth
- Shift from desktop to mobile social media consumption
- Introduction of likes, hearts, and quantified social validation
- Development of sophisticated engagement algorithms
- Rise of influencer culture and curated authenticity

4.2 How Social Media Harms Gen Z Mental Health

Constant Exposure to Idealized Lives: Social media exposes Gen Z to endless streams of carefully curated content showing peers' achievements, experiences, relationships, and physical appearances. Unlike previous generations who might occasionally hear about friends' successes, Gen Z witnesses multiple daily updates from hundreds of peers simultaneously.

Upward Comparison and Inadequacy: Psychological research demonstrates that upward social comparison—comparing oneself to those perceived as better off—consistently generates negative emotions including envy, inadequacy, and depression. When adolescents compare their unfiltered reality against peers' idealized digital presentations, they develop unrealistic expectations for their own lives, fostering chronic feelings of failure.

The Quantification of Worth: Likes, comments, shares, and follower counts transform social validation into measurable metrics. Gen Z members whose posts receive limited engagement may interpret this as evidence of social rejection or personal inadequacy. The variable reinforcement schedule of social feedback (never knowing how many likes a post will receive) creates addictive checking patterns similar to slot machines.

Gender Disparities in Comparison: Research consistently shows females engage in more appearance-focused social comparison than males. This partially explains why 91% of women report social media makes them feel pressured to be perfect, compared to 75% of men, and why girls experience depression at approximately double the rate of boys.

Alarming Statistics A UK study revealed that 51% of women say social media makes them want permanent body changes through surgery, compared to 25% of men. This desire for body modification among teenagers reflects internalization of digitally altered beauty ideals that even the people in photos don't naturally achieve.

Pro-Eating Disorder Communities Despite platform policies prohibiting pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia content, these communities persist on social media. They provide:

- "Thinspiration" images promoting extreme thinness
- Tips for hiding eating disorders from family
- Competition and accountability for disordered behaviors
- Normalization of dangerous weight loss methods
- Community reinforcing illness identity

Cyber bullying has been linked in studies to various mental health issues. According to research, Gen Z individuals experiencing cyber bullying demonstrate elevated likelihood of depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and self-harm.

4.3. Cyber bullying and Online Harassment

Pervasive and Inescapable More than half of young people ages 12-20 have experienced cyber bullying, with physical appearance serving as the primary justification for abuse. Over 40% of cyber bullying victims report experiencing anxiety or depression as direct consequences. Unique Characteristics Making It Worse Cyber bullying differs fundamentally from traditional schoolyard bullying:

24/7 Nature: Unlike traditional bullying confined to school hours, cyber bullying follows victims home, occurring around the clock without respite. Gen Z cannot escape by going home—their phones bring bullies into their bedrooms.

Massive Audience: Bullying that previously might involve a few witnesses can reach hundreds or thousands of peers instantly. Humiliating content spreads rapidly, amplifying embarrassment and social pain.

Permanence: Digital content creates permanent records. Screenshots preserve humiliating moments indefinitely, with content resurfacing repeatedly even after deletion attempts.

Anonymity: Many cyber bullying perpetrators hide behind anonymous accounts, reducing accountability and enabling more extreme cruelty than they might express face-to-face.

4.4. Sleep Disruption and Exhaustion

Late-Night Usage Patterns-Gen Z frequently uses social media before bed and during night-time hours, driven by:

- Fear of missing out on conversations or events
- Compulsive checking habits
- "Doom scrolling" through negative content
- Responding to messages and notifications
- Watching "just one more" video in autoplay sequences

Biological Impacts-Social media usage disrupts sleep through multiple mechanisms:

Blue Light Exposure: Device screens emit blue light suppressing melatonin production—the hormone signaling sleep time—making it harder to fall asleep.

Mental Stimulation: Engaging content, emotional reactions to posts, and social interactions activate the brain when it should be winding down.

Anxiety and Arousal: Social media can trigger anxiety about social situations, body image, life comparisons, or world events, keeping minds racing when trying to sleep.

Consequences of Sleep Deprivation-Chronic sleep loss among Gen Z creates cascading mental health effects:

- Significantly increased depression and anxiety risk
- Impaired emotional regulation and mood instability
- Reduced cognitive function and decision-making
- Heightened irritability and interpersonal conflicts
- Decreased stress resilience
- Physical health consequences including weakened immunity

4.5. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)

Constant Awareness of Others' Activities-Social media provides endless streams showing what peers are doing, experiencing, and achieving. Unlike previous generations who might hear about a party they missed at school the next day, Gen Z watches real-time updates from events they're not attending.

Psychological Mechanisms-FOMO manifests as:

- Persistent concern that others are having rewarding experiences without them
- Compulsive need to stay continuously connected
- Anxiety about being "out of the loop"
- Dissatisfaction with own life choices and activities
- Inability to be present in current moments

Mental Health Consequences-OMO generates:

- Chronic low-grade anxiety
- Difficulty enjoying present experiences
- Compulsive phone checking interrupting activities

- Sleep disruption from late-night checking
- Feelings of social exclusion and loneliness
- Decision paralysis about how to spend time

4.6. Addiction and Compulsive Usage

Deliberately Addictive Design-Social media platforms employ sophisticated psychological techniques intentionally designed to maximize user engagement:

- **Infinite Scroll**: Eliminates natural stopping points, encouraging endless consumption.
- **Auto play**: Videos automatically play sequentially, removing decision points where users might stop.
- **Variable Reward Schedules**: Unpredictable likes, comments, and notifications create dopamine-driven checking compulsions similar to gambling.
- **Push Notifications**: Constant alerts interrupt activities, triggering return to platforms.
- **Streaks and Badges**: Gamification elements create pressure to maintain daily usage.

4.7 Signs of Problematic Usage-Gen Z reports:

- Difficulty controlling usage despite wanting to stop
- Checking platforms immediately upon waking
- Anxiety or distress when unable to access accounts
- Using social media longer than intended repeatedly
- Failed attempts to reduce usage
- Continuing usage despite awareness of negative consequences
- Choosing social media over in-person activities

4.8 "Doom Scrolling" Phenomenon- Many Gen Z members engage in "doom scrolling"—compulsively consuming negative news and content despite knowing it worsens their mood. This behavior reflects anxiety-driven attempts to feel informed and prepared for threats, but actually increases distress without providing genuine control.

4.9. Loss of Authentic Connection

Quantity Over Quality Despite having hundreds of online "friends," many Gen Z members report feeling lonely and disconnected. Research reveals a paradox: intensive social media

usage often correlates with increased loneliness, suggesting digital interactions may displace deeper offline connections without providing equivalent psychological benefits.

5. Gender Disparities in Mental Health Impacts

5.1 Girls Suffer More- Research consistently demonstrates that female adolescents experience more severe negative mental health impacts from social media usage compared to male peers. Multiple factors contribute: Girls face intense pressure regarding physical appearance:

- 91% of women report social media makes them feel pressured to be perfect (vs. 75% of men)
- 51% of women desire permanent body changes through surgery due to social media (vs. 25% of men)
- Visual platforms (Instagram, TikTok) emphasize appearance more for female users
- Cultural beauty standards applied more rigidly to females

5.2 Social Comparison Patterns- Psychological research shows females engage in more social comparison than males, particularly regarding appearance, relationships, and social status. This tendency makes them more vulnerable to social media's comparison-inducing features**.** Larger shares of girls than boys report having more negative experiences on social media**.** For example, 34% of teen girls say social media platforms make them feel worse about their own lives, compared with 20% of boys.

5.3 Male Mental Health Concerns

While girls experience more pronounced negative effects, boys also face significant challenges:

- Pressure to display traditional masculinity
- Exposure to toxic masculinity content
- Gaming addiction and compulsive usage
- Radicalization through algorithm-driven content
- Comparison regarding achievements and status
- Less likely to seek help due to stigma

6. **Thought of renunciation-** Despite awareness and intentions, Gen Z struggles to reduce social media usage because:

o **Social Infrastructure Dependence**: Unlike optional activities, social media hosts Gen Z's entire social infrastructure—friend communications, event planning, group projects, and community belonging.

o **Fear of Social Exclusion**: Reducing usage creates anxiety about missing important information, social events, or conversations, potentially leading to real social exclusion.

o **Addictive Design**: Platforms are engineered to be addictive, making voluntary reduction extremely difficult even with strong motivation.

o **Lack of Alternatives**: Gen Z hasn't experienced non-digital socialization as primary mode, making it difficult to envision or create alternatives.

o **Peer Pressure**: When everyone uses platforms constantly, reducing usage feels like opting out of peer culture entirely.

Conclusion:

Social media's impact on youth mental health reflects neither purely positive nor uniformly negative outcomes. Rather, these platforms function as complex environments where benefits and harms coexist. The challenge lies not in eliminating social media from young people's lives but in fostering healthy, balanced usage patterns that maximize protective factors while minimizing risk exposure. Achieving this balance requires collaborative efforts among youth themselves, families, educators, healthcare providers, and platform developers to create digital environments supporting rather than undermining psychological well-being.

Social media has evolved from simple communication tools into complex, multifaceted platforms that serve diverse personal, professional, and societal functions. Understanding this evolution and the various platform types helps contextualize social media's pervasive influence on contemporary life and its continuing transformation as technology and user

Prior to the 1960s, youth demographics were largely dismissed as commercially insignificant, receiving minimal attention from marketers. The emergence of Baby Boomers fundamentally altered this paradigm. This generation became the most substantial and impactful consumer cohort in contemporary marketing history, though their countercultural movements and skepticism toward corporations presented unprecedented challenges that forced marketers to

develop entirely new strategic approaches. The parallels to today's marketing landscape are striking. Over subsequent decades, marketers have continually adapted their strategies to engage successive youth cohorts—progressing from Baby Boomers through Generation X to Millennials, and currently navigating the complexities of Generation Z and the emerging Generation Alpha. Successfully connecting with younger demographics and understanding evolving cultural trends has remained a persistent challenge across industries.

Social media platforms—including Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube—have become integral to youth and Generation Z daily life, serving as primary channels for connection, learning, and self-expression. While these digital environments offer unprecedented opportunities, they simultaneously present significant mental health challenges requiring careful consideration

Toward Healthier Digital Futures

The evidence is clear: social media significantly impacts Gen Z mental health, with concerning correlations to depression, anxiety, body image issues, sleep problems, and other psychological challenges. The mental health crisis facing this generation demands urgent, comprehensive responses from individuals, families, educators, healthcare providers, policymakers, and platform companies.

However, the relationship between social media and mental health proves more complex than simple causation. These platforms provide genuine benefits including connection, support, information, and creative expression—particularly valuable for marginalized or isolated youth. The challenge lies not in eliminating social media from Gen Z's lives—an impractical goal given how deeply embedded these platforms are in social infrastructure—but rather in fostering healthier, more balanced relationships with technology.

Encouragingly, Gen Z increasingly recognizes social media's negative impacts, with growing numbers attempting to reduce usage and implement self-regulation strategies. This awareness represents the first step toward change, though sustainable behavior modification requires support across multiple levels.

Success demands collaborative action. Gen Z needs tools, education, and support for developing digital literacy and healthy boundaries. Parents need guidance for navigating

conversations and modeling healthy behaviors. Educators must integrate digital wellness into curricula alongside academics. Healthcare providers must screen for and treat social media-related mental health concerns. Policymakers must create protective regulations balancing safety with rights. Most critically, platform companies must prioritize user well-being over engagement metrics, fundamentally rethinking business models dependent on addictive design.

As the first generation of true digital natives, Gen Z teaches us about technology's impacts on human development and mental health. Their experiences—both positive and negative—provide crucial insights for creating healthier digital futures. By taking their mental health crisis seriously while acknowledging social media's benefits, we can work toward environments where these powerful tools enhance rather than undermine psychological well-being.

The stakes couldn't be higher. Gen Z's mental health affects not only individual lives but also societal functioning, economic productivity, and collective well-being. Addressing this crisis requires sustained commitment, evidence-based approaches, and willingness to challenge powerful economic interests prioritizing profit over youth welfare.

The path forward demands neither rejection of technology nor uncritical acceptance, but rather conscious, intentional evolution toward healthier digital ecosystems. Gen Z deserves platforms designed to support their flourishing, families equipped to guide them, educators prepared to teach them, healthcare systems ready to treat them, and policies protecting them. Only through comprehensive, collaborative efforts can we ensure that the first generation of digital natives becomes not a cautionary tale but rather a success story of human adaptability and resilience in the digital age.

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